

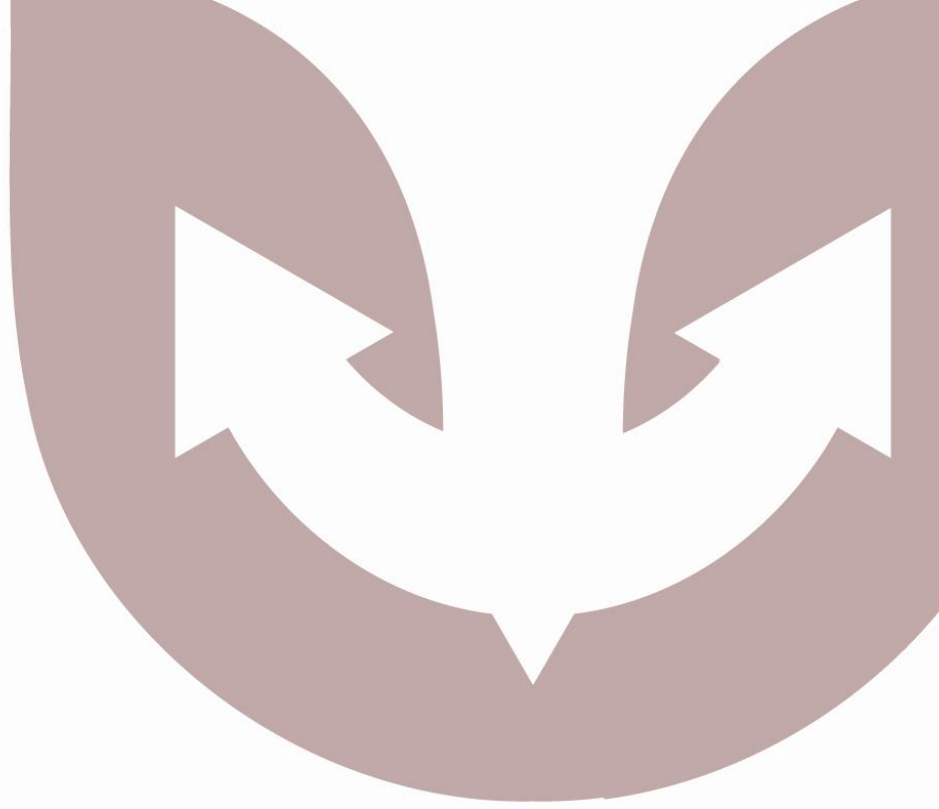


CROWDEDSHIP



EXPLORING

ESTHER



Exploring Esther

2024



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Cornerstone Sunday Morning Worship: February 18, 2024 – May 26, 2024

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OLD TESTAMENT

Amos	Am
1 Chronicles	1 Chr
2 Chronicles	2 Chr
Daniel	Dn
Deuteronomy	Dt
Ecclesiastes	Eccl
Esther	Est
Exodus	Ex
Ezra	Ezr
Genesis	Gn
Habakkuk	Hb
Haggai	Hg
Hosea	Hos
Isaiah	Is
Jeremiah	Jer
Job	Jb
Joel	Jl
Jonah	Jon
Joshua	Jo
Judges	Jgs
1 Kings	1 Kgs
2 Kings	2 Kgs
Lamentations	Lam
Leviticus	Lv
Malachi	Mal
Micah	Mi
Nahum	Na
Nehemiah	Neh
Numbers	Num
Obadiah	Ob
Proverbs	Prv
Psalms	Ps
Ruth	Ru
1 Samuel	1 Sm
2 Samuel	2 Sm
Song of Solomon	Sg
Zechariah	Zec
Zephaniah	Zep

NEW TESTAMENT

Acts	
Colossians	Col
1 Corinthians	1 Cor
2 Corinthians	2 Cor
Ephesians	Eph
Galatians	Gal
Hebrews	Heb
James	Jas
John	Jn
1 John	1 Jn
2 John	2 Jn
3 John	3 Jn
Jude	
Luke	Lk
Mark	Mk
Matthew	Matt
1 Peter	1 Pet
2 Peter	2 Pet
Philippians	Phil
Philemon	Phlm
Revelation	Rv
Romans	Rom
1 Thessalonians	1 Thes
2 Thessalonians	2 Thes
1 Timothy	1 Tim
2 Timothy	2 Tim
Titus	Ti

M1:

Introduction to Esther

February 18, 2024

Setting

Author. No author is established in the book. Some have suggested Mordecai, Ezra, and Nehemiah, but we have no certainty as to the author. Evidence throughout the book suggests the author had thorough understanding of Persian customs, etiquette, and even a familiarity with the palace. This knowledge, accompanied with an apparent understanding of Hebrew customs suggests a Persian Jew – maybe one who lived in Susa but later went back to Israel.

General setting.

- 605 BC: Daniel and his three friends go into Babylonian Captivity.
- 537 BC: Sheshbazzar leads a group of exiles to Judah.
- 520 BC: Haggai delivers his first message.
- 478 BC: Esther becomes queen (nearly 60 years after exiles allowed to go home).
- 473 BC: Purim instituted.
- 445 BC: Nehemiah begins his leadership among the Jews.
- 444 BC: Ezra reads the law

Unique qualities of Esther. (1) The author never mentions God throughout the book. Likely we see his handiwork throughout the book, but God is never mentioned. (2) While we will discuss this at several future points, the author leaves much to speculation regarding the character of Esther and Mordecai.

- Whenever the author talks about Esther it talks about her external beauty and never discusses her character (2:7 “the young woman had a beautiful figure,” 2:15 “Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her”).
- Mordecai tells Esther to hide that she is a Jew (2:10). Is this practically appropriate or is it shameful?
- Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman. Why? Was this pride (Lewis Paton)? Was it a refusal to bow to nothing but God alone? Unlikely since, throughout biblical history, people would bow in respect to another.
- If compared to characters like Ruth, Daniel, or Joseph, Esther’s character seems to fall rather short. Daniel and his friends refuse to eat the meat offered by the king –

risking their lives. Daniel gets put in the lions den because he refuses to stop praying. In contrast, Esther maybe prays once (4:16).

Joseph flees from Potiphar's wife and is thrown in prison. In contrast, Esther prepares for a year to please the king, with no indication she attempted to avoid the situation (she could have stood up to the king like Vashti). Minimally, she could have not tried so hard.

Bush (WBC). The same conclusion results from comparing *characterization* in the two books. In the book of Ruth, two of the major protagonists, Ruth and Boaz, are characterized not only by their words and actions but repeatedly by "embedded evaluation," i.e., through the words of other characters (e.g., Ruth by Boaz in 2:11; 3:10, 11; Boaz by Naomi in 3:17-18), and by the use of character contrasts (Orpah for Ruth and the unnamed "redeemer" for Boaz; see Berlin, *Poetics*, 40-41, 104-6). In one striking case, the narrator gives his own (omniscient) evaluation (Boaz in 2:1). There is virtually none of this in Esther. None of the characters give any embedded evaluation, and there are no character contrasts.¹

However, we likely commend them for their behavior amid several moments:

- Esther respected and obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him (2:20).
- Mordecai raises his cousin (Esther) due the death of her parents (2:7, 15).
- Mordecai regularly checks on Esther (2:11, "every day Mordecai walked ... to learn how Esther was").
- Both Mordecai and Esther fast when a threat comes to the Jewish people. And, we can probably assume prayer accompanied their fasting. However, who doesn't pray when their entire people group is about to be destroyed?

Jewish Virtual Library. The purposes of fasting are various. Its most widely attested function, for the community as well as the individual, is to avert or terminate a calamity by eliciting God's compassion.²

The Characters

Ahasuerus

- He is identified as the famous Xerxes, the son of Darius I.

¹ Fredric Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, vol. 9, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1996), 308.

² "Jewish Holidays: Fasting and Fast Days," Jewish Virtual Library. Accessed February 16, 2024. <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/fasting-and-fast-days>

- History paints Ahasuerus as a hot-tempered, impatient ruler who liked the women (having an affair with his brother's daughter and tried to have an affair with his brother's wife).

Mordecai & Esther

Lexham Bible Dictionary. Represents a model Jew surviving in the Diaspora.³

- A Jew living in the metropolis of Susa, the Persian capital.
- Mordecai's family had been exiled from Judea along with the king Jehoiachin (597). He may have been royalty.
- He is Esther's guardian and adoptive father (also her cousin).
- Possibly, if not likely, Mordecai serves in some administrative position in the Persian court.
- Mordecai's conflict arises due his refusal to bow to Haman.

Haman

- Clearly the main adversary of the Jews. He desires total annihilation of the Jewish people.
- He was a nobleman promoted by the king to second in command.
- Haman was an Agagite, from the line of the king which Saul murdered (Mordecai's from Saul's line).

Bush (WBC). Agag was the king of the Amalekites defeated by Saul and put to death by Samuel (1 Sam 15), and the OT tradition univocally stressed the bitter and unrelenting enmity that existed between the two peoples. Amalek is presented as the preeminent enemy of Israel. Thus, the conclusion of the story of the attack of the Amalekites upon Israel in the wilderness (Exod 17:8-16) notes, "Yahweh will have war with Amalek from generation to generation," and the book of Deuteronomy avows, "... you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven; you must not forget" (25:19; cf. also 1 Sam 15:2-3).⁴

3:10 Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews

8:1 Haman, the enemy of the Jews

8:3 Haman, the Agagite

8:5 Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite

9:10 Haman son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews

³ Kelly Whitcomb, "Mordecai, Esther's Cousin, Son of Jair," in John D. Barry et al., *Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012).

⁴ Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 9:384.

Simple Outline

- I. The greatness of Xerxes (1:1-2).
- II. The Rise of Esther and Mordecai (1:3-2:23).
 - A. Queen Vashti deposed (1:3-22).
 - B. Esther chosen as queen (2:1-18).
 - C. Mordecai saves the king (2:19-23).
- III. The threat to the Jews (3:1-4:17).
 - A. Mordecai provokes Haman (3:1-7).
 - B. Haman plots to destroy the Jews (3:8-15).
 - C. Mordecai laments (4:1-3), Esther resolves to help (4:4-17).
- IV. The Plot Reversed (5:1-7:10).
 - A. Esther's First Banquet (5:1-8).
 - B. Haman Plots to Kill Mordecai (5:9-14).
 - C. Mordecai Is Honored; Haman Humiliated (6:1-14).
 - D. Esther's Second Banquet (7:1-10).
- V. The Triumph of the Jews (8:1-9:32).
 - A. Esther and newly promoted Mordecai (8:1-2) write edict of deliverance for the Jews (8:3-17).
 - B. The Jews' victories over their enemies (9:1-19).
 - C. Purim established (9:20-32).
- VI. The greatness of Xerxes and Mordecai (10:1-3).

Hermeneutical principles.

1. Be sure to see the story in light of the Bible's grand narrative, not just a single story with life lessons drawn from the characters. Primarily Esther offers us a story of God's faithfulness in preserving a remnant of the Jewish people – through whom he would fulfill all his promises.

Whether God is mentioned or even thought of, God controls all the events of history. He controls the larger picture, but he also controls the small scenarios that require the larger picture to occur as planned. (ie. Mordecai just happens to overhear two men talking about killing the king, Haman just happens to be the only person available when the king wants to reward Mordecai, the king just happened to not be able to sleep and read of Mordecai's good deed, etc.).

Even while being ignored, God sovereignly and providentially directs every moment while simultaneously allowing mankind to enact genuine freedom.

Divine providence reveals God's slow but certain progression towards his ultimate goal – redeeming a people back to himself through the work of Jesus Christ – the Messiah come through the Jewish people.

2. Don't get lost in the side stories and forget the primary story.

3. Pay attention to what is said and not said.

We are not told Ahasuerus was drunk but instead that he was merry. Might we conclude he at least had poor judgment? Probably. We may inaccurately assess the interaction with Vashti, if we conclude some drunk husband demanded a wife to sensually present herself to the whole party (although maybe he did). The text doesn't say he was drunk. The text doesn't say he asked her to do anything necessarily worthy of her dramatic response.⁵

Jewish perspective from the Two Targums of Esther. Vashti was ordered so because of three prior events not mentioned in the Book of Esther. First, the *Targum Rishon* says that Mordecai prayed for seven days. Second, when Xerxes was inebriated, the Targum says that the Lord "incited an angel against him, the angel of confusion to confound their festivities." Third, Vashti was to come in the nude because, as the Targum says, she used to make the Israelite girls work in the nude on the Sabbath. Because God is not mentioned explicitly in Esther, the Targums supply the interpretation of God's activity in these events. See B. Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther, The Aramaic Bible*, vol. 18 (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991), 34–35. The Targums are Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew Scripture. They are of value because they provide a glimpse at the history of the interpretation of the Bible.⁶

Josephus regarding Esther. she, out of regard to the laws of the Persians, which forbid the wives to be seen by strangers, did not go to the king (however, other's argue Josephus offers a Greek view not a Persian view)⁷

Reasons given by the Babylonian Talmud. "And the queen Vashti refused ..." (B) Since she was an immoral woman, as a master said: "Both of them intended to commit an immoral act [cf. Mid. to Est. 1:9B]," why did she not go? (C) Said R. Yosé bar Haninah: This teaches that leprosy broke out on her. (D) *In a baraita one taught:* Gabriel came and made her a tail.⁸

⁵ Robert Deffinbaugh, *Esther: A Study of Divine Providence* (Biblical Studies Press, 1998), 5.

"The king was not asking; he was summoning his queen. But neither was he demanding she do anything demeaning to herself. She was to appear in all her glory to bring glory to the king"

⁶ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, Electronic ed., vol. 10, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993).

⁷ Titus Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete & Unabridged*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 298.

⁸ Jacob Neusner, *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2011), 59.

Early feminism. In some modern interpretations, Vashti refused to answer the summons because she was standing up for the rights of women. She was, sadly, “an unsuccessful heroine in an early struggle for women’s dignity.”⁹

Three examples: (1) Why didn’t Vashti go before the King? (2) Ahasuerus drunk? (3) Esther’s character. Beautiful? Obedient?

4. Don’t draw conclusions based on speculation.

Conclusion

William Cowper (written by Jeff Robinson TGC)

Cowper lived from 1731 to 1800, a contemporary to John Wesley and George Whitefield in England and Jonathan Edwards in America. Heartache was his handmaiden virtually from birth. William and his brother John were the only two among seven siblings to survive past infancy. At age 6, his mother died giving birth to John, leaving William deeply distraught. Cowper moved from school to school before landing at Westminster school in 1742 where he was bullied mercilessly by older students. While studying for a career in law as a young adult, he fell in love with his cousin Theodora and sought her hand in marriage. Her father refused to consent to the union and nuptials were never exchanged. Lost love left him crestfallen.

As he progressed into adulthood, things grew appreciably worse. In 1763, he was offered a position as a clerk of journals in the House of Lords, but the specter of the job examination sent him off the rails; he experienced grinding depression that bordered on insanity. Three times he attempted suicide and was sent to an asylum for recovery. The asylum turned out to be a place of grace for Cowper. Dr. Nathaniel Cotton, an evangelical believer, cared for Cowper and showed him the love of Christ. One day at the hospital, Cowper found a Bible and opened it. The pages fell upon Romans 3:25. God opened Cowper’s blind spiritual eyes that day, and he was converted to a saving hope in Jesus Christ. Salvation changed his heart, but not his propensity for melancholy.

In 1767, two years after leaving the asylum, Cowper met the slave-trader-turned-preacher John Newton, author of “Amazing Grace” and curate of the church at Olney. Newton mentored Cowper. He encouraged Cowper and ministered to him. There were numerous additional suicide attempts as the viper of melancholy gripped the poet every ten years, usually every tenth January. Cowper wrote “God Moves” in 1773 at the behest of Newton, who later published it in the Olney Hymnal. Soon after Cowper wrote “God Moves,” the darkness returned, and he attempted suicide by drowning. He died on April 25, 1800, in

⁹ Anthony Tomasino, *Esther*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 159.

the throes of depression. The final poem he composed in 1799 was titled "The Castaway," but by God's grace that did not describe his eternal state.¹⁰

God Moves in Mysterious Ways (aka Conflict: Light Shining Out of Darkness)

1 God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
and rides upon the storm.

2 Deep in unfathomable mines
of never-failing skill;
He treasures up His bright designs,
and works His sov'reign will.

3 Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
the clouds ye so much dread
are big with mercy and shall break
in blessings on your head.

4 Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
but trust Him for His grace;
behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

5 His purposes will ripen fast,
unfolding every hour;
the bud may have a bitter taste,
but sweet will be the flow'r.

6 Blind unbelief is sure to err,
and scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
and He will make it plain.

¹⁰ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/god-moves-in-a-mysterious-way/>

M2:
Ahasuerus' Grandeur, Vashti Deposed
(1:1-22)

February 25, 2024

Introduction

Exordium.

In October of 2019, China celebrated the 70th anniversary of the founding of Communist China in Beijing.

With a smiling President Xi Jinping looking on, the festivities began at 8 p.m. on Tuesday with a fireworks show over the square and along the long thoroughfare that passes by it. Thousands of participants performed a synchronized dance, holding up lighted boards to make various formations including the Chinese flag. The evening celebration followed a daytime parade in which China showcased both its military and its achievements since the Communist Party came to power.¹

The parade intended to communicate to the Chinese people and the world their time has come. With such a show they intended to instill hope and pride in the Chinese people and instill fear and deter enemies.

Xi Jinping said, "There's no force that can shake the foundations of this great nation. No force can stop the Chinese people and the Chinese nation forging ahead!"²

Social media sites experienced a high volume of posts by Chinese people who were moved to tears to see their country rise to such greatness after decades of struggle. Xi would go on to say:

China today is created by hundreds of millions of hard-working Chinese and China's tomorrow will be even more prosperous! Long live the great

¹ Associated Press, "The Latest: China celebrates 70 years of Communist rule," October 1, 2019. Accessed February 22, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/shootings-ap-top-news-tiananmen-square-international-news-china-62b7d0275a6f4433a458000d010390f0>

² Robyn Dixon, "The military might showed off at China's 70th anniversary parade moved some Chinese to tears. Here's why." *Los Angeles Times*, October 1, 2019. Accessed February 22, 2024. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-10-01/china-sends-a-confident-message-on-its-70th-anniversary-parade-is-that-its-advanced-military-rivals-the-u-s>

People's Republic of China! Long live the great Communist Party of China!
Long live the great Chinese people!

Xi Jinping's purpose in 2019 equates almost identically to what Ahasuerus attempts to do in 483 B.C. Ahasuerus desires to show his power and might to both his own people and the world.

Simple outline.

1. Consider the three Scenes in this first Act of Esther.
 - a. Act 1 Scene 1: Three grand feasts.
 - b. Act 1 Scene 2: Ahasuerus' inebriated and rejected demand
 - c. Act 1 Scene 3: Ahasuerus' and the seven dwarves

Three Grand Feasts (1:1-8).

A Simple Overview: The Grandeur

- I. 127 provinces (1:1)
- II. The formidable army displaying its might and power (1:3)
- III. 180 day feast: likely with different groups coming and going throughout the time (1:4)
- IV. A second 7 day feast for those in Susa (1:5) – with equal, excessive, and extravagant decorations (1:6)
- V. Beautiful and varied cups (1:7)
- VI. Each guest allowed to drink with no restrictions (1:8), which seems to set up the scenario in which Ahasuerus and his guest are inebriated.

His Motivation: Defeat Greece

Historically, it appears, Xerxes provides this feast in order to initiate his plan to conquer Greece. This inordinate display likely boosted moral and gave hope to the people of Persia of their victory and greatness.

In coming to power, Xerxes desired both to continue the expansion of the Persian Empire but also to punish Greece for their defeat of his father, Darius.

Herodotus, the 5th Century Greek Historian (Histories, 7.8.1 – 7.8C.2). 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 ...
“No one needs to tell you ... which nations Cyrus and Cambyses and Darius my father subdued and added to our realm. Ever since I came to this throne, I have considered how I might not fall short of my predecessors in

this honor, and not add less power to the Persians ... For this cause I have now summoned you together, that I may impart to you what I intend to do. 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. You saw that Darius my father was set on making an expedition against these men. But he is dead, and it was not granted him to punish them. 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.... we will make the borders of Persian territory and of the firmament of heaven be the same. No land that the sun beholds will border ours, but I will make all into one country, when I have passed over the whole of Europe.³

Daniel would prophecy of this moment when he wrote, "Behold, three more kings shall arise in Persia, and a fourth shall be far richer than all of them. And when he has become strong through his riches, he shall stir up all against the kingdom of Greece" (Dan 11:2).

Breneman, NAC. Herodotus was greatly impressed with the wealth of the affluent Persian king. Cyrus had conquered Babylon (539 B.C.) and ruled as far as the Aegean Sea. Cambyses conquered Egypt and added it to the empire. Darius I added northwest India as far as the Indus River and had organized the empire; thus Xerxes inherited an immense and powerful empire.⁴

Defeated by Greece.

Following his inordinately luxurious 180 day feast, Xerxes would head towards Greece with his army for the next three years in order to punish the Athenians for defeating Darius I. He experienced a few successes. He defeated several Greek states (led by Leonidas and the Spartans) at the Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC. In September of that same year, he destroyed Athens.

At this point, Mardonius, Xerxes general and Darius' nephew, discouraged Xerxes from further attack on Greece. According to Herodotus, Mardonius said, "Why is it so necessary for you to risk everything by fighting at sea? Do you not possess Athens, for which you set out on this march, and do you not have the rest of Hellas? No one stands in your way. Those who opposed you have received what they deserved."⁵

Needless to say, Xerxes proceeded to attack Greece, culminating at the battle of Salamis. In a naval battle, Xerxes and the Persians were defeated.

³ Herodotus, *The Histories*, ed. A. D. Godley, Herodotus, with an English Translation (Medford, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), 7.8.1-7.8C.2.

⁴ Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 10:305.

⁵ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 8.68A.2.

the majority of the ships at Salamis were sunk, some destroyed by the Athenians, some by the Aeginetans. Since the Hellenes fought in an orderly fashion by line, but the barbarians were no longer in position and did nothing with forethought, it was likely to turn out as it did. Yet they were brave that day ... for they all showed zeal out of fear of Xerxes, each one thinking that the king was watching him.⁶

Not only did Xerxes lose this significant battle, which resulted in him ultimately going back to Susa, his brother also died in the battle.

Abbott. Xerxes had no intention of any new attack. The loss of this battle gave a final blow to his expectations of being able to carry his conquest in Greece any further. He too, like the Greeks, employed his men in industrious and vigorous efforts to repair the damages which had been done, and to reassemble and reorganize that portion of the fleet which had not been destroyed. While, however, his men were doing this, he was himself ... in his mind, moodily and despairingly, plans, not for new conflicts, but for the safest and speediest way of making his own personal escape from the dangers around him, back to his home in Susa.⁷

Vashti's Feast (1:9).

With no accompanying fanfare, the author simply but purposefully establishes the coinciding feast held by Vashti in Ahasuerus' palace.

Let us cautiously speculate as to the purpose of the author including this verse. While much debate surrounds Vashti's refusal to come to the king, a consistent opinion indicates that while Vashti may have been part of the feast⁸ for a period, by this point, the lawful wives would have exited the party when the party desired to become inebriated. After the wives left, the music-girls and concubines would come in and entertain the men while they often became drunk.

Herodotus, the 5th Century Greek Historian (Histories 5.18.2). After dinner, the Persians said to Amyntas as they sat drinking together, "Macedonian, our

⁶ Herodotus, 8.86.1.

⁷ Jacob Abbott, *History of Xerxes the Great* (Philadelphia: Henry Altemus Company, 1900), 242–43.

⁸ *Plutarch, the Greek 1st Century philosopher (Conjugalia Praecepta, 16).* "The lawful wives of the Persian kings sit beside them at dinner, and eat with them. But when the kings wish to be merry and get drunk, they send their wives away, and send for their music-girls and concubines. In so far they are right in what they do, because they do not concede any share in their licentiousness and debauchery to their wedded wives." [Plutarch, *Moralia*, ed. Frank Cole Babbitt, vol. 2 (Medford, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 309.]

Baldwin (TOTC). It does not seem to have been usual to entertain the women separately in Persian custom; indeed Esther herself entertained the king and Haman to a feast. The size of the guest-list may have made some division of numbers necessary, or we may be intended to infer that the excesses of the banquet would have offended the sensibilities of these ladies. [Joyce Baldwin, *Esther: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 59.]

host, it is our custom in Persia to bring in also the concubines and wedded wives to sit by the men after the giving of any great banquet. We ask you, then, (since you have received us heartily, are entertaining us nobly and are giving Darius our king earth and water) to follow our custom.” [3] To this Amyntas replied, “We have no such custom, Persians. Among us, men and women sit apart, but since you are our masters and are making this request, it shall be as you desire.”⁹

So then, the author informs the reader Vashti had already left the feast and been enjoying a feast with some of the other women. She would not typically join the feast again because the less important, less significant women were entertaining the drunk men — the queen wouldn’t be part of that moment.

Therefore, the verse serves as a transitional statement to set the stage for Ahasuerus’ inappropriate request.

Ahasuerus’ Inebriated and Rejected Demand (1:10-12).

Ahasuerus Inebriated (1:10)

While the text does not overtly state the men were drunk, we may appropriately imply an impairment of judgment. (1) Samuel uses this same word when he talks about Nabal’s merry heart. In this case, he states “Nabal’s heart was merry within him, for he was very drunk” (1 Sam 25:36). (2) Josephus reveals the typical practice of the Persians was to constantly serve wine. While Ahasuerus’ allows for each person to choose their level of intoxication, the norm would be for the group to be pretty drunk.¹⁰

So, let’s conclude minimally Ahasuerus’ is somewhat inebriated (maybe not completely drunk), but his discernment seriously fails him in this moment. Along with him, and knowing human nature, he was accompanied by a bunch of drunk men.

Vashti Beckoned (1:11)

In his inebriated¹¹ state, Ahasuerus orders seven of his eunuchs to bring Vashti to the feast to display her beauty. Why did this request require seven eunuchs? Why did the

⁹ Herodotus, *The Histories*, 5.18.2.

¹⁰ *Josephus (Ant. 11.6.1)*. “He [Xerxes] also gave order to the servants, that they should not force them to drink by bringing them wine continually, as is the practice of the Persians, but to permit every one of the guests to enjoy himself according to his own inclination.” [Josephus, *The Works of Josephus: Complete & Unabridged*, 298.]

Baldwin does argue the value of Josephus’ comment. “Josephus, however, was following LXX, which inserted a negative and so completely changed the sense of the second clause, as it stands in Hebrew and standard English versions. His contribution therefore does not help.” [Baldwin, *Esther*, 12:59.]

¹¹ I’m leery of using the term “drunk” due to its connotation and the fact that the Hebrew word does not necessitate drunk. While we may appropriately infer drunk from the context, I feel more confident, due the context and usage of the word in other passages, to use terms such as “tipsy” or “inebriated.”

author deem it important to name all seven of them? I'm not sure except potentially to offer some historical evidence to the authenticity of this story — and maybe to keep in step with the rather elaborate and over the top scenario the story has already posed.

The Rabbis seem to go a bit too far in their theorizing the nature of Ahasuerus' request. Some argue he requested her wear only her crown. Others argued God was punishing her for her cruel acts towards her Jewish slaves – demanding they wear nothing as they serve her.

Megillah 12b:3-4. The Gemara continues to detail what occurred at the feast. So too, at the feast of that wicked man, Ahasuerus, when the men began to converse, some said: The Median women are the most beautiful, while others said: The Persian women are the most beautiful. Ahasuerus said to them: The vessel that I use, i.e., my wife, is neither Median nor Persian, but rather Chaldean. Do you wish to see her? They said to him: Yes, provided that she be naked, for we wish to see her without any additional adornments.... The Gemara comments: Vashti was punished in this humiliating way for it is with the measure that a man measures to others that he himself is measured. In other words, God punishes individuals in line with their transgressions, measure for measure. This teaches that the wicked Vashti would take the daughters of Israel, and strip them naked, and make them work on Shabbat. Therefore, it was decreed that she be brought before the king naked, on Shabbat. This is as it is written: "After these things, when the wrath of King Ahasuerus was appeased, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her" (Esther 2:1). That is to say, just as she had done with the young Jewish women, so it was decreed upon her.¹²

The point of the story rests not in the exact request. However, we can likely conclude the request was inappropriate or else the author would not have set the stage by acknowledging the queen's previous departure to her own feast and the king's inebriation. Whatever he wanted was inappropriate and disrespectful.

Duguid (REC). To command his wife to appear dressed up in her royal finery for the enjoyment of a crowd of drunken men was to treat her as a doll, a mere object who existed for the king's pleasure, and to show off his power¹³

¹² https://www.sefaria.org/Megillah.12b.3?ven=William_Davidson_Edition_-_English&lang=bi&with=Midrash%20ConnectionsList&lang2=en

¹³ Iain M. Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, ed. Richard D. Phillips and Philip Graham Ryken, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, N.J: P&R Publishing, 2005), 9–10.

Vashti refuses (1:12)

Maybe she refused because Ahasuerus asked her to come to the whole group with nothing but her crown.¹⁴ Maybe she refused because she didn't want to be placed on the same level as the concubines who had been entertaining the men up to this point.¹⁵ Maybe she was from Babylon, hated Ahasuerus, and wanted to embarrass him.¹⁶ And as the most bizarre Rabbi's speculate, maybe she had leprosy or a tail and was embarrassed to display herself — ok, unlikely.¹⁷

So then, we conclude, we cannot know Vashti's motivation. And, her motivation is irrelevant to the story. Here's what matters. Ahasuerus was trying to impress the whole nation, and his queen decided to embarrass him in front of all his friends.

Drunk or not – he was livid!

Ahasuerus and the seven dwarves overreact (1:13-22)

Up front let's admit that the best reaction at this point would have been to laugh it off and move on. However, these men determine to make this betrayal a national scandal followed by a national demand for all wives to always obey their husbands.

So then, their one stupid demand turns into another even more stupid demand.

¹⁴ *Midrash. Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 49:12*. Rabbi José said: It was the universal custom of the kings of Media when they were eating and drinking to cause their women to come before them stark naked, playing and dancing, in order to see the beauty of their figures. When the wine entered the heart of Ahasuerus, he wished to act in this manner with Vashti the queen. She was the daughter of a king, and she was not willing to do this. He decreed concerning her, and she was slain. When the wine had passed from the heart of Ahasuerus, he sought after Vashti, but he did not find her. They told him of the deed which had been done, and (also) of the decree which had been ordained concerning her. Why was the decree passed against her? Because she used to make the daughters of Israel come and toil for her on Sabbaths, therefore was the decree ordained against her that she should be slain naked on the Sabbath, as it is said, "He remembered Vashti, and *what she had done*, and what was decreed against her" (Esth. 2:1). [\[https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_DeRabbi_Eliezer.49?lang=en\]](https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_DeRabbi_Eliezer.49?lang=en)

¹⁵ *Tomasino (EEC)*. "Concubines were the lowest level of royal wives, and these women were specially trained to entertain the king and his guests with music and dance. Vashti probably felt that being put on display before the king's guests reduced her to the status of a concubine. That she was told to wear the royal crown added insult to injury: the royal crown was a sign of her status, while the king's summons seemed to deny that status. Vashti's refusal was not a blow for women's rights, but for the dignity of the royal office. It might be significant that the word order in Vashti's title is reversed here: when summoned, she is called "Vashti, the queen"; when she refuses, she is called "the queen, Vashti." [Tomasino, *Esther*, 159–60.]

¹⁶ *Megillah 10b:22*. The verse continues: "And instead of the nettle [*sirpad*]," this means instead of the wicked Vashti. Why is she called a nettle [*sirpad*]? Because she was the daughter of the son of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar, who burned the ceiling [*saraf refidat*] of the House of God, as it is written: "Its top [*refidato*] of gold" (Song of Songs 3:10). [\[https://www.sefaria.org/Megillah.10b.22?lang=bi\]](https://www.sefaria.org/Megillah.10b.22?lang=bi)

¹⁷ *Reasons given by the Babylonian Talmud*. "And the queen Vashti refused ..." (B) Since she was an immoral woman, as a master said: "Both of them intended to commit an immoral act [cf. Mid. to Est. 1:9B]," why did she not go? (C) Said R. Yosé bar Haninah: This teaches that leprosy broke out on her. (D) *In a baraita one taught*: Gabriel came and made her a tail. [Neusner, *Babylonian Talmud*, 59.]

For what it's worth, a similar situation occurred to Cyrus, and he responded much differently with little lasting impact. Clearly, Ahasuerus' inebriated state does not allow him to make a similarly wise response.

Plutarch (Artaxerxes, 26). Accordingly, Dareius asked for Aspasia, who had been the special favourite of Cyrus, and was then a concubine of the king.... Once when Cyrus was at supper, she was led in to him along with other women.... when Cyrus proceeded to sport and dally and jest with them, [Aspasia] showed no displeasure at his friendly advances. But Aspasia stood by her couch in silence and would not obey when Cyrus called her; and when his chamberlains would have led her to him, she said: 'Verily, whosoever lays his hands upon me shall rue the day.' The guests therefore thought her a graceless and rude creature. But Cyrus was delighted, and laughed, and said to the man who had brought the women: 'Dost thou not see at once that this is the only free and unperverted woman thou hast brought me?' From this time on he was devoted to her, and loved her above all women, and called her The Wise.¹⁸

The king is enraged (1:12).

Understandably so, the king is enraged. Throughout this entire event, he desires to display his grandeur, power, authority, etc. And yet, he can't even get his wife to do what he says. She embarrassed him in front of everyone. Wrong or not, he's mad.

He seeks counsel from his wise men (1:13-15).

Radday and Brenner, in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, offer a convincing argument that the names of the wise men are intended to be comical. In reading the story, the modern audience is likely left wondering why the author mentioned these seven names at all. How are these men consequential enough to name all of them?¹⁹

Radday and Brenner go on to convey how a Hebrew audience would hear these names. They write the following:

Whatever these names may mean in Persian, Median or the language of any of the 127 royal provinces (1:1), in Hebrew they just sound ludicrous. For instance, no. 1 recalls *m^ehûmāh* = 'panic', no. 2 *bizzāh* = 'plunder', no. 3 *ḥarbôn* = 'drought', no. 4 *delef* = 'leaker',—the rest evoke no direct Hebrew associations, but are equally droll. Lacking any operative task ... they give

¹⁸ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, ed. Bernadotte Perrin (Medford, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926).

¹⁹ "The matter is totally different [in comparison to genealogies such as in Genesis] when name lists are found of non-Israelites, where they do not serve the slightest purpose and where we ask ourselves what may have made the authors include tiresome records of inconsequential names in dramatic narrative." [Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner, eds., *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, England: The Almond Press, 1990), 71.]

the impression of a dumb chorus in an opera bouffe [comical or farcical opera].²⁰

Potentially a modern audience should picture something like Snow White and the Seven Dwarves: Happy, Doc, Grumpy, Dopey, Bashful, Sleepy, and Sneezy.

Memucan offers a response (1:16-20).

- Memucan over dramatizes the incident — Vashti's offense was against ALL the officials and ALL the peoples in ALL the provinces, and will be made known to ALL women. Pretty serious stuff.
- All the women throughout all the provinces are going to do the same, so we must make a decree for the whole world!
- All women must give honor to their husbands.
- Vashti's out!

The king makes his decree (1:21-22).

- In this moment we see the first example of Ahasuerus swayed by those around him – which will occur several more times throughout the book of Esther.
- He decrees every man must be master in his own household.

Conclusion

Humor in Esther.

Esther's particular response to a hostile environment makes use of humor. Unfortunately, we know too little about the nature of humor in the ancient world, but this paper assumes that it is easier to bear pain or subjugation if one can mock those in authority or those responsible for the pain.²¹

The book is meant to make us laugh. For oppressed and powerless people, satire is a key weapon, cutting the vaunted splendor of the empire down to size.²²

²⁰ Radday and Brenner, 71.

²¹ Bruce William Jones, "Two Misconceptions About the Book of Esther," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (1977): 172.

²² Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, 6.

What is more, we too struggle with the invisibility of God. The God who can part the Red Sea and raise Jesus from the dead does not choose to exercise that same power very often in our experience.²³

God's Providence

Sometimes God shows up in thunder and lightning, sometimes in a pillar of fire and ascends on the tabernacle. Other times he appears in the form of man and talks directly to a person, directing them in how they should act.

However, there are also moments in which silently but just as effectively directs the whole scene while appearing absent the entire time. "In the Book of Esther, however, we see God working invisibly and behind the scenes. Here there are neither dramatic miracles nor great heroes, just apparently ordinary providence moving flawed and otherwise undistinguished people into exactly the right place at the right time to bring the empire into line and to establish God's purposes for his people."²⁴

Purpose statement. God's presence and direction, as revealed in the book of Esther, well reflects how you will experience God's providence. He will silently move and work – always present, never visibly seen. Trust he is present and is working a bigger and more valuable work you could ever imagine.

1. God directs, even man's foolishness, towards his own goals. From Ahasuerus' perspective, he got inebriated and made a stupid decision to call Vashti into the party. However, God orchestrated this moment in order to have Vashti deposed and set the stage for Esther to later become queen.
2. God's providence includes your hardship. Let's set aside Xerxes and Vashti for a moment. Esther and Mordecai will endure immense hardship long before they see how God may be using them in a greater way. God's providence often works this way – amid our hardship.

Are you okay with God's providence including your hardship? What if your hardship endures for a long time – with no seeming end? Can you be content knowing God is doing a much bigger work in and through your hardship, even if that means you remain in suffering?

A Caution Against Inebriation

By means of a secondary application, let me offer a lesson from a character sketch. Xerxes chooses to drink wine to the point of inebriation – probably drunk. Minimally, he was tipsy. Due to his decision, he ended up making one bad decision after another. First, he inappropriately requests/demands his wife to come entertain the party. When she

²³ Duguid, 5.

²⁴ Duguid, 7.

doesn't, he makes his second bad decision. He makes his domestic squabble into a worldwide edict for all women to do what their husbands say.

Realize the immense impact one moment may make to not only yourself but many others – near or far from you.

M3:

Esther Crowded Queen

(2:1-18)

March 10, 2024

Mardonius' Story

Introduction and Context. Good morning, my name is Mardonius.¹ I came to live in Susa in 482. This was a couple of years after Xerxes got rid of Vashti. You may remember when Vashti refused to come in to Xerxes party – he got mad and got rid of her.

Anyway, Xerxes left for Greece shortly after to pay back Greece for defeating his father, Darius. During his time in Greece, I was given to Persia as a eunuch to serve in the king's court. Every year, Babylon had to give 500 eunuchs to Persia as part of their tribute to the empire.² It didn't take me long to realize everyone was expendable for the king's pleasure or purposes. As one of these young men, I was placed under the service of Hegai who oversaw all the king's wives and concubines (2:3).

A year after my arrival, Xerxes finally came back to Susa. He had been embarrassed by some losses in Greece and decided to give up. From what I understand, he kind of wanted to get back together with Vashti. She had always been one of his favorites. That's probably why his counselors told him to make his decision a decree (2:1). They knew how fickle he was.

Young Men Propose Idea. Anyway, as he was moaning about wanting Vashti back, some of the eunuchs that served him came up with this brilliant idea to have a beauty pageant. Some of the king's officers would go throughout the whole empire, pick out all the prettiest young women, and add them to the harem. Xerxes would then have one night with each of them and if he liked one better than the rest, he could make that one the queen.

¹ Mardonius, Old Persian: Latinized form of Marduniya (meaning soft and mild) via its Greek form Mardonios. This name was borne by the son-in-law of Darius the Great. I do realize that if this story were consistent he would have a Babylonian name and not a Persian name 😊

² "Having done these things in Persia, he divided his dominions into twenty provinces, which they call satrapies; and having divided his dominions and appointed governors, he instructed each people to pay him tribute ... From Babylon and the rest of Assyria came to Darius a thousand talents of silver and five hundred castrated boys" [Herodotus, *Herodotus, with an English Translation by A. D. Godley*, ed. A. D. Godley (Medford, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), bk 3, 91-92.]

I wasn't there, but I heard Xerxes loved the idea (2:4). But then again, why not? He was known throughout the empire as a womanizer.

Shortly after the decree was given, we started seeing new women show up at the palace. They were all placed under the care of Hegai, and I began helping him prepare them for their special night. Most of them would go into the king for one night and never be called back to him.

I'm not sure how they felt. Some of us eunuchs didn't mind so much. Some of us were ripped away from really great homes and hated every moment of slavery. Others of us came from really poor homes and didn't mind the stability of the palace. Afterall, I got to serve the most beautiful women in the empire. The same goes with the harem. Some of them wanted to take the chance to be Xerxes' favorite and others seemed to dread every second.

Of course, none of us really had any option.

Esther Arrives and Enters Beauty Pageant. Eventually, Esther came to the palace. She was beautiful. Immediately Hegai took a liking to her and thought she had the best chance of becoming queen. He set her up with the best cosmetics, the best food, seven other assistants, and the best place in the harem (2:9).

I never knew Esther was a Jew (2:10). That only came out later. As far as I knew, Mordecai was her dad and their family had lived in Susa for a long time. From all outward appearances, they both seemed like Persians. Only years later would I come to realize that Esther was from Israelite royalty. She was raised by her cousin after her parents had been killed, and their family had been brought to Susa as captives from Israel (2:5-6).

Looking back, I suppose I should have figured it out. Every day, Mordecai would come to the court of the harem and ask about Esther. But he never talked directly to her. He always asked other people about her (2:11). I guess, I never really thought much about it. Maybe he was just a big fan 😊 Afterall, we all had our favorites we were rooting for.

A Night with the King. You might not realize that each of these young women took a year to prepare for their one night with the king. I know it seems a little ridiculous. They were all required to understand how to use the precious spices and oils inherent in an intimate evening with the king.³ And of course, they wanted to look and smell great (2:12). But a year?! Really? I think we can all agree that's absurd. But, if you're trying to learn how to please the king of the world more than all the other prettiest women in the empire – I suppose it takes a while.

³ "Myrrh, the precious spice derived from the resin of the commiphora bush, was frequently associated with lovemaking in the Song of Solomon (e.g., Song 1:13; 3:6; 4:6, 14; 5:5, 13; see also Prov 7:17). The text discreetly avoids any overt references to sex, but the implications of the scenario are clear, and the language is charged with innuendo." [Anthony Tomasino, *Esther*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 189.]

And remember – if they weren't the one chosen as queen, they would move over to the other group of concubines (2:14). Maybe they would get called into the king later and maybe they never would. A lot of them were forgotten by the king and just lived in the king's harem. Every now and then they might join the other concubines to dance and entertain the king's friends.

I remember the night Esther was called to go into the king. Quite a few of us thought she would probably be the one the king chose. I can recall one odd detail of that night. Each woman could take whatever she wanted to impress the king. She could dress however she wanted. She could wear as much or as little makeup as she wanted. It was up to her to decide how to best impress him. When Esther ended up going into Xerxes, she took nothing but a few things that Hegai told her (2:15). We all questioned that call, but it seemed to work out for her. The next day, we all knew Xerxes was a big fan (2:17).

Shortly after, the king put on a huge feast, and we all celebrated Esther as the new queen. He even told the empire they could pay less tribute that year. I hoped maybe Babylon wouldn't need to give so many young eunuchs that year.

Bridging the Gap

Purpose statement. Praise God! God's providence is not hindered by our weakness.

Mordecai and Esther's character. We need to be careful we don't draw too firm a conclusion regarding Mordecai and Esther's character. The author does not give enough information to really know much.

- We can't be certain about Mordecai's motivation for having Esther hide her Jewish heritage.
- We don't know Esther's opinion on being pulled into the harem. We shouldn't demonize her as if she wanted to be part, but we can't really be certain she didn't mind either. Maybe Mordecai wanted her to win and potentially advance himself, but maybe he was appalled by the whole thing and hated every moment. We are not told.

We do know a few things.

- *Back to Israel.* Jews were directed by God to go back to Israel after the 70 years of captivity. (1) In Deuteronomy 30:1-5, God reveals how they will be taken into captivity, but will later bring them back into the land given to them by their fathers. (2) Isaiah instructed them to settle in the land of their captivity, but once the 70 years were fulfilled, they were supposed to come back (Jer 29:1-7, 10-14). (3) The psalmist poetically unfolds the emotion of the exiles who longed to return home (Psa 137:1-9). It seems the appropriate emotion and longing for the Jews was an ache and desire to return to Israel.

Ezra and Nehemiah paint the pictures of those Jews who returned to the land and sought to rebuild the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. Esther seems to give an account of Jews who became too inculcated in their foreign culture.

- *Intermarriage.* God directed his people to not intermarry with other people groups. Esther's marriage to a foreign king was in clear violation to God's law – so much so that Ezra even directs the Jews to divorce the wives they had taken from the surrounding lands.

You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons (Deut 7:3).

Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children forever' (Ezr 9:12).

And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now then make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives" (Ezr 10:10–11).

- *Dietary Laws.* Those in captivity were supposed to follow Jewish dietary laws. Daniel offers an example of a young Jew who sacrificed everything to follow God's laws (Dan 1:8). We see no indication of Esther following dietary laws. If so, others would have known her to be a Jew.

We need to be careful to not draw too firm conclusions about Esther and Mordecai, but we possess enough information to conclude they offer us an example of two Jews who blended into the Persian culture – offering no to little distinction between themselves and the godless Persians around them.⁴ By the fact that no one knew they were Jewish, they clearly were not following dietary laws, publicly praying to the east,⁵ or communicating any desire to return to Israel.

Jobe (NIVAC). Unfortunately, the text does not commend Esther's obedience to those laws. She does not rise to her high position by consistent obedience to the law of God, the way, for instance, Joseph did in Egypt when he refused

⁴ In chapter three, we see evidence that Mordecai may very well have hidden his Jewishness to most people. The other men at the gate didn't know he was a Jew by his actions, clothing, or words, but only because he had told them (3:4). Additionally, Haman didn't know he was a Jew until the other men at the gate told him (3:6).

⁵ In Solomon's dedication of the temple, he mentioned how the people "pray towards this place" (1 Ki 8:35, 48). The Jewish people have traditionally understood this to mean they should face Jerusalem in their prayers (Talmud, Berachot 30a; Shulchan Aruch Harav, Orach Chaim 94:1), even though there are several varied opinions to this practice. Daniel offers us an example of such a practice (Dan 6:11).

the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife and spent harsh years in an Egyptian prison as a result.⁶

Mordecai and Esther blended into the godless culture around them. We may not be able to determine their motivation, but we can observe their actions. These two characters offer an example of the sinfulness of conforming to a worldly culture, while at the same time clearly revealing God's work through and around his sinful people. God works out his plan – not because of his people's perfection or lack of perfection – but in spite of them all together.

Two Timeless Principles. (1) God's people are not immune to the temptation of conforming to the world around them. This reality of conformity sadly reflects part of our fallen condition. We struggle to consistently pursue holiness and sometimes we fail miserably. (2) However, God's work is not limited by or endangered by our failure. He is working out his divine story unhindered by anyone.

Conclusion

God's people of all generations – in captivity or amid the freedom of a modern American culture, struggle with being pulled into conformity to the world around them.

Jesus, along with both the apostles John and Paul cautioned the church of this inevitability. In his intercessory prayer in John 17, Jesus prays that his disciples will be protected from the world. We are not of the world, so sanctify us in the truth, so we may be sent out into the world to declare the truth (Jn 17:14-19).

John exhorted the early church:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever (1 Jn 2:15-17).

And Paul as well exhorted the church to “no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds” (Eph 4:17). And again in Romans, Paul wrote, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2).

Jesus prayed we would be protected from the world. John commanded us to not love the world. Paul exhorted us to not conform to the world. In so doing, they each reveal the tendency of God's people to struggle with being conformed to the philosophy of the world around them.

⁶ Karen H Jobes, *Esther*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 113.

In the same way that Mordecai and Esther probably didn't think much about their disobedient actions. They probably were just living life – maybe with little thought to God's expectations. How about you?

Cornerstone Application

Do all your neighbors or all the people you work with know you are a Christian? If not, why not? Are you purposefully hiding your Christianity? Are you distinct in your community or would no one know you are a Christian besides you telling them?

More important to this text – God is working his plan whether you are what you should be.

Regardless of whether they always knew what the right choice was or whether they had the best of motives, God was working through even their imperfect decisions and actions to fulfill his perfect purposes. Other than Jesus, even the godliest people of the Bible were flawed, often confused, and sometimes outright disobedient. We are no different from them. Yet our gracious God omnipotently works his perfect plan through them, through us, and most surprisingly, even through powerful political structures that sometimes operate in evil ways.⁷

⁷ Jobes, 108.

M4:

Our Role in God's Providence

(4:1-17)

April 21, 2024

Introduction

Exordium. Is there a particular person in your life with whom you have failed to share the gospel? I'm referring to someone who the Spirit of God has implanted on your heart to talk with and share Christ and the gospel with? Maybe a neighbor, a co-worker, a friend, or family member.

For me, Karl (and Della) were our next door neighbors in Michigan. They were an older couple – likely in their 80's. They came off a little grumpy because most of the neighbors could hear them regularly yelling at each other – more because they were both nearly deaf and not necessarily unkind. We really liked Karl and Della. We talked with them often. They knew I was a pastor and would give me a little bit of a hard time every now and then – just in play. We had spiritual conversations but never a clear conversation outlining the gospel of Christ. Karl died while we lived there, and I recall a great deal of shame as I sat at his funeral realizing I no longer had an opportunity to share Christ with him.

In studying chapter four of Esther, Mordecai asks Esther a key question, “who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this” (Dn 4:14). I think it's appropriate for me to ask myself the question, “did God place next to Karl, for such a time as this?”

Broad context up to this point.

1. Ahasuerus hosts a six-month long feast in which Vashti rejects his request and is removed as queen.
2. After a few years of war and disappointing loss, Ahasuerus' returns home. Upon the suggestion of his young attendants, he puts on a beauty pageant in order to choose a new queen.
3. Esther becomes part of this pageant and eventually is chosen by Ahasuerus. Throughout this period, Esther keeps secret her relationship with Mordecai and her Jewish heritage.
4. While sitting at the gate, Mordecai becomes aware of a plot on the king's life and informs Esther who tells the king. Uncharacteristically, the king does not reward

Mordecai at that time, but the scribes do place the account in the chronicles of the king.

5. The author introduces a new character into the story – Haman. Quickly, Ahasuerus elevates Haman above the rest and appears to place immense trust in him.
6. Simultaneously, the author presents Mordecai and Haman at odds. Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman, producing within Haman an intense hatred for Mordecai and the Jews.
7. Haman keeps his anger concealed, on some level, only to approach the king with an absurd and dramatic accusation and request. He informs the king of a group of people who are rebels against the kingdom and need to be dealt with. He offers Ahasuerus' a large amount of money to proclaim a certain day on which all the kingdom can do away with these rebellious people and take all their property.
8. Haman did not share with the king who these people were. However, Ahasuerus agrees and gives Haman the royal ring to do as he wished.
9. The king and Haman sit down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

Immediate Context.

1. Mordecai mourns (4:1-3). What we are not told is that Mordecai or any of his fellow-Jews repented. We are not told that any prayed.

The name of God is not mentioned here or elsewhere in the Book of Esther. There is no specific mention of prayer, no mention of the Jews speaking to God, nor any reference to God speaking to His people through His prophets. Based upon the instruction given to dispossessed Jews in 2 Chronicles 6:34-39, and the example of godly Jews in Ezra 9:5-10:1; Nehemiah 1:4-11; and Daniel 9:4-19, it seems almost necessary to conclude these Jews—including Esther and Mordecai—are not godly.¹

2. Esther's maidens go to Mordecai (4:4). Esther indirectly communicates with Mordecai. Apparently, Esther is less concerned with the reason for Mordecai's mourning as she is about getting him to stop. She sends clothing in hopes of persuading him to stop mourning. Mordecai continues.
3. Hathach (Hātōk) goes to Mordecai and reports back to Esther (4:5-9).
4. Esther sends Hathach back to Mordecai (4:10-12).
5. Mordecai responds back to Esther (4:13-14).

¹ Deffinbaugh, *Esther*, 28.

Fasting

Prayer often accompanies fasting. Typically, in the OT, fasting accompanies prayer and times of mourning and suffering. The Lexham Bible Dictionary indicates fasting to be “primarily a means of mourning,” and typically “in response to suffering or disaster, in conjunction with other mourning rituals.”² In the Old Testament, “fasting was a means of asking God to have pity and relent from inflicting punishment on the person or people praying.”³

When Moses communicated with the Lord on Mount Sinai for forty days and forty nights, he fasted (Ex 34:28; Dt 9:9). (2) When Israel went to war with the Tribe of Benjamin, “all the people of Israel ... came to Bethel and wept. They sat before the Lord and fasted that day ... and offered burnt offerings (Jgs 20:26). (3) Samuel confronts the people of Israel with their idolatry, resulting in the people gathering at Mizpah, praying to the Lord, fasting, and confessing “We have sinned against the Lord (1 Sa 7:5-6). (4) After returning to the land, Ezra proclaims a fast, so the people “might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our children, and all our goods ... So we fasted and implored our God for this, and he listened to our entreaty” (Ezr 8:21-23). (5) On hearing of the poor conditions of Jerusalem and the temple, Nehemiah “sat down and wept and mourned for days, and ... continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven” (Neh 1:4).

Prayer uncertain for M & E. While prayer typically accompanies fasting, we can’t be certain that Mordecai and Esther were praying. Biblical authors possess no apprehension in revealing the prayer lives of bible characters. On several occasions, Daniel discusses his prayer life. “When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house ... he got down on his knees three times a day and prayed ... as he had done previously (Dn 6:10, cf. Dn 2:18-19, 10:2).

Additionally, not all fasting seemed to include prayer.

In Mesopotamia, fasting was a part of mourning rituals. It was a public display of one’s grief that stood in stark contrast to celebration (Scurlock, “Death and the Afterlife,” 1886). In the ancient Near East, fasting held social significance similar to feasting. Both practices could create or renew a social bond and displayed an individual’s or group’s current state. While feasting was often a public display of wealth and success, fasting was a display of humility and grief (Pollock, “Feasts, Funerals and Fast Food,” 21-22).⁴

² Barry et al., *Lexham Bible Dictionary*, “fasting.”

³ Barry et al.

⁴ David Seal and Kelly A. Whitcomb, “Fasting,” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*, ed. John D. Barry et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

Mordecai may have publicly mourned and fasted in order to draw public attention to the injustice about to occur. He may have simply embraced the cultural norm of dramatically grieving impending suffering.

Uncertain if prayer would have been to God. While they probably were praying, we can't be certain that they were praying to God. Jews are often confronted with their sin of worshiping other gods. We have no evidence to assume Mordecai and Esther worshiped the God of the Bible. Additionally, most religious groups fast.

Darius fasted when Daniel was placed in the lions den. Daniel writes, "Then the king went to his palace and spent the night fasting; no diversions were brought to him, and sleep fled from him" (Dan 6:18). Darius fasted as a means of mourning. He likely prayed, but likely not to God.

Even today, most major religions fast, and their fasting is often accompanied by prayer. Certainly, we would all agree they are not fasting and praying to God of the Bible.

Hindus fast on several occasions. One such fast is "believed to cleanse the soul, remove the sins committed unknowingly, and bring prosperity."⁵ Amid each period of fasting the Hindus "pray" requesting blessings and forgiveness.

Muslims are required to fast on each of the 29 to 30 days of Ramadan. The fast includes dietary expectations as well as five daily prayers.⁶ Muslims fast in order to "attain piety, seek forgiveness for past sin, and appreciate the pain of hunger."⁷

Here's my point. Just because Mordecai and Esther fasted does not necessitate that they prayed or that their potential prayers were directed to God.

Improper motivation in prayer. Let's assume they were praying to God. We still can't be certain they were praying with proper motivation. Isaiah discusses selfishly motivated fasting – or at least addresses fasting characterized more by religious ritual than by repentant and humble people (Is 58:1-12). Additionally, through Amos, God tells the Jews, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them (Am 5:21-24). As well, Micah addresses the need to come to the Lord, amid religious ritual, with justice, kindness, and humility; otherwise, those religious rituals possess no value (Mi 6:6-8).

Even if Mordecai and Esther prayed amid their fasting to the God of the Old Testament, we have no indication their heart was properly motivated. In fact, the author offers some indication on Esther's part that she may not be properly motivated (4:16).

⁵ Times of India, "6 Important Vrats and Fasts Hindus Should Keep and Why," January 5, 2024. Link [here](#).

⁶ An article on Ramadan in the booklet "Center for Spiritual Life." Link [here](#).

⁷ "Why Muslims Fast During Ramadan," Muslim Aid Media, July 2014. Link [here](#).

Propensity to whitewash bible characters. I understand the natural desire to assume the best of Mordecai and Esther. We see this desire in the following author's attempt to add a prayer to Esther.

Apocryphal Esther, ch. 14:1-19. Queen Esther also, being in fear of death, resorted unto the Lord: ²And laid away her glorious apparel, and put on the garments of anguish and mourning: and instead of precious ointments, she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she humbled her body greatly ... ³And she prayed unto the Lord God of Israel, saying, O my Lord, you only are our King: help me, desolate woman, which have no helper but you: ⁴For my danger is in my hand. ⁵From my youth up I have heard ... that you, O Lord, took Israel from among all people ... ⁶And now we have sinned before you: therefore you have given us into the hands of our enemies, ⁷Because we worshipped their gods: O Lord, you are righteous ... ¹²Remember, O Lord, make yourself known in time of our affliction, and give me boldness ... ¹⁴But deliver us with your hand, and help me that am desolate, and which have no other help but you ... ¹⁹O mighty God above all, hear the voice of the forlorn; and deliver us out of the hands of the mischievous, and deliver me out of my fear.⁸

As well intentioned as this may be, the author does not give enough evidence to conclude much of anything about Mordecai and Esther's fasting. Maybe – if not probably – little information is given about Mordecai and Esther's motivation and actions because the lesson to be learned lies outside of their character or religious rituals, and instead lies in God's abilities and providential dealings with people regardless their motivation or level of spirituality.

Let me ask a question. Many of you likely have a disposition to whitewash the characters in the Bible. We feel better about them being godly heroes. Why do we seem to need the characters in the Bible to be model faithful believers?

Sidenote. Several modern commentators as well conclude Esther serves as a godly heroine. Swindoll seems to go the furthest in his eloquent portraiture of Esther. However, Peterson considers her a "Jewish saint" and "passionate intercessor" who spoke for and identified with God's people. Wechsler goes so far as likening Esther's three day fast to "the three-day period of Jesus' death."

Swindoll. Is that a great answer or what? Is this a great woman? She's had only a few moments to consider what Mordecai had told her, a brief slice of time to weigh his counsel. It was all she needed. She is determined to make a difference, no matter what the consequences to her personally: 'If I perish, I perish. If a guard drives a sword through my body, I die doing the right thing.' She has changed from fear to abandonment and faith, from hesitation to confidence and determination, from concern for her own

⁸ *The Apocrypha: King James Version* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), Es 14:1–19.

safety to concern for her people's survival. She has reached her own personal hour of decision and has not been found wanting.⁹

Peterson. The moment Haman surfaced, Esther began to move from being a beauty queen to *becoming a Jewish saint*, from being an empty-headed sex symbol to being *a passionate intercessor*, from the busy-indolent life in the harem to *the high-risk venture of speaking for and identifying with God's people*.¹⁰

Wechsler. Just as Esther's fast and Jesus' humiliation (*tapeinosis*, Phil. 2:8) commenced on the same date [supposedly Passover], so too Esther's three-day period of fasting parallels the three-day period of Jesus' death.¹¹

Therefore, too many assumptions must be made based on speculation to draw the conclusion that Mordecai and/or Esther were godly, faithful Jews genuinely praying to their God for deliverance. So then, how might that impact the meaning of the text? The value of the text lies not in how to emulate the faith of Esther and Mordecai, but rather in being comforted by the fact that God accomplishes his purposes regardless the moral strength of anyone person. His plan remains unhindered by our actions or inactions, by our mistakes or successes, by our heroism or cowardice.

We need to let go of our natural desire to draw conclusions about Mordecai and Esther's character in this story. Some want to conclude they both act as heroes with abundant faith. Others may infer Mordecai and Esther to be secular, culturally conformed Jews who only embrace religious ritual when ultimate destruction arises. And even then, Esther only reluctantly endangers herself to intervene for her people.

The reality – their level of faith does not play an important role in this story. It doesn't matter if they are faith-filled heroes or reluctant and cynical victims. What is most important is what we learn of God in the story.

The Reality of God's Providence.

Your decisions don't hinder God's divine plan.

TP. You can't hinder God's plan. God will accomplish his plan regardless your effort or lack of effort. The question then remains. Do you want to be part of his plan, reaping the benefits, or outside his plan, suffering the inevitable consequences of disobedience?

⁹ Charles Swindoll, *Esther: A Woman of Strength and Dignity*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 85-86.

¹⁰ Eugene Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 172-173.

¹¹ Michael G. Wechsler, "Shadow and Fulfillment in the Book of Esther," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:615 (July-September 1997):281.

TC. Some argue against the traditional and most natural reading of the text. For instance, Deffinbaugh argues Mordecai intends to communicate to Esther that if she does not intercede there is no other hope.

Deffinbaugh. If Esther does not act on her behalf and on behalf of her fellow-Jews, there is no other hope. How could I possibly reach such a conclusion? Does the text not indicate just the opposite? Does Mordecai not indicate to Esther that if she does not act to save her people, God will bring about their deliverance in some other way? No.¹²

Deffinbaugh goes on to support his conclusion by citing a footnote in Breneman's commentary which consists of a summary statement from a journal article by John Wiebe. Breneman writes the following:

Breneman's footnote. Wiebe argues that this phrase should be translated as a rhetorical question, suggesting that the implied answer is no; help would not arise from anywhere else. Thus Esther was the only hope for their deliverance. Wiebe suggests that this translation fits the context of the Book of Esther much better than the traditional rendering. Such a reading would, however, limit the resources of God, who brought this about, and transplant the emphasis from God's work to Esther's work. God is capable of using anyone for his purposes. He was not limited to using just Esther, but she turned out to be the one because she answered the challenge.¹³

While Deffinbaugh argues this view from Breneman's footnote, he does not engage the article itself in which John Wiebe offers an unconvincing argument for the position.¹⁴ Wiebe proposes two unnatural questions or problems with the traditional interpretation. First, from where would the relief or deliverance come? Frankly, who cares? We need not know what God might have theoretically done to embrace that he could have easily taken care of it by other means. Secondly, Wiebe sees it as problematic that all of Esther's family would have been punished/destroyed for her lack of interceding. The problem for Wiebe rests in Mordecai receiving punishment for Esther's refusal to act. Once again, why should this be a problem at all. Mordecai has already displayed himself to be disobedient to God's expectations for the Jews,¹⁵ and why should Wiebe's discomfort for God's decision impact what seems to be a logical and traditional interpretation.

¹² Deffinbaugh, *Esther*, 30.

¹³ Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 10:336 fn. 4.

¹⁴ John M. Wiebe, "Esther 4:14: 'Will Relief and Deliverance Arise for the Jews from Another Place?,'" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53, no. 3 (1991): 409–15.

¹⁵ By this I refer to his refusal to go back to Israel, encourage Esther to participate in the pageant, his clear conformity to a pagan culture, his seeming lack of prayer, &c.

Therefore, we are left taking the natural interpretation to heart. If Esther had not acted, God would have caused some other means to deliver his people. He would have had to because he made promises he must fulfill.

TA. Let me offer a practical balance to this reality. While we should find great comfort in the reality that God will accomplish his purpose regardless of our effort, we should act as if we are the only one in a place to accomplish the task to which we have been called. While God could easily have used other means, he determined to use Esther, and she should act as if she were the only one in a place to do so.

Your refusal to engage will negatively impact you.

Mordecai draws Esther's attention to a dark reality. Mordecai tells Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews" (Est 4:13). And again he says, "if you keep silent ... you and your father's house will perish" (Est 4:14). In so saying, he only gives Esther one logical decision. She will die if she does nothing, but she may live and save all her people if she acts.

Similarly, God has called you to be an active part of his plan of redemption. There is no bench on the side for people that don't get called into the game. We've all been called to engage. If we don't engage in the plan, we sacrifice the blessing, joy, and satisfaction of being an active part. Additionally, in refusing to participate, we suffer the consequences of loss of eternal reward, an anemic Christian walk, shame and sorry from ongoing disobedience.

God put you here, at this time, as part of his divine plan.

Mordecai further incentivizes Esther by asking her to consider the probability she had "come to the kingdom for such a time as this" (Est 4:14). Regardless Mordecai's level of spiritual commitment throughout the book, he seems to have enough biblical and spiritual sense to recognize that Esther may have likely been divinely placed in her position for this very moment.

Most likely, none of you have been placed in a certain position whereby your actions will save all your people – at least I hope not for your sake. However, you have all been divinely placed in a specific place, a specific job, with specific fellow employees, next door neighbors, the friends you want and maybe some you don't. God's providence has equipped you and navigated your life situations for you to be a part of his divine plan in the lives of particular people, at a particular place, in a particular time to be the aroma of Christ and a proclaimer of the Gospel.

Embrace it. Don't opt out of God's divine plan out of fear, anxiety, uncertainty, or false modesty. I don't know what role God has for you, but I think you might. Embrace it.

Yet, rest in the fact that God will accomplish his divine plan in the lives of the people around you – regardless of whether you engage his plan or not. Disobedience will result in punishment.

The Nature of Our Response.

Very often we respond like Esther, “I guess so ... if I perish, I perish.” Esther’s response closely resembles Thomas’ response to Jesus, “Let us also go, that we may die with him” (Jn 11:16). Both were willing to obey, but they did so with great reluctance and cynicism.

Obey regardless of your emotions.

The author seems to clearly indicate Esther’s anxiety and uncertainty in approaching the king. Esther says, “then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish” (Dn 4:16). She doesn’t want to go. She thinks it possible if not probable she will be killed for illegally approaching the king. He hasn’t called her to himself for the last month, and she’s going to just barge in on him. This could go poorly. Yet, she decides to do the right thing, even though her emotions and maybe even logic are not supporting her decision.

Esther seems to only step up to the right decision after Mordecai convinces her that her life is in danger. Her statement, “If I perish, I perish,” does not reveal a heart of faith or significant trust. But at the end of the day, she chose to do the right thing, resulting in the Jews, along with her and Mordecai being spared.

Sometimes, doing the right thing just because it’s the right thing is okay. It’s not ideal but it’s okay. Your emotions don’t need to coincide. You don’t need to completely understand. You just do the right thing. You go to work some days because it’s the right thing. You treat people kindly – not because you like them – but because it’s the right thing. You treat your spouse with respect and love – not because you are always thrilled with them – but because it’s the right thing. You share Christ with your neighbor – not because your confident and fearless – but because it’s the right thing.

God uses our feeble works and accomplishes his perfect will.

Engage others.

Ultimately, Esther approached the king and interceded for her people. And, as a result, God used her to spare the Jewish people. Uncomfortable as it was, fear filled and anxious as inevitably she must have been – she acted.

Are you mourning the impending destruction of billions of non-believers? You may not be able to address the billions of people, but you can engage the small group of people God has placed in your life, your immediate vicinity.

Gloriously, God will effectually draw all those he has divinely called to be his children. I’m so thankful for that reality. However, he has also called us to share the truth with those around us. Will we, like Esther, take the uncomfortable step in engaging the problem or will we sit back and do nothing?

Trust something other than your own human ability.

Esther calls upon all the people to join her in her mourning and fasting. She realizes that for this interaction to go well, more people need to be engaged than just her and Mordecai.

The same dynamic remains true for each of us. We need help. We need others prayers. We are weak and incapable of accomplishing what God has for us by ourselves. You must come to the understanding that God desires for you to work alongside others, and ultimately to know that while you can't accomplish his purpose for you alone, he will empower you and accomplish his will.

Conclusion

Purpose statement. Rest in knowing God accomplishes his plan without needing you but take action as if it did depend on you.

Back to Karl. Let me go back to my neighbor Karl. I have settled on two truths regarding Karl. (1) I rest in the fact that I didn't mess up God's plan for Karl's life. I know with certainty that Christ will build his church and even the gates of hell will not prevail against it. Christ will effectively draw all those to himself who he has divinely appointed to eternal life. That is his plan, and I can't mess it up. I can't mess up God's plan for someone else's life. I find a great deal of comfort in that reality. (2) However, I am responsible to reflect and declare both the glory of God and the truth of Christ's gospel to the people God brings into my life. And, when I choose to not engage that plan – when I fail to obey – I may not mess up God's divine plan, but I will suffer the consequences for disobedience. I will miss out on the eternal reward that accompanies obedience, and I will live with a weaker spiritual life and the shame that accompanies disobedience.

M5:

God's Providence Includes Normal People

(5:1-8)

April 28, 2024

Introduction

Exordium. Let me share with you a couple responses from last week's message. One person told me their family's response to the message was, "he ruined Esther for us." Another person, a woman, told me, "We don't have a lot of women heroes in Scripture, and I feel like you're taking one away from me."

That's not my intention – at all. I do intend for us to view these characters accurately but not with a view that destroys our appreciation for them. So then, let me do a little bit of purposeful clean up this week. While we will briefly consider the other main characters in Esther, I would like us to consider the character development specifically for Esther that we find in chapter five.

Context. At the end of chapter 3, we read of Haman's plot to have all the Jewish people killed. As the king and Haman sit down to drink (3:13), Mordecai sits in sackcloth and ashes in the midst of the city and at the king's gate (4:1-3). Esther's maidens, followed by Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, go to Mordecai first to get him to put on some clothes and finally to tell her why he was mourning (4:4-6). Through Hathach, Mordecai reveals Haman's evil plan and directs Esther to go into the king in order to save her people (4:7-14). Once convinced, Esther determines to potentially forfeit her life and approach the king but not until she directs Mordecai to have all the Jews fast for three days (4:15-17).

Simple outline. At the end of chapter 4, we find one of the most important, if not the most important statement in the book. Mordecai reveals God's providence in saying, "who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this" (4:14). While the first eight verses of chapter five don't contain some profound statement, they do serve as a key turning point in the story and in Esther's character. So then, we will take a few moments to (1) see the author's purposeful character development in these few verses and then (2) consider the normalcy of these characters and the impact of that reality on us. And just a heads up – the first part is much longer than the second.

The Development of Characters in Esther

Before examining Esther's character development, let's take a moment to quickly consider the other three main characters. We find little character development for the other three main characters throughout the book of Esther. Ahasuerus and Haman evidence no change in character throughout the story. Mordecai seems to have some potential development, clearly in his role, less so in his character. However, we find in this chapter a clear turning point for Esther's development.

Bush, WBC. she is portrayed with some depth and complexity, accomplished to a large extent by the fact that her character develops, in contrast to the static portrayal of the other three.¹

Tomasino. Of all the main characters, only Esther displays any character development through the course of the narrative. While other characters may experience a change of position or office, Esther actually develops a backbone.²

Xerxes. Born in 518 BC,³ Ahasuerus (or Xerxes) becomes the king of Persia in 486 BC at the age of 32 years old.⁴ For four to five years, Xerxes prepares to attack Greece, as retribution for his father.⁵ As part of this preparation, he hosts a six-month feast in Susa in order to rouse support, confidence, and excitement. During this feast, Xerxes deposes Queen Vashti. At that time, 483 BC, Xerxes is 35 years old.⁶

Xerxes initiates and fails in his campaign against Greece (480 BC).⁷ He won in Thermopylae in mid-August 480 BC. He defeated Attica and destroyed Athens in September. However, he lost a naval battle in Salamis on September 29, 480 BC. Herodotus writes (8.86.1), "the

¹ Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 9:319.

² Tomasino, *Esther*, 96.

³ "The Achaemenid king Xerxes I was born in 518 B.C., the first son of Darius and his favorite queen Atossa, born after Darius had come to the throne. He was elevated to official crown prince some years before the death of his father." [T. Cuyler Jr. Young, "Xerxes (Person)," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1009.]

⁴ "After declaring Xerxes king, Darius was intent on his expedition. But in the year after this and the revolt of Egypt, death came upon him in the midst of his preparations, after a reign of six and thirty years (521-485)" [Herodotus, *The Histories*, 7.4.1.]

⁵ "Thus it was that Xerxes mustered his army, searching out every part of the continent. [20] [1] For full four years (484-481) after the conquest of Egypt he was equipping his force and preparing all that was needed for it; before the fifth year was completed, he set forth on his march with the might of a great multitude." [Herodotus, 7.20.1.]

⁶ "in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants" (Est 1:3).

⁷ "The number, then, of those whom Xerxes son of Darius led as far as the Sepiad headland and Thermopylae was five million, two hundred and eighty-three thousand, two hundred and twenty. [187] [1] That is the number of Xerxes' whole force." [Herodotus, *The Histories*, 7.186.2.]

majority of the ships at Salamis were sunk, some destroyed by the Athenians, some by the Aeginetans.”⁸

He comes home after his defeat in Greece and conducts a spectacle in which he replaces the now deposed Vashti with Esther. Xerxes is 40 to 41 years old (479 BC).⁹ About five years pass before Haman orders the Jews to be killed and Mordecai calls on Esther to approach the king. The year is 473 or 474 BC and Xerxes is around 45 years old.¹⁰ Xerxes will have Haman killed in the following passages, and Xerxes himself will be assassinated not even ten years later. In August 465 BC, one of Xerxes commanders, Artabanus, assassinates him.

Throughout his life, we see little change in the qualities that define Xerxes.

Ambitious. Tomasino writes of Xerxes:

For the ancient audience, he would have represented the height of Persian glory, a man of great power and wealth. His efforts to conquer Greece demonstrate the breadth of his ambition; his failure to carry through speaks poorly of his military competence.¹¹

Impetuous. (1) He gets rid of Vashti because she embarrasses him. (2) Offers to give half the kingdom to Esther. (3) When a storm destroys a bridge during his war against Greece, he orders his soldiers to flog the channel with lashes (Herodotus, *Histories*, 7.34-35).

Easily manipulated. (1) Haman suggests destroying an entire people group and he hands over his ring. (2) He listens to his manservants and imposes a beauty pageant on the kingdom in which he works his way through likely hundreds of women. (3) Seemingly, he continues in his Grecian conquest at the push of his general rather than his own desires. (4) On the request of one of his wives (Amestris), who was angry with his affair with his niece, Xerxes allows her to cut off parts of her body and send her home – ultimately resulting in Xerxes sending his army to kill his brother and nephews.¹²

Ruthless. (1) He declared the destruction of an entire group of people with a wave of his hand (3:11). (2) At the will of his queen, he kills his second in command and his family.

Tomasino. the depiction of the great king in the book of Esther is not nearly as complex as that which appears in Herodotus and other ancient literature. Here, he seems rather shallow, a “flat” figure who develops little in the course of the narrative. He apparently has no inner life, no hidden motives

⁸ Herodotus, 8.86.1.

⁹ “And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign” (Est 2:16).

¹⁰ “In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar” (Est 3:7).

¹¹ Tomasino, *Esther*, 88.

¹² Herodotus, *The Histories*, 9. 109-113.

or agendas. He is the only major character in the story who does not change office from beginning of the narrative to the end; indeed, the book begins by extolling his magnificence and describing his reign, and it ends in the same way. Though he is prominent throughout the story (as will be discussed below), he is easily the least interesting of the main characters.¹³

Haman. The first time the author introduces Haman, he connects him to a hatred of the Jews (Haman, the Agagite). He then immediately acknowledges the honor Haman desires from the people and his frustration with Mordecai for not showing him such honor. So simply put, Haman hates Jews, specifically Mordecai, and he is extremely proud. This reality never changes and drives the drama of the story.

Mordecai. The author initially links Mordecai to King Saul and likely the upper class of Judea (2:5). His role throughout the book often revolves around Haman and their age long animosity for each other's people. Likely the original recipients of this letter would have held a negative opinion of Mordecai due to his name being a "barely-Hebraized form of the name Marduk, chief god of Babylon."¹⁴

Born Nationalistic Leader. While we may question his level of spiritual leadership, there is little question as to his natural and nationalistic leadership.

Fox. He acts not as an individual but as the Jew – the representative and then the leader of the Jewish people. He is introduced as (literally) a Jewish man – with no comments on other qualities, such as piety, wisdom, courage, or obedience to Torah.... Mordecai knows just what is happening and – except for one moment – knows exactly what must be done.... He has the political savvy to compose a decree that will avert the disaster.¹⁵

The main feature of this personage is that he earns his position by his own deeds; It is not an institutionalized post ... he is not elected or even acclaimed ... but simply acts as he sees fit, and his deeds are confirmed by communal accord.¹⁶

Pride. Mordecai's interaction with Haman indicates a certain level of pride. However, the type of pride may be uncertain. Michael Fox makes a distinction between "the pride of self-esteem rather than the pride of arrogance."¹⁷ While we may be able to appreciate the nuance, God seems to condemn pride of any kind. Either way, his pride seems somewhat irrational or emotional. Mordecai's actions ultimately result in the near destruction of his people – not just him.

¹³ Tomasino, *Esther*, 88.

¹⁴ Tomasino, 91.

¹⁵ Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 186.

¹⁶ Fox, 187.

¹⁷ Fox, 187.

Not self-serving. While Mordecai ultimately replaces Haman in the high position in the king's court, Mordecai does not seem to be motivated by his own career or success. In fact, he appears to take actions contrary to self-advancement. The honors he receives fall into his lap. He overhears a conversation that results in great honor, and Esther gives him power once she's destroyed Haman. Neither were prompted or manipulated by Mordecai.

Mordecai is wise, patriotic, and committed to his young cousin and adopted daughter. He appears to avoid those negative qualities of typical politicians such as cunning, deceptive, or devious. Although he does appear dangerously blunt.

Lack of spiritual faithfulness. One quality seems obviously absent from this sketch of Mordecai. He displays no clear spiritual qualities of faith or obedience to Mosaic Law.

Piety, either as an attribute of spirit or as obedience to Mosaic Law, is not displayed among Mordecai's virtues.... Ideal figures pray, preach, and demonstrate their trust in God and their zeal for the Law ...Mordecai, in contrast, nowhere prays, and when he states his faith, it is not expressly in God. Nor does he show any concern about his ward's marriage to a gentile.¹⁸

We will further address Mordecai's character in later texts.

Esther. Most dramatically and unlike any other character, Esther transforms throughout the story. Esther transforms from the young and beautiful, although passive ward (adopted daughter) of Mordecai, into the authoritative Queen Esther.

Young. First, let's acknowledge Esther's likely age. While several rabbis in Jewish commentaries (i.e. Midrash) place Esther's age anywhere from 40 to 80,¹⁹ the text indicates she was a young woman – likely a teen girl.

He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The *young woman* had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter (Est 2:7).

¹⁸ Fox, 189.

¹⁹ "That is what is written: "He was rearing Hadasa, she was Esther" (Esther 2:7) – Rav said: She was forty years old. Shmuel said: She was eighty years old. The Rabbis say: She was seventy-five years old. The Rabbis from there said: The Holy One blessed be He said to Abraham: 'You departed from your father's house when you were seventy-five years old, by your life, the redeemer that I will establish from you [from your descendants] will be seventy-five years old,' corresponding to the numerical value of Hadasa. *The numerical value of Hadasa is 74, but often one number is added when such calculations are made." ["Bereshit Rabbah 39," in *The Sefaria Midrash Rabbah*, 2022. https://www.sefaria.org/Bereshit_Rabbah.39.13?lang=bi]

The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* defines the word translated “young” as a noun that “refers to a marriageable but unmarried girl, emphasizing the youthfulness of the girl.”²⁰

While her age does not justify any wrong actions, we benefit in understanding her age and experience. Remember, Daniel would have been a similar age when he stood up to Nebuchadnezzar.

Passive Stage. Initially, the author presents her as Mordecai’s adopted daughter, and the text emphasizes her beauty – and really nothing else. Throughout these scenes, the author uses passive terms to describe her character and actions.

- Mordecai raises her and takes her as his daughter (2:7).
- Esther was taken to the king’s palace (2:8).
- She was given cosmetics (2:9).
- She was commanded by Mordecai to not reveal her national identity (2:11).
- Able to take whatever she wants into the king, she passively complies with Hegai (2:15).
- “She is the object of the king’s actions: he loves her, sets the crown on her head, and makes her queen (2:17).”²¹

Three years later, amid Mordecai’s public mourning, little has changed in her character. She simply wants to cover up the embarrassment or the public spectacle. She’s still superficial. But what would be expected of a young lady who has only had an expectation of beauty and external appearances.

Esther is not consulted; her will is of no interest. The author does not even hint at how Esther felt about what was happening to her, because her feelings are irrelevant.... Esther is putty – not because of any personality flaw, but because of age and situation. Nothing has ever challenged her to be anything more. (197)

Esther accepts whatever happens to her. So devoid is she of individual will that she does not ask for further aids on her big night – a request that might at least show active participation in the process ... nor does she refuse anything, an action that might show a spark of self-assertion – evidence of confidence in her own beauty, perhaps or indifference to the outcome, or principal repudiation of artificial luxuries... So far Esther has been nothing more than sweet and pretty. (198)

Active Stage. We see an initial change in her character at the end of chapter 4. She sends her servants to address an issue and makes commands in order to accomplish an important purpose. She is starting to act like a leader. By the end of chapter 4, Esther

²⁰ Milton C. Fisher, “1389 נער,” in R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, New Edition (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 586.

²¹ Tomasino, *Esther*, 96–97.

reveals the first shift in her character. She resolves to do her duty and directs Mordecai to three days of fasting with all the other Jews.

Indeed, in his closing narrative summary, 4:17, the narrator sets up a striking contrast. In v 8 it was Mordecai who *ordered* Esther to go to the king in order to plead with him on behalf of her people. Here he reports “Mordecai did exactly as Esther had *ordered* him.”²²

Yet, her concern in going to the king rests primarily on herself and not her people. Mordecai consistently displays national pride and commitment throughout the book. However, Esther needed time to come to this point – the point of a national hero.

Authority Stage. In one day, Esther is transformed from a pretty young woman – just an object on some levels – and the obedient adopted daughter of Mordecai, into Queen Esther, one of the preeminent Jewish leaders.

The author of the story seems to purposefully indicate this transition by his use of the term Queen. Prior to this section, in chapter five, Esther is mentioned 22 times and only one time is she referred to as Queen Esther (2:22). However, in this moment and afterward, Esther is mentioned 33 times and in fourteen of those instances, she is referred to as Queen Esther.

Bush, WBC. Once having been accepted into the king’s presence ... she is completely in command. The banquet strategy is entirely her own stratagem, and she pursues it with courage, consummate skill, and commendable shrewdness.²³

Fox. First, the plan Esther executes is of her own devising. Mordecai had merely told her to go to the king and entreat him on behalf of her people. Of course she has acceded to his demand in essence and has taken his cause to herself. But, with no further consultation, she has chosen to approach the task in a way quite different from what Mordecai and the reader would expect.²⁴

What seems most natural to the reader might be for Esther to appeal to the king immediately once the king grants her any requests, “even to the half of my kingdom” (Est 5:3). Esther no longer acts in mere compliance to those around her but formulates a plan and executes her strategy with skill and eloquence.

Boldness. On several occasions, Esther exhibits commendable boldness. (1) First, on potentially a penalty of death, Esther breaks the law in speaking to the king. (2) In her conversation, Esther must acknowledge she kept information from the king about her heritage. (3) Esther must convince Xerxes to change an unchangeable law. (4) Esther not

²² Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 9:320.

²³ Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 9:320–21.

²⁴ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 200.

only approaches the king but must also confront the second most powerful man on the earth. (5) In making her request, Esther must attempt to not reveal the king's impetuous and foolish dealings with Haman.

Wisdom, shrewdness. Esther displays great wisdom in her interaction with the king and Haman. She doesn't rush into her request immediately upon Ahasuerus' invitation to come to him. Amid significant anxiety, she cautiously navigates the king and invites him to a feast. Even amid the first feast, she does not just jump in and accuse the second in command and potentially embarrass or confront the king.

I personally doubt she is reliant or in some way sensitive to God's leading, but she senses in the interaction with Ahasuerus that she should wait one more day. She additionally sets him up to of necessity favor her request.

If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said." (Esther 5:8).

Frederic Bush, WBC. Unmistakably, with Esther's subtle restatement of the invitation, the king's future compliance (which he can hardly now refuse) has become virtually a public pledge to grant her unstated request! This careful and subtle development in the two dialogues demonstrates that Esther is not stumbling blindly in the dark, inexplicably inviting the king to two unneeded banquets, dangerous because of the time they consume, and it demonstrates that the narrator has not clumsily introduced a development that leaves his readers stumbling blindly in the dark, wondering what is going on. Esther is shrewdly and subtly pursuing a well-designed plan, by which she has maneuvered the king into committing himself in advance.²⁵

Mordecai and Esther contrasted. Mordecai is more an ideal figure than Esther. He offers a bundle of virtues (not necessarily faith or spiritual fidelity), whereas Esther stumbles and grows throughout the story. She is the more human character, the more imitable character. Michael Fox writes of Esther, "Her very ordinariness suggests that ordinary people too can rise to the moment and take on unexpected strengths. Mordecai may be the more unqualified exemplum, but she is the more effective one."²⁶ Frederic Bush agrees when he writes the following.

Bush, WBC. Esther, too, is an ideal, a model, but a far more lively and "real" one than Mordecai. She begins as a nonentity, valued in that courtly world only for her good looks and her body, but she resolutely accepts Mordecai's challenge to use her position as queen to act for the salvation of her people

²⁵ Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 9:407.

²⁶ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 205.

(with but one brief objection). In one decisive moment she becomes a force to be reckoned with. Mordecai's loyalty is a key factor in the Jews' deliverance. However, it is Esther, with her courage, cunning, ingenuity, and diplomacy—a woman in a world that was not only ruled by men but devalued women—who is the main agent in effecting their deliverance.²⁷

Was Esther Amestris? Most commentators minimally acknowledge the debate as to the historical reality of both Vashti and Esther since Herodotus presents Xerxes having only one wife/queen. Herodotus could have been wrong or maybe only emphasized the wife connected to Xerxes offspring. Either way, our view of Esther is somewhat impacted by whether Ahasuerus is Xerxes or not.

Of the resources I could find, Tomasino offers the most helpful overview of the historical issues surrounding Esther's name in connection with Herodotus' history of Xerxes and Amestris.

So far, there has been no satisfactory answer for this difficulty. To contend that the book of Esther is literal history, one must conclude that Herodotus and the other ancient authors were mistaken in their identification of Amestris as Xerxes' queen. If we allow that the Greek authors were correct, then we must conclude that the book of Esther is not a literal historical account of events in the reign of King Xerxes. There really seems little hope of reconciling the accounts.²⁸

God uses ordinary people.

Esther offers us one more ordinary person God providentially used to accomplish his sovereign plan. Using ordinary people appears to be God's typical method.

1. Noah drank too much, but God uses him to build the ark and save mankind (Gn 6-9).
2. Abraham and Sarah are an old, diminished couple that seem a bit cynical as well. And yet God uses them to build a nation (Gn 11-25).
3. Jacob is a deceiver (Gn 25-35).
4. Moses is a murderer and stutterer who becomes God's spokesman and leader (Ex 3-4).

²⁷ Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 9:321.

²⁸ Tomasino, *Esther*, 56.

5. Rahab is a prostitute God uses to protect the spies going into Jericho (Jo 2).
6. Jonah runs from God and after calling Nineveh to repentance sits and anxiously awaits its destruction (Jon 1-3).
7. David murders the husband of the woman he had an affair with and yet God establishes an eternal kingdom from his lineage.
8. Throughout the book Ecclesiastes, Solomon unfolds all his sinful paths, and yet he falls in line of the coming Messiah and the wisest of kings.
9. Peter is impetuous, tries to chop a guys head off, denies Christ, and yet God uses him to start the church (Mat 26; Jn 21, Acts 1-2).

Now when they [religious leaders] saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus. (Acts 4:13).

10. Paul becomes the most prominent murderer of Christians and yet God uses him to become one of the most prominent authors of Scripture and the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 7-9).

When Paul writes his first letter to the Corinthians, he begins by informing them that the God had chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. Paul writes:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (1 Cor 1:26-29).

God consistently uses normal people. In fact, I'm often more encouraged by God's use of normal people than those who seem to have no flaws. Daniel can feel a bit inaccessible. We are never told of a weakness or sin in Daniel. Of course, he sinned, but we don't know what his weaknesses were. He comes off as a flawless hero.

Esther is a hero, but she's first a normal person. She grew and developed and ended up stepping up when she needed to. That's commendable and admirable.

Conclusion

Purpose statement. Expect God to use normal people. You are normal. Expect God to use you.

1. Being normal does not justify sinful weaknesses or encourage a lack of pursuing accomplishment.
2. Every person God has used is normal and has serious flaws. Christ is the only human to whom we should look for a perfect model or hero. Cling to him, no other human hero will satisfy.

M6:
God's Providence, Haman's Pride
(5:9-6:13)

May 12, 2024

Introduction

In the story of Haman, we find a wonderful example of a couple proverbs. Solomon writes in Proverbs 16:18, "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall." And again in Proverbs 29:23, "One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor."

Due to God's providence, Haman experiences incredible, almost comedic, humiliation. In Haman's humiliation, we can learn two things, (1) God's providence extends to the mundane moments of life, and (2) in his providence, God deals harshly with pride.

Apple. The providential and sovereign control of God is seen in all of the detailed ways that God works behind the scenes to bring about His kingdom agenda, to protect His covenant people and to destroy His arrogant enemies.¹

God's Providence Includes the Mundane.

1. The king's insomnia.

Henry. The providence of God rules over the smallest concerns of men. Not a sparrow falls to the ground without him. Trace the steps which Providence took towards the advancement of Mordecai. The king could not sleep when Providence had a design to serve, in keeping him awake. We read of no illness that broke his sleep, but God, whose gift sleep is, withheld it from him. He who commanded a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, could not command one hour's sleep.²

2. The king's choice of entertainment. (C.S. Lewis, *Phantastes* and Augustine, the Bible)

¹ Paul G. Apple, *Esther: For Such a Time as This* (Baltimore, MD: Bible Outlines, 2021), 99.

² Matthew Henry and Thomas Scott, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary* (Logos Research Systems, 1997), Es 6:1.

3. The servant's choice of book.

Henry. The servant that read to him either lighted first on that article which concerned Mordecai, or, reading long, came to it at length. Among other things it was found written that Mordecai had discovered a plot against the life of the king which prevented the execution of it, v. 2. Mordecai was not in such favour at court that the reader should designedly pitch upon that place;³

4. The king's delay in rewarding Mordecai.

Herodotus, 8.85.2-3 I can list the names of many captains who captured Hellenic ships, but I will mention none except Theomestor son of Androdamas and Phylacus son of Histiaeus, both Samians. I mention only these because Theomestor was appointed tyrant of Samos by the Persians for this feat, and Phylacus was recorded as a benefactor of the king and granted much land.⁴

Herodotus, 9,107.3. Xenagoras won the gratitude of Masistes himself and Xerxes, for saving the king's brother. For this deed he was made ruler of all Cilicia by the king's gift.⁵

5. The timing of Haman's arrival.

Bush, *WBC*. His decision to speak to the king in the morning about having Mordecai hanged meets with a set of coincidences so remarkable that they can hardly be anything but the narrator's cipher for "divinely arranged" (Clines, 307). Haman's plans are about to run head on into the providence of God.⁶

6. The irony of Haman having just finished Mordecai's gallows to be commanded by the king to honor the same Mordecai.

³ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 648.

⁴ Herodotus, *Herodotus, with an English Translation by A. D. Godley*, ed. A. D. Godley (Medford, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920).

⁵ Herodotus, *Herodotus, with an English Translation by A. D. Godley*, ed. A. D. Godley (Medford, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920).

⁶ Fredric W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, vol. 9, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1996), 418.

God's Providence Humbled the Proud.

The rollercoaster of Haman's pride.

Loop 1. The proud are easily offended.

The high point in leaving the honored feast with the king and Esther. "Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart" (5:9a).

The low point of Mordecai's dishonor. As Haman floats around feeling really good about himself, he heads home for the day. He passes the king's gate and Mordecai refuses to pay any attention to him. His moment of grandeur is dashed by one man's refusal to bow to him, and Haman is "filled with wrath against Mordecai" (5:9d).

In our pride, other's actions tend to easily offend when they fail to match up to our expectations. Haman offers a wonderful example of the principles Solomon shares in Proverbs. Solomon writes, "A brother offended is more unyielding than a strong city" (Prv 18:19a). Again, he writes, "Good sense makes one slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook an offense" (Prv 19:11). The reverse proves true as well. Poor sense results in quick anger and easy offense.

Loop 2. The Proud are irrational.

The high point of Haman recounting his riches. Haman walks in his home and (probably like many times before) rehearses the long list of his credentials (5:11-12).

- His wealth,
- His sons,
- His promotions,
- All the people he's advanced beyond,
- And even the queen's high opinion of him.

Objectively, Haman possesses abundant reason to be positive or optimistic. Yet, all these "blessings" prove insufficient to overcome the offense of one man's actions.

The low point of all is worthless. Pride forbids you appreciate the many blessings of God due to overemphasis on simple slights. Haman tells his family, "all this is worth nothing to me" as long as Mordecai doesn't bow (5:13).

And this is heightened by the fact that we find Haman wandering the king's court at indecent hours of the night (6:4). The text would indicate one of two things to be true. (1) Either the king is struggling to sleep early in the morning or (2) more likely, the king is struggling sometime in the night. The text states, "on that night the king could not sleep" (6:1). Therefore, Haman, unable to let go of his rage, wanders to the king's court in the middle of the night, anticipating his early morning request to kill Mordecai.

In Haman, we see the irrational nature of pride. While Haman possesses more than anyone in the kingdom – other than the king; he can't enjoy anything while a single man

refuses to show him due honor. This pride and rage keep him from sleeping, motivated by murderous intent. He'll only be happy when Mordecai's dead.

Loop 3. The proud are presumptuous. They assume everyone does or should see them the same way they see themselves. The king, as usual, seeks out someone to give him ideas. When the king decides to honor Mordecai, he needs some counsel – and the best counsel is whoever is closest it appears 😊

The high point of potential honor. Addicted to his own opinion of himself, when asked how to honor the one in whom the king delights, Haman assumes he will be the honored recipient (6:6). Haman couldn't imagine the king wanting to honor anyone but himself.

The lowest point of all. Haman unfolds his ideal honor, only to be completely humiliated by a couple realities. First, Mordecai is to receive the honor. And second, Haman will be the honored prince to lead Mordecai around proclaiming his greatness (6:10).

Imagine being Haman. He took Mordecai – dressed him, led him around town, and proclaimed, “thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor” (6:11). Hours earlier, Haman had finished building a gallows on which to kill Mordecai. Now he parades him around town extolling his greatness. Rough day!

Mordecai goes back to the king's gate. In some sense, nothing for Mordecai changed, in either his character or his position. However, broken Haman crawls back home to groan to his wife over his ordeal – only to be told by his wife and friends, “you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him” (6:13).

Conclusion

When you seem invisible, God is aware. Not everything is what it seems. In this specific text, Mordecai plays a small, although integral role. Haman takes center stage but remains driven by his hatred for Mordecai. A lot is going on in the background involving Mordecai. Haman's preparing the gallows for him, and the king is preparing to honor him. Of course, Mordecai is probably unaware of any of this.

Mordecai appears to be forgotten. Mordecai may have struggled wondering why he never received any kind of reward for saving the king's life. It may have eaten at him. We can't be certain of course. It's natural he may have wished something had been done. Yet, God in his providence and grace, was holding off on Mordecai's honor for a specific time in which he would cause Ahasuerus to struggle sleeping so he could reward Mordecai on the exact right moment.

Haman thinks he's on the verge of great honor. He's been given so much power up to this point. Even Esther seems to want him at an important event. And then, the king asks him directly how he should show honor to “the one whom the king delights.” Of course, Haman thought it was him and he wanted to be paraded around town as if he were the king. And yet, he's setting himself up for the most humiliating moment of his life.

God's providence is not accurately described by your present perception of circumstances.

The proud possess a distorted view of themselves, while the humble allow others to lift them up. Other people's perception of us hardly matches our own perception of ourselves. Pride has a way of magnifying the perception of ourselves, and yet that same pride destroys everyone else's perception of us. We often assume everyone else is as impressed by our greatest values as we are. This is often why we feel the necessity to share those with others regularly – if only they knew all the amazing things about me they would find me pretty amazing. In reality, no one really cares about your amazing feats and accomplishments.

In contrast to Haman, Mordecai offers a good example of “let another man praise you and not your own mouth” (Prv 27:2).

God's justice is served in his time not ours.

Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. ... It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone. (*Mere Christianity*, New York: Macmillan, 1952, pp. 109–10.)

You don't want to be in opposition to the Jews! Our world is full of Hamans. In one sense, all who are proud reflect Haman's sinful proclivity. However, the rooted hatred in Haman's heart toward the Jewish people as well finds many reflections in our current culture: college students supporting Hamas and crying for the destruction of all Jewish people, a president who refuses to send the support needed to assist Israel, 12,000 protesters at Eurovision protesting the inclusion of one Jewish participant – To Hamas, to Hezbollah, to Iran all calling for the destruction of the Jewish people. Pure hatred and pride results in offended, irrational, and presumptuous people raising their hand against God's divinely chosen people – not a wise or safe place to position yourself.

There is something deeper here than a natural reaction against an ethnic group. Even in Moses' time, Pharaoh tried to destroy this people. Later Merneptah, another pharaoh, said he had destroyed them. “Ultimately, as brought out in the New Testament, this is not merely anti-Jewish hostility but hatred of the people of God (John 15:18). Its source is satanic: the attempt to defeat God in his redemptive purpose. Its historic outworking involves all of God's people, Christians as well as Jews.”⁷

⁷ Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, electronic ed., vol. 10, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 297.

M7:

God as a Warrior (7:1-10)

May 19, 2024

Introduction

Exordium. The book of Esther unfolds a divine vs. human political chess match in which God providentially moves people in opposition to Haman's political maneuvering.

God sets the playing field by having Vashti removed and Esther placed as queen. Mordecai taunts Haman, and Haman's political move is to orchestrate the destruction of all the Jewish people! Yet, we know God is ten steps ahead of Haman.

As a result of Haman's move, Mordecai directs Esther to go into the king and plead for the salvation of the Jewish people. She does, and providentially God softens the heart of the king and sets up Haman for his downfall.

In the meantime, Haman makes a dramatic move and decides to prematurely take out Mordecai. However, simultaneously, God keeps the king awake and brings to mind Mordecai's saving act of service to the king.

Haman attempt to take a move by going to the king to ask if he can kill Mordecai, only to be defeated by having to honor Mordecai. Upon this humiliation, Haman finds his side of the chess board with very few pieces left and doesn't realize that the second feast with Esther will result in the queen destroying him and a pawn ultimately placing him in checkmate.

Broad Context. *[This broad context is likely unneeded due to the previous exordium.]* At the end of chapter 3, we read of Haman's plot to have all the Jewish people killed. As the king and Haman sit down to drink (3:13), Mordecai sits in sackcloth and ashes in the midst of the city and at the king's gate (4:1-3). Esther's maidens, followed by Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, go to Mordecai first to get him to put on some clothes and finally to tell her why he was mourning (4:4-6). Through Hathach, Mordecai reveals Haman's evil plan and directs Esther to go into the king in order to save her people (4:7-14). Once convinced, Esther determines to potentially forfeit her life and approach the king but not until she directs Mordecai to have all the Jews fast for three days (4:15-17).

In chapter five, Esther goes in to the king, and gloriously, is warmly welcomed by the king. He offers up to half the kingdom, yet she simply asks he and Haman to join her for a feast (5:1-4). The king calls for Haman and the two join Esther at her first feast. After again offering her half the kingdom, Eshter requests the two come back the next day for a second feast (5:5-8). They agree and Haman leaves the palace "joyful and glad of heart" only to be confronted once again by Mordecai's refusal to bow to him as he walked by the

king's gate. Haman goes home and complains to his friends and family, and they all conspire to hang Haman from gallows the next day (5:9-14).

Chapter six begins with a king struggling with insomnia. His solution to insomnia is to have a servant read to him. The servant just happens to grab the book of memorable deeds and recounts for the king how Mordecai had once saved his life but never been rewarded for this immense service (6:1-3). The impetuous king decides he must take care of this at once and inquires into who is in the court. Providentially, Haman is the only servant in the court. The king asks Haman what he should do with one "whom the king delights to honor." Presuming to be the recipient, Haman unfolds a majestic display of honor only to have the king then command Haman to perform the honor on his arch nemesis, Mordecai (6:4-10). After leading Mordecai throughout Susa and proclaiming to all "thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor," Mordecai goes back to the king's gate and Haman goes back to his home humiliated. At this point, his wife assures him that he will surely fall to the Jewish people (6:13). Haman has no time to process his humiliation because the king's servants pound on the door in order to take Haman to Esther's second feast (6:14).

In chapter seven, Esther conducts her second feast for the king and Haman.

Simple outline. (1) First, we will walk through the brief scene of Esther's second feast for the king and Haman. In this feast, Esther reveals herself to be a Jew and condemns Haman, ultimately resulting in Haman's death. (2) In this chapter, God providentially fights for his people. So secondly, we will consider the oft overlooked, underappreciated, and misunderstood attribute of God as a warrior throughout Scripture. (3) And finally, we will wrap up the message with a couple clarifications and considerations.

God as a Warrior in Esther

In the ten verses of chapter seven, we read a brief but dramatic scene in which (1) Esther and the king briefly interact and (2) the king and Haman respond to Esther's revelation.

Esther and the King

Haman and the king enter Esther's second feast – both anticipating something. At this point, Haman may be quite nervous and cynical having just left his wife's discouraging foretelling of his likely demise. The king likely senses both some level of anticipation and maybe a little weariness at how Esther has dragged out this whole ordeal.

So then, the king starts the conversation with the most obvious question, "what is your wish" (Est 7:2). Finally, the time has come for Esther to plead with the king for her life and the life of her people. If her slavery were all that was on the table, she wouldn't have bothered the king. However, her life is at risk.

Of course, the king desires to know who would threaten the life of his king and all her people. This is where the queen places Haman in check! She points to Haman and says, “a foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!”

Three Strikes and You’re Out! Haman and the King’s response.

Immediately, Haman is terrified, and the king rises in anger and storms out to the garden. Haman stays to beg for his life from Queen Esther (7:7).

Strike one: Haman’s edict threatened Esther and all the Jews. The king expresses wrath for likely several reasons. Of course he is upset about the problem at hand, but also he likely struggles to find appropriate reason to punish Haman. The king had allowed for the destruction of Esther and her people. He was not an innocent party in this scenario.

Jobes. Esther’s words send Xerxes into an enraged quandary that drives him out of the banquet room and into the garden. In his commentary, M. Fox reads the questions circulating in Xerxes’ mind: “Can he punish Haman for a plot he himself approved? If he does so, won’t he have to admit his own role in the fiasco [and lose face]? Moreover, he has issued an irrevocable law; how then can he rescind it?” The king’s dilemma will soon be resolved by Haman’s further folly.¹

Maybe somewhat bewildered, uncertain how to respond, the king returns to Esther and Haman. If the king were uncertain how to deal with Haman prior to walking in the room, he’s confronted with a new issue when he walks in the room. Haman appears to be assaulting Queen Esther.

Strike two: Haman assaults Esther. Upon entering the room, the king sees Haman falling on the couch by Esther (maybe because of Gabriel pushing him 😊).² He may not have actually thought Haman was forcing himself on her, but he does say, “will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?” (7:8).

The *TWOT* defines the Hebrew word translated assault as “subdue, bring into bondage, keep under, force”³ and *BDB* adds “tread down, beat or make a path, subdue ... press, squeeze ... also attack, assault”⁴

Whether Haman was physically assaulting Esther or merely laying at her feet pleading for his life, his actions were inappropriate and illegal.

¹ Jobes, *Esther*, 165.

² “Second Targum of Esther 7.8. As the king returned *in anger* from the *inner* garden to the site of the wine feast, *there was the angel Gabriel pushing the wicked Haman, when the king saw Haman leaning over the bed upon which Esther sat, the king wondered, saying to himself: Truly did Haman ...*” [Bernard Grossfeld, ed., *The Two Targums of Esther*, The Aramaic Bible, v. 18 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 7.8.]

³ John N. Oswalt, “951,” in Harris, Archer, and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 430.

⁴ F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 461.

Artaxerxes, 27.1. This was the woman for whom Dareius asked, and he gave offence thereby to his father; for the Barbarian folk are terribly jealous in all that pertains to the pleasures of love, so that it is death for a man, not only to come up and touch one of the royal concubines, but even in journeying to go along past the wagons on which they are conveyed.⁵

Yamauchi. One of the edicts on harem conduct published by Ernst Weidner read: A courtier or a eunuch when he would speak with a woman of the palace should not approach closer than seven steps. He may not speak with her if she is insufficiently clothed, nor may he remain standing and listening when two palace women are gossiping.⁶

Jobes. Harem protocol dictated that no one but the king could be left alone with a woman of the harem. Haman should have left Esther's presence when the king retreated to the garden, but where could he have gone? His choice was either to follow the king, who had bolted in anger from his presence, or to flee the room, suggesting guilt and inviting pursuit. Haman is trapped. Even in the presence of others, a man was not to approach a woman of the king's harem within seven steps. That Haman should actually fall on the couch where Esther is reclining is unthinkable!⁷

The king now has just cause to punish Haman. While he may not have been able to appropriately condemn him for his pogrom of killing all the Jews (because he had participated in the edict), he could condemn Haman for assaulting the queen.

Bush. Rather, he chooses so to interpret Haman's action, thereby providing a charge with which to condemn him that relieves the king from raising publicly the true reason for the condemnation, the plot against the Jews.⁸

Tomasino. though Haman had no intention of violating Esther, that Xerxes emphasizes that the offense was occurring in his presence implies that he interpreted the scene as more than a mere proximity breach. One might even wonder whether Xerxes deliberately misinterpreted the scene, in order to simplify his decision regarding Haman's fate⁹

Strike three: Haman set up the gallows for Mordecai who had saved the king. As Haman's face is covered, Harbona (of chapter 1 who participated in Vashti's removal) draws the king's attention to the fact that Haman had just built a gallows to kill Mordecai – "you remember king, the Mordecai that saved your life and you just honored? Yea, that guy!"

⁵ Plutarch, *Artaxerxes*, ed. Bernadotte Perrin (Medford, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 27.1.

⁶ Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), 262.

⁷ Jobes, *Esther*, 165.

⁸ Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 9:433.

⁹ Tomasino, *Esther*, 299.

In light of our chess analogy, the queen places Haman in check, and one of the pawns comes in and puts Haman in checkmate. Haman is taken away to be brutally and publicly destroyed, and the king's anger subsides.

LALHB. to hang someone up on a stake and so impale the person as a form of execution. Qal: Ge 40:19, 22; 41:13; 2 Sa 4:12; Es 5:14; 6:4; 7:9-10; 8:7¹⁰

My struggle with Esther. The question of “so what” plagued my study of this passage. I struggled understanding the author's intent. I wondered if the lesson of the text lie within a character sketch of Esther or Haman, maybe even the king. Or were we supposed to see God's character revealed in the text in some way – beyond God's providence, the attribute we've consistently seen throughout the book.

As I considered Esther, several questions came to mind. I primarily struggled with what seemed to be a lack of pity or mercy extended, not only to Haman but later when she asks for an additional day to kill more people. That seems odd to me. How do we as New Testament believers process that type of response?

Could she have been more merciful to Haman? How does love your enemies and do good to them who hate you – play into this story (Lk 6:27ff.)? Should Jesus' directions to his disciples be imposed on Esther? Why or why not? Can we react like Esther? Maybe my attention should not be focused on Esther and rather God's character.

God as a Warrior Throughout Scripture

At the Lanier Theological Library in Houston, TX, Tremper Longman III taught on the topic of God as a warrior.¹¹ In his teaching, he outlined five different phases throughout Scripture in which God manifest as a warrior. Let's consider those five phases.¹²

¹⁰ *Lexham Analytical Lexicon of the Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2017).

¹¹ Longman also wrote a book on the topic. I did not purchase the book because it is still in production in Logos, although available in Amazon Kindle. I assume the video teaching outlined much of the book. [Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 1995).]

Additionally, Longman outlined the steps before, during, and following war in the Old Testament. While these notes did not offer much to this message, they are worth noting here.

The nature of divine warfare in Scripture. (1) What takes place before a battle? (a) Inquiry: God had to tell them to go to war (Joshua 5; 1 Sam 23:1-6). They were not supposed to make that decision on their own. (b) Spiritual preparation (Josh 5:2-12; 2 Sam 11). (c) Sacrifices (1 Sam 13). (d) The march into battle (Num 10:35-36; 2 Chron 20:20-26). (2) What takes place during a battle? Number of troops and quality of weapons don't matter (Judges 7:1-8; 1 Sam 17:45-47). Israel was not to go into battle with a superior fighting force. God desired Israel to have an inferior position so he would receive the glory and not man. Amid a battle, we see the principles of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. (3) What takes place after the battle? (a) Praise (Ex 15; Judges 5; Psalm 24, 98). (b) Herem, utter destruction (Joshua 6:15-19, 24-25).

¹² Longman worded his five phases in the following manner: “Phase One: God fights the flesh and blood enemies of Israel. Phase Two: God fights Israel. When Israel is disobedient, God judges them. Phase 3: God will

1. God wars against the enemy of his people.
2. God wars against his people because of their disobedience.
3. God promises a warrior king.
4. A warrior king comes, fighting a spiritual battle.
5. A warrior king comes fighting a physical and spiritual battle.

Phase 1: God wars against the enemy of his people.

The Flood. Very few pages of Scripture turn before seeing God as a warrior. “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5). Therefore, he destroyed the world, only sparing a small remnant in the Ark (Gen 6-9).

The Exodus. In moving from Genesis to Exodus, we see God war against the people of Egypt. God continually hardened Pharaoh’s heart as he brought more and more dramatic plagues on the land of Egypt (Ex 7:3). And, in the final plague, “the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt” (Ex 12:29), shortly after he drowned the Egyptian army in the sea so that “all the host of Pharaoh that had followed [Israel] into the sea, not one of them remained” (Ex 14:26-28). In Exodus 15, Moses and the people of Israel sing a song to the Lord in which they say:

The LORD is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him. The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name. Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea. The best of Pharaoh’s officers are drowned in the Red Sea. (Ex 15:2-4 NIV).

Israel’s conquest into the land. God promised to Joshua, “Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses” (Jo 1:3). However, to place their sole in any place required warfare.

The city of Jericho offers one of the most notable battles through which God delivered his people. In approaching Jericho, Joshua saw a man standing before him with a sword in hand. Upon further inquiry, the man revealed he was “the commander of the army of the Lord” (Jo 5:14). God would go before Israel and defeat Jericho. For seven days the people of Israel would walk around Jericho, and on the seventh day, God would cause the walls to crumble. The people then went into the city and “devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword” (Jo 6:21).

Deborah, the Judge. Prior to the kings of Israel, God raised up judges in order to save Israel “out of the hand of those who plundered them” (Jgs 2:16). At one point, Jabin, king of Canaan, “oppressed the people of Israel cruelly for twenty years” (Jgs 4:3). God raised up Deborah and Barak, who lead the people against Sisera. “Up! For this is the day in which

come and fight the oppressors of his people. Phase 4: Jesus fights spiritual powers and authorities. Phase 5: Jesus wins final battle over human and spiritual enemies.”

the LORD has given Sisera into your hand. Does not the LORD go out before you?" (Jgs 4:14).

Barak pursued the chariots and the army ... and all the army of Sisera fell by the edge of the sword; not a man was left. (Jgs 4:16).

Following the victory, Deborah and Barak sang a song in which they described the work of God.

When you, LORD, went out from Seir ... the earth shook, the heavens poured, the clouds poured down water. The mountains quaked before the LORD, the One of Sinai, before the LORD, the God of Israel (Jgs 5:4-5).

Hezekiah and 185,000 Assyrians. For the first fourteen years of his reign, Hezekiah would not serve Sennacherib, the king of Assyria (2 Kgs 18:7). Eventually, Sennacherib sends a massive army to destroy Jerusalem. After a bit of rather dramatic and effective taunting to those on the walls of Jerusalem, one of the Assyrian spokesman told the people:

Hear the word of the great king, the king of Assyria! Thus says the king: 'Do not let Hezekiah deceive you, for he will not be able to deliver you out of my hand. Do not let Hezekiah make you trust in the LORD by saying, The LORD will surely deliver us, and this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria (2 Kgs 18:28-30).

Hezekiah's servants report back to Hezekiah, and Hezekiah responds by tearing his clothes, covering himself in sackcloth, and going into the house of the Lord where Isaiah reassures him of God's protection (2Kgs 19:1-7). Hezekiah prays to God that he would save his people (2 Kgs 19:14-19). Following, Isaiah prophecies of Sennacherib and Assyria (2 Kgs 19:20-33), and that night "the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians" (2 Kgs 19:35).

Phase 2. God wars against his people because of their disobedience.

The Lord would war against his own people when they were disobedient. Very little time would pass after Jericho before God would direct Israel's defeat at the city of Ai. However, the most significant destruction and defeat of Israel would come by the Assyrians and Babylonians.

While Jeremiah would call the people of Israel back to repentance, his primary message was to declare the coming judgment of God. Jeremiah prophesied to Israel:

Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Behold, I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands and with which you are fighting against the king of Babylon and against the Chaldeans who are besieging you outside the walls. And I will bring them together into the midst of this city. I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger and in fury and in great wrath. And I will strike down the inhabitants of this city, both man and beast. [God would then give all the survivors] ... into the hand

of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and into the hand of their enemies, into the hand of those who seek their lives. He shall strike them down with the edge of the sword. He shall not pity them or spare them or have compassion (Jer 21:3-7).

And following the destruction of Jerusalem and the captivity of Israel, Jerusalem would mourn the dramatic and nearly comprehensive loss. He describes the city of Jerusalem:

How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow has she become, she who was great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a slave (Lam 1:1).

He describes the destruction by Babylon through a divine lens. He writes the following in Lamentations.

He has cast down from heaven to earth the splendor of Israel; he has not remembered his footstool in the day of his anger. The Lord has swallowed up without mercy all the habitations of Jacob; in his wrath he has broken down the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; he has brought down to the ground in dishonor the kingdom and its rulers. He has cut down in fierce anger all the might of Israel; he has withdrawn from them his right hand in the face of the enemy; he has burned like a flaming fire in Jacob, consuming all around. He has bent his bow like an enemy, with his right hand set like a foe; and he has killed all who were delightful in our eyes in the tent of the daughter of Zion; he has poured out his fury like fire. The Lord has become like an enemy; he has swallowed up Israel; he has swallowed up all its palaces; he has laid in ruins its strongholds, and he has multiplied in the daughter of Judah mourning and lamentation (Lam 2:1-5).

Phase 3. God promises a warrior king.

Phase three begins with Israel in Babylonian Captivity. Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed. Even when the temple is rebuilt, the presence of the Lord does not descend on it. God has removed his presence from Israel. He no longer fights their battles. But, he has not left them without particular promises and a dream of a future warrior king.

Daniel would unveil such a character in his visions. In Daniel 7, Daniel unfolds a dream of four beasts. Four ugly, deformed, and violent beasts rise from a great sea. Daniel describes the fourth as “terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong” with iron teeth, devouring and stamping everything under its feet (Dan 7:1-8). However, the vision did not end with this fourth beast. Instead, one like the son of man came with the clouds of heaven. “He came to the Ancient of Days ... and to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples ... should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Dan 7:13-14)

So then, the people of Israel were left anticipating the coming of a warrior king.

Phase 4. A warrior king comes, fighting a spiritual battle.

Phase 4 begins as we enter the New Testament. Israel anticipates a warrior king. Is that who came? That's who John the Baptist anticipated. Consider how John the Baptist described the one who came after him.

after me comes one who is more powerful than I ... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matt 3:11-12).

How does that description fit with your perception of Jesus? Jesus went about healing people, feeding thousands, and not conquering Rome. John the Baptist anticipated a conquering king whose "axe is laid to the root of the trees" (Matt 3:10).

This expectation on John's part probably explains why he would send two of his disciples to question Jesus as to whether he was the Messiah. John had already acknowledged Jesus to be The One. Had he made an error? Had he baptized the wrong guy? He sends two disciples, and they ask, "are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Matt 11:3).

Longman. Jesus responds in essence with, "John, I am the divine warrior, but I have heightened and intensified the battle so that it's directed not toward flesh and blood but toward the spiritual powers and authority. And John, you can't defeat these enemies by killing but rather by dying."¹³

John, all of Israel, and even the disciples expected a conquering, warrior king. In one sense, Jesus didn't come as a warrior king – if – your perception of warrior king is physically focused. However, Jesus did come as a warrior king if you understand his war to be primarily spiritual over the powers of sin and hell (the emphasis of the *Christus Victor* model of the atonement).¹⁴

In his life, Christ purchased us with his blood (Ac 20:28). He paid the debt we owe (Rom 3:21-26; 1 Pet 2:24-25). His death was a ransom for many (Mk 10:45). However, in context of our study today, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8b). Paul addressed this as well in his letter to the Colossians.

¹³ Longman, *God Is a Warrior: Coming to Terms with Divine Violence* (Houston, TX: Lanier Theological Library, 2017), 47:38, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9VTISmNQpBY>.

¹⁴ *Christus Victor* is the element of the atoning work of Christ that emphasizes the triumph of Christ over the evil powers of the world, through which he rescues his people and establishes a new relationship between God and the world. [Robert Kolb, "Christus Victor," The Gospel Coalition (blog), n.d. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/christus-victor/>]. Ligonier Ministries offers a helpful, concise article addressing the same issue with specific discussion on how the ransom was not paid to Satan. [Ligonier Ministries, "Christ Our Ransom," May 1, 2013. <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/christ-ransom>] Consistently, varied resources cited Gustaf Aulen's work *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*. Further study should include consideration of this work. At a quick glance, he did cite many of the early church fathers.

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. (Col 2:13–15).

During his time on earth, Jesus Christ's primary war took place in a spiritual realm. However, a time will come in which his war will consist both of the spiritual and the physical.

Phase 5. A warrior king comes fighting a physical and spiritual battle.

Jesus will return. In his return he will ultimately defeat Satan, but he will also physically destroy all those who stand in opposition to him. John the Baptist likely expected the warrior king painted for us by the apostle John in Revelation.

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns.... He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood ... The armies of heaven were following him ... Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS (Rv 19:11–16).

Volf. The book of Revelation rightly refuses to operate with the belief that all evil will either be overcome by good or self-destruct. It therefore counts with the possibility of divine violence against the persistent and unrepentant evildoer. Those who refuse redemption from violence to love by the means of love will be, of necessity, excluded from the world of love.¹⁵

Clarifications and Considerations

Clarifications

Esther lived in phase 3. The story of Esther rests in phase 3 (and a bit in phase 1). During Esther's life, the people of Israel look forward to a coming warrior king. However, even amid this primarily future perspective, God does manifest his desire to fight for, defend, and preserve his people. He displays this by providentially working the destruction of Haman, the enemy to the people of God.

¹⁵ Miroslav Volf, "Christianity and Violence," *Reflections: Yale Divinity School*, Violence and Theology, 91, no. 1 (2004): 21.

Therefore, my question about what we learn from Esther's character in this chapter proves to be the wrong question. Instead of looking to Esther's character, intriguing as she may be, we find more value as we look at the character of God in this chapter.

Esther still lived in a moment in which God primarily defeated his enemies through physical means. However, we live in a time in which God has primarily defeated his enemies through spiritual means.

We live in phase 4. However, we live in phase 4 and our battle primarily occurs in a spiritual dimension.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. (Eph 6:10–12).

Longman. We live in phase four, the period of spiritual warfare. The use of violence to further the interests of the gospel in any way or to fight to physically harm anybody in defense of the church or our values is sinful. (56:56).¹⁶

Considerations

Justice matters. Do you struggle with God as a warrior? We must consider the idea of justice amid a discussion of God as a warrior.

Volf. Absolute hospitality would in no way amount to absence of violence. To the contrary, it would enthrone violence precisely under the guise of non-violence because it would leave the violators unchanged and the consequences of violence unremedied.¹⁷

Volf. Transformation of the world of violence into a world of love cannot take place by means of absolute hospitality. It takes radical change, and not just an act of indiscriminate acceptance, for the world to be made into a world of love. The Christian tradition has tied this change with the coming of the Messiah, the crucified and the resurrected One, whose appearance in glory is still awaited.¹⁸

You are engaged with the war. This is not a war in which you can claim to be a pacifist and opt out. You must choose a side and engage the battle. But remember, God is a warrior. Either you are on his side or in opposition to him. He has already won. Choose wisely.

¹⁶ Longman, *God Is a Warrior*, 56:56.

¹⁷ Volf, "Christianity and Violence," 19.

¹⁸ Volf, 20.

M8:

The Great Reversal (8:1-9:19)

May 26, 2024

Introduction

Winston Churchill, June 18, 1940. What General Weygand calls 'the battle of France' is over. The battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization.¹

And with that Winston Churchill began his famous speech titled "Finest Hour." Amid one of the darkest hours of World War II, with the backdrop of the fall of France, Churchill inspired a nation to not only remain unflinching in their resolve but turned their resolve into a roar of determination and defiance.

Churchill became Prime Minister on May 10, 1940, the day Hitler launched his invasion of France, Belgium, and Holland. During the tense months that followed, Britain stood alone with her Empire and Commonwealth, surviving the Battle of Britain and the Blitz. Churchill's speeches and broadcasts carried a message of determination and defiance around the globe.²

In June of 1940, Churchill delivered a speech to the House of Commons in the United Kingdom. In this speech, titled "This was their finest hour," Churchill offers one of the finest moments of his career. He said:

Winston Churchill, June 4, 1940. Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender. And even if, which I do not for a moment believe, this island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's

¹ Churchill Papers, Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge, U.K. (104.1) © Crown copyright 1940, Archival Reference #9/172/152. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/churchill/wc-hour.html#:~:text=Churchill%20became%20Prime%20Minister%20on.of%20Britain%20and%20the%20Blitz.>

² Library of Congress, "Churchill and the Great Republic: The Finest Hour,"

good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the Old.³

Under Churchill's leadership, what appeared to be certain destruction by the Nazi advance, turned into a wave of victory for the Allies.

Context. We love comeback stories whether they are found on a battle scene or a sports field, especially when we are on the victor's side. Esther offers several reversals throughout the book.

1. She goes into king expecting to die and is instead granted up to half the kingdom.
2. Haman makes gallows on which to hang Mordecai yet gets hung on the same gallows.
3. Haman expects to be honored by the king but instead must honor the one man who refuses to honor him.
4. Haman rises to claim the second seat in the kingdom only to be deposed by his enemy Mordecai who then receives the second seat in the kingdom.
5. Haman designs an edict to kill all the Jews (3:13), Mordecai designs an edict to defend all the Jews (8:11). Instead of all the Jews being killed, the Jews kill their enemies.
6. A day of Jewish mourning turns into a day of Jewish celebration (9:16-18, 29-32).

In chapter 8 and 9, we read of the most prominent of the reversals. Instead of the Jews suffering extinction at the hands of their enemies, they are spared by means of a second edict written by Mordecai.

Simple outline. In chapters 8 and 9, we will observe 4 significant reversals. After briefly considering each of these reversals, we will connect this story to the greatest reversal in history – Christ's defeat of sin and death, bringing victory to doomed people.

Four Reversals

Reversal 1: Instead of Haman Ruling, Mordecai and Esther Rule

At the end of chapter seven, we celebrate the destruction of Haman. His life, along with his powerful position, have been destroyed, leaving a hole to be filled. As far as the king is concerned, the problem has been addressed. His wife is safe and Haman, an embarrassment to the king, is gone. The king's anger is abated – which means, he's not necessarily broke up about the future destruction of the Jews. In fact, he probably wouldn't have done anything about it without Esther's appeal. However, Haman's position and property need to be addressed. And with this, we find our first reversal. Esther is

³ Hansard HC Deb 04 June 1940 vol 361 cc787-98. <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1940/jun/04/war-situation>

given Haman's house and Mordecai is given Haman's position, and ultimately Esther also gives Haman's house to Mordecai.

Reversal 2: Instead of Haman's Edict, Mordecai's Edict prevails.

Haman is gone, yet his evil edict remains. Established in their new and safer roles, Mordecai and Esther once again step up to address the king.⁴

Esther pleads with the king for her people.

"Falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite" (8:3). Esther lays on the flattery a bit thick as she says, "If it pleases the king ... if he regards me with favor and thinks it the right thing to do ... if he is pleased with me" (8:5) can we overrule Haman's decree.

The king replies with what could be viewed as somewhat flippant. He reminds Esther he has already given her Haman's house, and they killed Haman. However, "here's my ring. If you want to write something, go ahead. That ought to take care of it."

Mordecai authors a new edict.

The scribes were summoned, and Mordecai authors a new decree on behalf of the king.⁵

It's a moral challenge. In reading varied translation of Esther 8:11, we see a conflict. Several modern versions translate the verse in such a way as to communicate that the Jews had the authority to kill "any armed force ... including their [the armed forces] women and children" (ESV, NET, CSB). A few other versions communicate the Jews had authority to kill any "who might attack them or their children and wives" (NLT, NIV). The first interpretation seems to allow for the morally questionable action of killing innocent women and children in war. The second interpretation allows for the Jews to defend themselves against anyone who would threaten them or their families.

Duguid. The NIV obscures the issue by making "their women and children" in 8:11 refer to the Jews who are under attack, not the families of their aggressors. However, most English translations and commentators follow the natural reading of the Hebrew which, in parallel with Haman's edict,

⁴ While not being too conclusive, we likely can assume the conversation between Esther and the king takes place amid the inevitable conversation of 8:1-2. My point: Esther likely did not have to endure the same level of uncertainty and fear as in her approach to the king in chapter five. At this point, she has already established herself through the recent interactions with Haman and the two feasts. Additionally, Mordecai has been established as the second in command, offering additional safety in her approach.

⁵ While not pertinent to the text or any resulting application, I did find Herodotus' discussion intriguing regarding "the letters by the mounted couriers" (8:10). From his quote, the US Post Office derived their slogan. *Herodotus 8.98.1*. Now there is nothing mortal that accomplishes a course more swiftly than do these messengers, by the Persians' skillful contrivance. It is said that as many days as there are in the whole journey, so many are the men and horses that stand along the road, each horse and man at the interval of a day's journey. These are stopped neither by snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness from accomplishing their appointed course with all speed. [Herodotus, *The Histories*, 8.98.1.]

permits slaughter of the families and the taking of their plunder. So, for example, Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 99–100.⁶

First, the edict does seem to be written in a manner purposefully paralleling Haman's edict in 3:13. In Haman's edict, the people were allowed to kill all Jews: men, women, and children, and confiscate their possessions. A strict reversal would allow for the Jews to do the exact same to their enemies. While the author does seem to purposefully parallel the two edicts, if we conclude a strict parallel, we must conclude the Jews have the right to slaughter seeming innocent women and children.

Second, several commentators argue the two edicts don't parallel as closely as may be proposed by others. Robert Gordis and Joyce Baldwin argue the two edicts (3:13, 8:11) differ more than many commentators conclude.⁷

Gordis. The book, therefore, underscores that, while the Jews were now empowered to fight against those who "sought to do them harm" (9:2), their only goal was to repulse those who might attack them, their wives, and their children.⁸

Baldwin. As has already been pointed out, the decree of Haman in 3:13 is reflected in that of Mordecai, and some of its wording is repeated in the later decree; but the differences also need to be taken into account. In 3:13 there is no doubt about the meaning. The object of the verb *annihilate* follows immediately: 'all Jews, young and old, women and children'. In 8:11, on the other hand, the object of the verb is 'any armed force ... that might attack', while 'them, with their children and women' is the object of the verb 'attack'. This is the way in which NIV interprets the meaning, and indeed it is the plain sense of the text. Whatever ethical objection may be raised against the actions of the Jews as recorded in this book, at least they should not be based on this verse, misunderstood as it has commonly been.⁹

In so concluding, Baldwin and Gordis (along with the NIV and NLT) avoid the moral dilemma of slaughtering women and children in war. These two authors seem to take a minority position in their interpretation. Most other commentators conclude that, taken at face value, the edict allows for the slaughter of women and children. However, they vary in addressing the moral dilemma proposed by such an interpretation.

⁶ Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, 103. [In footnote 5] For instance, both Tomasino and Bush argue the near parallelism of the two edicts. Tomasino, *Esther*, 317–18; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 9:447.

⁷ Robert Gordis, "Studies in the Esther Narrative," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976): 50–51.

⁸ Gordis, 52.

⁹ Baldwin, *Esther*, 12:97–98.

Three positions. In overviewing several conclusions, we find three basic positions. (1) First, some conclude Mordecai authors a “heartless directive”¹⁰ or “measure-for-measure retaliation by the Jews against their enemies.” Iain Duguid goes on to write, “They could kill those who attacked them, along with their families, and then plunder them, just as their enemies had planned to kill the Jews and their families and take their plunder.”¹¹

Haupt. Unlike its parallel in 3:12, the counter-decree does not say “from old to young,” but it does imitate Haman’s in specifying “children and women” among the victims, showing that the slaughter of the Jews’ enemies is to be total, embracing their families as well.¹²

(2) Others, with little linguistic discussion, simply dismiss the idea as improbable. Jacob Hoschander writes the following.

Hoschander. Mordecai's decree, as represented in our text, is quite improbable. Its execution would have been a matter of impossibility. Though numerically representing an insignificant part of the population of the empire, the Jews could have defended themselves successfully against the attacks of their enemies with the assistance of their friendly neighbours, and the support of the officials. But they could not have enlisted the sympathy of the latter in their cause by committing atrocities in killing women, and especially little children, who did not and could not attack them. Even barbarians, as a rule, spared women and children. If the Jews had acted in such a cruel way, they would have been isolated in their defence, and thus certainly would have perished. We may credit Mordecai with so much good sense that he never decreed anything of that sort.¹³

(3) Finally, some conclude the allowance is given to slaughter women and children – assuming those women and children are part of the attacking army. For instance, Paul Haupt credits some of the challenges in verse 11 to “uncorrected misunderstanding” and “scribal expansion” and concludes the edict extended to woman and children only as “a heathen woman might assault a Jewish woman, a heathen boy might attack a Jewish boy; some heathen children might kill an old Jew.”¹⁴

¹⁰ “This must be remembered when one considers Mordecai's admittedly heartless directive ‘to wipe out, slaughter, and annihilate every armed force of any people or province that was hostile to them, along with their children and women, and to plunder their personal property.’” [Carey A. Moore, *Esther: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 83, <https://archive.org/details/esther0000care>.]

¹¹ Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, 103.

¹² Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 99.

¹³ Jacob Hoschander, *The Book of Esther in the Light of History* (Philadelphia: Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1923), 240, <https://archive.org/details/bookofestherinli00hosc/page/240/mode/2up>.

¹⁴ Paul Haupt, *The Book of Esther: Critical Edition of the Hebrew Text with Notes* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1908), 159, <https://archive.org/details/bookofesther01haup>.

The Jews only killed men. I say this cautiously. In chapter nine a few verses indicate the Jews only killed men.

In Susa the citadel itself the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men (Est 9:6).

And the king said to Queen Esther, "In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men and also the ten sons of Haman (Est 9:12).

The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed 300 men in Susa, but they laid no hands on the plunder (Est 9:15).

However, when giving the total number killed, the author does not use the term *men*. He writes in verse sixteen, "Now the rest of the Jews ... also gathered to defend their lives, and got relief from their enemies and killed 75,000 of those who hated them, but they laid no hands on the plunder" (Est 9:16). We do see (1) the Jews defended themselves, (2) killed their enemies, and (3) did not plunder.

So then, while the edict may have included the killing women and children (I don't think it did), the Jews seemed to only kill those (seemingly men) who attacked them.

The problem addressed. (1) I don't think the decree included the killing of women and children. Such a decree seems unlikely both for Mordecai to propose and for Ahasuerus to approve. Yes, Haman's decree included women and children, but the decree was specific to Jewish people. Mordecai's decree included every nationality in the kingdom. I find it implausible that Ahasuerus would allow Mordecai to give that type of proposal the green light.

(2) I think Mordecai purposefully paralleled much of Haman's decree, but clearly inserted differences. He adds the concept of defense and uses women and children instead of "young and old." While slight, he did not simply reverse Haman's decree. In allowing for slight changes, the door is then opened for the significance of "women and children" in Mordecai's decree.

(3) A plausible linguistic explanation: while Gordis and Baldwin's proposal contain some weaknesses (as articulated by others), there connection of "women and children" to those being attacked offers a linguistic argument for understanding the decree as such.

(4) Mordecai wrote the decree, not God, which matters if you conclude the decree includes an immoral allowance (i.e. the killing of women and children).

(5) God does direct the Jews to kill women and children at times. So then, if you conclude this particular edict does not include women and children, you still have to wrestle with the moral challenge in other passages. However, in those other passages, a specific group of people were selected by God for destruction (arguably due their pervasive rejection and immorality). He does not give them the blanket allowance to kill any of their enemies, including all the women and children. This edict, however, would encompass most of the known world at that time.

Reversal 3: Instead of the Jews being killed, they are victorious.

In chapter 8, Mordecai's decree is speedily sent throughout the empire. As we come to chapter 9, the author unfolds the dramatic events of the 13th day of the month of Adar. Instead of the enemies of the Jews annihilating the Jewish population, the Jews win a victory over their enemies (9:1).

- The decree allowed for the Jews to gather and build an army prior to the 13th of Adar. Typically, the assemblance of an army would provoke a harsh reaction on the part of the ruling empire. However, the Jews were allowed such an act in preparation of the day of their defense due to Mordecai's decree (9:2).
- Due to God's providence in raising Mordecai and Esther to their positions of power, fear came upon the people. Additionally, instead of regional leaders and armies attacking the Jews on this dark day, those same people assisted the Jews in the destruction of their enemies (9:3-4).
- The Jews killed 500 men in Susa on the 13th and 300 additional men in Susa on the 14th. Additionally, they hung Haman's ten sons (9:6-10).
- The decree allowed for the Jews to kill any who attack them. They are not allowed to just kill whoever they might like.
- The story, as told in chapter nine, reveals the Jews likely only killed men and did not take any of their property. The fact that the Jews did not take the property of those they killed might suggest not only did they not kill the women and children but also allowed for their ongoing sustenance.

Esther's extension day. The 13th of Adar has passed. Nearly 75,000 enemies of the Jews have been killed. Following the events of the day, Esther and the king discuss the outcome. The king once again offers to grant Esther any additional request. At this point, Esther offers what most of us would consider a bizarre if not ridiculous and cruel request. She asks the king if the Jews in Susa can have one more day to destroy their enemy. The king agrees.

What should we think of Esther's request? Should we think about it at all? (1) Some commentators conclude the request produces no justification.

For this horrible request no justification can be found. A second massacre was in no sense an act of self-defence, since the power of the enemies of the Jews had already been broken by the events of the thirteenth of Adar. This shows a malignant spirit of revenge¹⁵

(2) Others propose the slaughter on the 13th naturally produced a desire for revenge that needed to be squelched on the 14th. While this makes sense, why would Esther then only

¹⁵ Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, ICC (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1908), 287.

ask for the defense to occur in Susa and not throughout the empire?¹⁶ As well, would not an additional day of slaughter bear its own vengeful response?

Presumably, the same rules would apply on this day as had applied on the first: the Jews would be permitted to kill anyone who attacked them. Given the carnage that the Jews had just visited on their enemies, it seems reasonable that survivors might well seek revenge, whatever the law would normally allow. Indeed, in an honor-driven culture, it would be their responsibility to do so.¹⁷

(3) A few others conclude, the author includes the one-day extension in Susa to explain two days of celebration for Purim. Likely, following generations would wonder why the celebration lasts for two days, and the author explains.

Tomasino. “Tomorrow also” makes Esther appear hard and cruel for wanting to continue the massacre. Apparently the Jews wanted to clear the palace area of all their enemies. Some suggest that the second day of massacre was introduced here to explain why Purim was celebrated on two successive days.¹⁸

Bush. the passage is devoted specifically and exclusively to telling why the fighting in the city of Susa took place over two days, in contradistinction to what happened in the rest of the empire, and how this is related directly to the conflict in the dates of the celebration of Purim.¹⁹

The text offers little evidence for understanding Esther’s motivation for the request. We must remember, the author rarely addresses the emotions or thinking of the characters throughout the story. In this moment, he stays true to form and reveals nothing as to the motivation of Esther. Therefore, we must conclude her motivation plays no role in understanding the intent of the story. In harmony with Tomasino and Bush, the author most likely unfolds this moment to explain the observation and celebration of Purim.

Reversal 4: Instead of great mourning, the Jews experience great joy.

In each chapter, the Jews have a moment of joy and celebration. In chapter eight, following the announcement of Mordecai’s decree and his accompanying promotion, all the Jews celebrated with “a feast and a holiday.”

The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor. And in every province and in every city, wherever the king’s command and his edict reached, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday (Est 8:16–17).

¹⁶ I suppose, realistically she couldn’t have spread word throughout the empire in time for people to know they had one additional day.

¹⁷ Tomasino, *Esther*, 337.

¹⁸ Tomasino, 337.

¹⁹ Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 9:472.

Additionally in chapter nine, following the day of battle, the Jews take “a day of feasting and gladness.”

[After their day of victory, on the 14th of Adar] they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness ... [But due to two days of war on the 13th and 14th, the 15th of Adar became] a day of feasting and gladness. Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another (Est 9:17–19).

A day which should have or would have been characterized as a day of great mourning (if any were left to mourn), was turned into a day of great feasting and celebration.

Conclusion

Purpose statement. A New Testament reversal, brought on by Jesus Christ, results in a believer’s joy and celebration.

A New Testament Reversal. God through his providence orchestrated several grand reversals. Esther and Mordecai advocated and interceded to the king for the people of Israel. As a result, the people of Israel experienced deliverance and victory.

Similarly, we were under an edict in which Satan desired to destroy us. However, Jesus Christ advocated and interceded for us to The King. As a result, through faith in him, we experience deliverance and victory.

Jobes. Just as Xerxes king of Persia could not simply rescind the first decree of death, God, King of the universe, cannot simply rescind the decree of death pronounced in the Garden of Eden against humanity. Instead, he issues a counter-decree of life, the gospel of Jesus Christ.²⁰

Israel rejoiced and celebrated because of the victory over their enemies. Similarly, we ought to rejoice and celebrate due our victory over Satan, sin, and death. Satan, sin, and death, which threatened to destroy us, were ultimately destroyed in Christ.

This morning, we laid out several great reversals for the people of Israel. Let us consider some of the great reversals for the people of God today.

- Darkness to light
- Eternal death to eternal life
- God’s wrath to God’s love
- Dead in sin to alive in Christ

²⁰ Jobes, *Esther*, 188–89.

When God intervenes to gloriously reverse our position of darkness, death, and wrath, our only appropriate response is celebration. We must never be afraid to express our joy for the Lord's reversals.

Characterized by joy and celebration. (1) I understand we aren't always going to live in a constant state of celebration and delight. However, worthy of note, the Jews set aside a day of joy and celebration for the deliverance they experienced. We have a couple obvious similar moments. We purposefully set aside communion and our weekly worship services as times for joy and celebration over our victory in Christ. (2) However, the Apostle James does direct us to "count it all joy ... when you meet trials of various kinds" because that process makes you "perfect and complete" (Ja 1:2).

What keeps us from joy and celebration? I don't want to oversimplify the answer to this question but let me offer two things to consider. (1) We often overlook or fail to believe in God's providential and sovereign promise to work all things for good for his people. (2) We have unrepentant sin in our lives producing shame and robbing us of joy and celebration. Or, we are dealing with sin in our lives, but we fail to allow Christ's forgiveness to affect our emotions.

A call to joy and celebration is a call to holiness.

M9:

Where is God in Esther? (9:20-10:3)

May 26, 2024

Introduction

Exordium. Chaim Weizmann [Hi-um Vights-mon] was born in Russia in 1874. He received his education in biochemistry in Switzerland and Germany, where he became active in the Zionist movement. In 1905 he moved to England. He attempted to land a position in London but instead acquired a job in the Chemistry department at the University of Manchester. He would later describe this position in Manchester as “an almost random choice of a provincial city.” Weizmann describes his initial time in Manchester in the following manner.

You are dealing with the dregs of Russian Jewry, a dull ignorant crowd that knows nothing of issues such as Zionism.

You cannot imagine what it means for an intellectual to live in the English provinces and work with the local Jews. It’s hellish torture!

Had things not improved, Weizmann would have left Manchester. However, he soon after found the companionship of four young men who would become a “fellowship of friends brought together by a common cause and sharing a common approach.”

Acetone. Working as a senior lecturer in biochemistry at the University, Weizmann invented a fermentation process that converted starch into acetone. As chance would have it, acetone was a key component in the production of the smokeless gunpowder used by Britain in World War I. Britain had previously imported their acetone from Germany, but since the Allies were at war with Germany, they could no longer acquire their acetone. So, Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, requested that the “Weizmann process” be used to mass produce acetone in England, Canada, and the U.S.

C. P. Scott. At a garden party, Weizmann met C. P. Scott, who would introduce Weizmann to David Lloyd George, who would eventually become Prime Minister of England. Lloyd George’s biblical upbringing and imperial inclinations made him susceptible to the Zionist cause. Exposure to the full force of Weizmann’s persuasive charm did the rest.

Arthur Balfour. It was another Manchester friend, philosopher Samuel Alexander, who arranged a fateful meeting between Weizmann and Arthur Balfour. Balfour was blown away by Weizmann’s impassioned advocacy of the Zionist cause. Weizmann reported that Balfour was “moved to tears”. “It is not a dream,” the former prime minister declared at the end of the meeting, “it is a great cause and I understand it”.

The combination of his acetone production and newly formed political connections, Weizmann found himself placed in the important role of campaigning for the Zionist cause in forming a Jewish nation. Weizmann's two newly formed friends (Scott and Balfour) would soon become the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. Weizmann had the support of the key decision makers in the British government.

The Balfour Declaration. Due to his connections and his political savvy, these two leaders would push British support for a Jewish nation in Palestine over the line and on November 2, 1917, Balfour wrote his famous letter to Lord Rothschild.

Foreign Office
November 2nd, 1917

Dear Lord Rothschild,

I have much pleasure in conveying to you. on behalf of His Majesty's Government, the following declaration of sympathy with Jewish Zionist aspirations which has been submitted to, and approved by, the Cabinet.

His Majesty's Government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

I should be grateful if you would bring this declaration to the knowledge of the Zionist Federation.

Yours,

Arthur James Balfour

Weizmann and Truman. After World War I he renewed his call for a Jewish state. Weizmann took on the job of winning over the new American president, Harry S Truman. Truman wavered in his support of an Jewish State. Truman did not like being pushed around and as the lobbying became more intense, he shut down even more.

Weizmann confided his fears to American Zionist, Dewey Stone, who then told his friend Frank Goldman. As the two attended a dinner for a Jewish organization in Boston, they device a plan to get Weizmann into the White House to meet with Truman. At the dinner, they decide to reach out to their mutual friend, Eddie Jacobson, who happened to be a good friend and old business partner to Truman. In order to call Jacobson, the two friends go from table to table collecting change to make the long-distance call. Jacobson agreed.

Never before had Jacobson asked his friend Truman for a favor. However, in the oval office, Jacobson made an urgent plea. He He called on the U.S. president to meet with Chaim Weizmann, the former head of the World Zionist Organization and the movement's spiritual leader, to recognize the first Jewish state in nearly 2,000 years.

The suggestion annoyed and angered Truman, and the president even swiveled his chair to turn his back on Jacobson. At this point, Jacobson said:

Harry, you have a hero, Andrew Jackson. I, too, have a hero, Chaim Weizmann ... He's the greatest Jew who ever lived. He's an old and sick man and he's traveled all this way to speak to you and you won't see him. That's not like you.

Truman drummed his fingers on the desk and turned around in his chair. The president had changed his mind. The agreement led to a secret meeting between Truman and Weizmann days later in which the president promised to continue to work on behalf of the establishment of Israel. Then, 11 minutes after Israel declared its independence, Truman made good on his friend's request: "The United States recognizes the provisional government as the de facto authority of the new State of Israel," Truman wrote.

With the declaration of the State of Israel, Weizmann was chosen to serve as the first President of Israel. He filled this role until his death on November 9, 1952.¹

So then, let me ask you. Are all those historical moments mere coincidences? When you hear a story such as that, do you naturally see God's providential hand at play. Do you assume God's sovereign control over the affairs of men in the establishment of a Jewish nation?

In the story, I just unfolded, I never mentioned God. In fact, in reading about Chaim Weizmann, I found little discussion of the Jewish religion or God. I have no idea as to Weizmann's spiritual state or positions. Yet, don't you see God's hand of providence spread throughout the story? I do. Probably most believers assume God's presence throughout such a story.

Context. Maybe that's what the author of Esther desires we do throughout his dramatic story in which God is nowhere mentioned.

¹ The introduction consists of several different articles, letters, and videos. A majority of the flow of the introduction comes from two articles. The biographical information was drawn from the *Jewish Virtual Library* (<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/chaim-weizmann>). Most of the rest of the introduction was drawn from an article in *The Jewish Chronicle* titled "Chaim Weizmann and how the Balfour Declaration was made in Manchester." (<https://www.thejc.com/life-and-culture/chaim-weizmann-and-how-the-balfour-declaration-was-made-in-manchester-t31wjzd7>).

The text of the Balfour Declaration ([https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/text-of-the-balfour-declaration](https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/text-of-the-balfour-declaration;)); A picture of the Balfour Declaration (https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/8/8e/Balfour_declaration_unmarked.jpg/455px-Balfour_declaration_unmarked.jpg); an article regarding Weizmann's acetone discovery (<https://www.weizmann-usa.org/blog/chaim-weizmann-s-acetone-discovery-was-key-to-british-wwi-effort/>); two helpful youtube video summaries (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVe1-K9rvxw> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JHQUseMAh14&t=2s>); Weizmann's letter to Truman (<https://www.shapell.org/manuscript/harry-truman-supports-israel/#transcripts>), and Truman's letter acknowledging the State of Israel (https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american_originals/post.html).

As we come to the end of Esther (the end of chapter nine and the three verses of chapter ten), we read of two events: (1) the establishment of the Jewish holiday, Purim [poor-um], and (2) the greatness of Mordecai.

Simple outline. (1) Briefly outline the final episode of Esther. (2) Address the contrast between Daniel and his two kings (Nebuchadnezzar and Darius) and Esther, Mordecai, and Ahasuerus. (3) Address the absence of God in the book of Esther.

Esther's Final Episode

The Establishment of Purim. The celebration lasted for two days: March 14 for those living throughout the kingdom and March 15 for those living in walled cities. Mordecai recorded and sent letters to all the Jews for the initial establishment of Purim (9:20-21), and Esther later sent a second letter, confirming "that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons" (9:29-32). The name *Purim* derives from the word *pur* meaning "lot" or "die," referring to Haman casting lots in his plot against the Jews. Since that time, the Jewish people have never failed to celebrate Purim.

The celebration of Purim is therefore different from the feasts prescribed by the Torah. Rather than being imposed on the people from above as God's commandment, Purim began as the spontaneous response of God's people to his omnipotent faithfulness to the promises of the covenant.²

The book of Esther and the resulting establishment of Purim have proven to be a testament of hope to the Jewish people; so much so, even avid antisemites hate the book and have forbidden its possession. Edwin Yamauchi quotes Robert Gordis. Gordis wrote in *Megillat Esther*:

Anti-Semites have always hated the book, and the Nazis forbade its reading in the crematoria and the concentration camps. In the dark days before their deaths, Jewish inmates of Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka, and Bergen-Belsen wrote the Book of Esther from memory and read it in secret on Purim.³

Karen Jobes also draws attention to this reality during the same historical moment. She writes in her commentary on Esther:

The significance of the holiday and the message of the Esther story were not lost on the Nazis, who would kill on the spot any Jew in the prison camps possessing a copy of the book of Esther. Yet the incarcerated Jews wrote copies of it from memory. The story of Esther was most precious to the Jews

² Jobes, *Esther*, 214.

³ Edwin M. Yamauchi, "Archaeological Backgrounds of the Exilic and Postexilic Era Part 2: The Archaeological Background of Esther," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (1980): 112.

facing mass death, because in it they found assurance and hope that they, not their enemy, would triumph against all expectation.⁴

The Historical Observation of Purim. Deffinbaugh⁵ quotes from Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. In his book⁶, Telushkin outlines the four major aspects of the Purim celebration. (1) “Women as well as men are commanded to hear the public reading of the biblical scroll of Esther.”

Telushkin goes on to write, “Almost all children, and some adults, come to the service with groggers (noisemakers), which they sound whenever Haman’s name is read. Since Haman is mentioned more than fifty times in Esther, the reading is constantly interrupted by shouts, screams, boos, and the rattling of groggers.”

Megillat Esther. During the reading, when the name of Haman is mentioned, it is customary to “bang” or stamp with the feet, etc. In Chabad this is done only when his name is accompanied by a description such as “*Agagi*” etc. The reader should stop and not resume till absolute quiet prevails.⁷

(2) “The synagogue service is usually followed by a party where the command to get drunk is carried out.”

Telushkin goes on to write, “Although recovering alcoholics, people with health problems, and those planning to drive are freed from observing this commandment, a fair number of Jews do get drunk on Purim. After all, how often can one do something normally regarded as wrong, and be credited with fulfilling a commandment?”

Babylonian Talmud, Megillah. A man is obligated to drink on Purim until he no longer knows [the difference] between cursed Haman and blessed Mordecai.⁸

(3) “Another Purim commandment is to send *mishloakh manor* (gifts of food and drink) to other Jews.” (4) “Another commandment associated with the holiday is to enjoy a large, festive repast known as the Purim *se’udah* (meal).”

⁴ Jobes, *Esther*, 220.

⁵ Deffinbaugh, *Esther*, 56–57.

⁶ *Jewish Literacy, The Most Important Things to Know about the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History*, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.), 1991, pp. 578–580.

⁷ Moshe Bogomilsky, “Halachot U’minhagim: Laws and Customs of Purim,” in *Vedibarta Bam: Megillat Esther*, Sichos in English Collection (Brooklyn, NY, n.d.), https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2833170/jewish/Halachot-Uminhagim-Laws-and-Customs-of-Purim.htm.

⁸ Neusner, *Babylonian Talmud* vol.7b, 33.

Mordecai's Greatness. Following God's gracious providence in saving the Jewish people, Esther is not mentioned, the king is barely acknowledged, Mordecai is exalted, and God is absent altogether. The author writes:

King Ahasuerus imposed tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. And all the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia? For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people (Est 10:1-3).

In the first verse, the author emphasizes the greatness of Ahasuerus. Typically, taxation finds no positive reception but most likely the author intends to acknowledge the nearly universal extent of his rule.⁹ Ahasuerus ruled the world – and Mordecai was second in command.

Mordecai receives praise for two specific reasons: (1) "he sought the welfare of his people," and (2) he "spoke peace to all his people" (10:3). In so doing, Mordecai serves Israel well as a national hero.

However, the question remains for me. While he serves well as a national hero, does he serve well as a hero of the faith?

Deffinbaugh. The reason the rest of the Bible ignores the people and events of the Book of Esther is because the book is an account of Jews who are preoccupied with the wrong kingdom, a kingdom which is not eternal. Oh, the God of Israel is at work in the Book of Esther, but neither Mordecai, nor Esther, nor the Jews, nor the Persians recognize it. In contrast, we see the Pharaoh recognizing the hand of God upon Joseph and Nebuchadnezzar acknowledging and worshipping Daniel's God. Not so in Persia!¹⁰

By means of contrast, let me take a moment to acknowledge what I don't see in the end of Esther.

⁹ Clines, *Esther Scroll*. v. 1 serves simply to emphasize the greatness of Ahasuerus's power and the well-nigh universal extent of his rule, is more plausible an explanation, but an imposition of tax, whether of tribute or labour ... was normally made either by way of punishment of subjugated races (e.g. Jos. 16:10; 17:13; 1 Kings 9:20) or in order to achieve some royal project (e.g. 1 Kings 5:13). We miss here any indication of a purpose in Ahasuerus's taxation. [David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1984), 58.]

Bush, WBC. The purpose, then, for using this unusual expression to describe the Persian empire, "the land and the islands-and-coastlands of the sea," must surely be to emphasize its vast expanse: it extends to the farthest western reaches of the known world. This serves to enhance the power and greatness of the king. In this light מ most likely means "forced labor" rather than "tribute, tax," for it would appear that the narrator is speaking hyperbolically in describing the power of the king to impress even the most distant parts of his empire into compulsory servitude. [Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 9:495.]

¹⁰ Deffinbaugh, *Esther*, 58.

The Contrast of Daniel and Esther

Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar. In Daniel 4, Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar's vision in which he is a large tree, providing shelter and nourishment for all those under his care. Yet, the tree is chopped down, leaving just a stump; and the remainder lives as a beast of the field for seven years. Shortly after Daniel's interpretation, Nebuchadnezzar experienced this humiliation, only to be later raised back up to his position of power and prominence. Nebuchadnezzar learns from this moment and glorifies God in his response.

At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;³⁵ all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" ...³⁷ Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble (Dn 4:34-37).

Daniel and Darius. After being throw in the lion's den for visibly praying, Darius cries out to Daniel, "May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you!" (Dn 6:16). The king then went to his palace, fasted, and didn't sleep. As soon as morning came, Darius ran to the lions den and "he cried out in a tone of anguish. The king declared to Daniel, "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?" (Dn 6:20). Daniel responded:

O king, live forever!²² My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm (Dn 6:21-22).

Daniel is removed from the lion's den. Those responsible for placing him there are put in the lion's den, and the king makes a decree to all the people of all the nations on earth.

^{25b} Peace be multiplied to you. ²⁶ I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring forever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. ²⁷ He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions." ²⁸ So this Daniel prospered during the reign of Darius and the reign of Cyrus the Persian. (Dn 6:25-28).

Note the stark contrast between these two moments in Daniels story and the end of Esther's story. In these two endings of Daniel, due to Daniel's faithful walk, the two kings extol and praise the God of Daniel and decree their kingdoms to tremble and fear before Daniel's God. However, in Esther, following God's dramatic deliverance, Mordecai is

extolled, and God is ignored. Should we draw any conclusions from this reality? Was the human author intentional in excluding God from the story? Why is God absent in the book of Esther? Or, is he absent?

The Absence of God in Esther

Esther's place in the Redemptive Story. First, let's consider the broader presence of God up to this point in redemptive history. (1) God offered his ideal presence in the garden as he walked with Adam and Eve (Gn 3:8). Due to the Fall mankind would not experience God's presence in this intimate a manner until Revelation 21:3.

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

(2) After delivering his people from Egyptian slavery, God appears to them in a pillar of cloud and fire (Ex 13:21-22). (3) After the dedication of the Tabernacle and the priestly line, "the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people" (Lv 9:23). (4) Once the Temple was built and the ark placed in the temple, "the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord" (1 Kgs 8:11).

However, God removes the ten northern tribes from his presence as they are spread throughout the empire due to their disobedience (2 Ki 17:21-23). Israel experiences further devastation at the destruction of the first temple and Judah's Babylonian Captivity (1 Chr 36:11-21).

Some hope rose as many Jews returned to the land following Captivity and rebuilt the Second Temple. Yet, note the difference between Israel's experience at the temple in Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezr 3:12, 6:13-22) and Israel's previous experience in Leviticus 9 and 1 Kings 8:10-11. By the end of the OT storyline, there is no mention of God's glorious presence at the second temple. And no Davidic king was on the throne of God's visible kingdom.¹¹

The New Testament believer looks back on God's presence again arriving in the person of Jesus Christ (Jn 1) and even more intimately experienced in the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:15 ff). Yet, we still look forward to the day where the presence of God is experienced as it was in the garden (Re 21:3).

However, Esther is post-Babylonian Captivity and pre-Jesus earthly presence. The story of Esther is placed in one of the darkest moments of God's redemptive plan. God is not visibly present with his people, and the book of Esther well represents such a reality.

Where a believer sees God in Esther. So, if God is absent during Esther's period, where do we see God in Esther? As New Testament believers, likely you assume God's presence throughout Esther's story. In fact, you likely never doubted it. While God's absence in the

¹¹ I drew this brief overview from both my study on Hebrews 7:1-10, pg. 113, and TLI Curriculum, Course 2, Sturgill edition: (4.3, pg. 72), (4.5, pg. 76), (5.2.4, pg. 90), and (10.1, pg. 155).

book raises our curiosity, we hardly succumb to doubt to his actual presence. Esther simply plays a small although important role in God's larger redemptive plan for his people.

We see God in every small **allusion**. When both Mordecai (4:14) and Haman's associates (6:13) allude to the preservation of the Jews, we assume these reflect God's promise to preserve his people. When the Jews fast and cry out, we assume they are appealing to God's mercy.

For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Est 4:14).

Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him" (Est 6:13).

The dramatic **coincidences** throughout the book seem to demand God's presence. (1) Vashti is deposed, and Esther becomes queen. (2) Mordecai uncovers a plot against the king. (3) Esther is favorably received by the king. (4) The king can't sleep and just happens to have the story of Mordecai read to him. (5) Haman just happens to arrive early at the palace. (6) Haman recklessly and inappropriately approaches Esther after his confrontation. All these seeming coincidences can only be explained by divine providence. Right?

The **reversals** spread throughout the book as well indicate some divine presence. Of course, the most dramatic reversal appears in chapter nine when "the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred" (Est 9:1). However, the author fills the story with reversals: Esther for Vashti, Mordecai for Haman, the Jews over their enemies, and Haman's gallows for Mordecai used for him. We see in each of these God's divine providence.

And finally, the **theme** of the book itself indicates God's presence. Throughout all time, God has been, and continues to, preserve a people for himself. He promised Abraham, he would make him a great nation and that one would come through him that would bless all the earth. To do so, God had to preserve these people – at least until the time of the appointed one. Therefore, God providentially preserved his people in the book of Esther.¹²

Addressing the issue of authorial intent. Even though the New Testament believer likely sees God's providence spread throughout the story, the (*little a*) human author may not

¹² Michael Fox offers these four categories as traditional explanations for proving God's presence in Esther. He unsuccessfully argues against all four of them. However, I found his arguments *for* them to be more convincing than his arguments *against* them. Just worthy of note, I am purposefully taking the opposite approach to Fox in these four categories. I do however agree with his conclusion. I offer an outline of his article at the end of this message. [Michael V. Fox, "The Religion of the Book of Esther," *Judaism* 39, no. 2 (1990): 139–44.]

have intended to suggest such conclusions.¹³ If the author intended to clearly communicate God's presence or providence, he seems to do so poorly. Other Old Testament passages more clearly acknowledge God's divine work behind the scenes. I've already mentioned Daniel, but Joseph also offers a helpful contrast. In Genesis, by means of a couple statements, Moses acknowledges "the Lord was with Joseph, and he was a successful man" (Gn 39:2). Also, Joseph acknowledges to his brothers, "you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gn 50:20).

The author of Esther had several moments (like the stories of Joseph and Daniel) in which a simple phrase or word would have given a hint to God's divine providence in the story. Yet, he chooses to not do so. We must assume the author was deliberate in his approach.

Fox. ambiguity could have been banished by one word. Rather, the author is carefully creating and maintaining uncertainty. That is why he hints at God's role, but only obliquely; and mentions religious practices, yet avoids setting them in a religious context. The author must be aware that readers will be expecting a statement that the Jews fasted and cried out to God (as we must imagine them doing), or a declaration of faith that deliverance is from the Lord (from whom else?), or a report that the Jews gave thanks to God after their victory (what else would they do?), or an exhortation to thank God in future Purim celebrations (as Jews have, in fact, always done).¹⁴

So then, if the human author is purposefully elusive as to God's presence, what did God intend to accomplish in the text?

Conclusion

As I told you the story of Chaim Weizmann, you likely assumed God's providence throughout the story. You may have mentally concluded amid the story, "God truly is amazing! Wow! See how he has cared for the Jewish people." We don't see God's providence in Chaim Weizmann's life because he's mentioned throughout, but because we know God is sovereign over everything and he providentially works in all circumstances. That is our default thinking as we view all of life.

We must approach the book of Esther with the same mindset. Whether the human author intended for us to assume God or not, I'm not sure. However, I am certain, God desires for us to assume his consistent presence throughout.

Does not the book of Esther often better reflect your own life experience than does the book of Daniel? Like the book of Esther, we are often left wondering if God is present and

¹³ Fox does effectively argue his point from the perspective of the human author, but does not address the broader purpose of the divine author. While the human author may have intended to communicate some hope amid primarily God's absence, God, the divine author, did not intend to communicate his absence.

¹⁴ Fox, "The Religion of the Book of Esther," 145-46.

active – with no obvious visual, tangible evidence to determine one way or the other. We are left to assess the moments of our lives, scrutinizing them for his presence, longing for his presence, assuming his care.

Israel will survive – that is the author's faith – but this will happen how he does not know. Events are ambiguous, and God's activity cannot be directly read out of them; yet, they are not random.... When we scrutinize the text of Esther for traces of God's activity, we are doing what the author made us do. The author would have us probe the events which we witness in our own lives in the same way.¹⁵

We live with little doubt of God's love. We have experienced it in Christ most dramatically but also in his daily provisions. In the same way, we assume God's providence in Chaim Weizmann's life and throughout the book of Esther, we should make the same concerted effort and accept the same default posture. **Even while appearing absent in your life, God is present and active everywhere, working all things for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose.**

Davey. God's name is never mentioned once in this story, but those who decide to ignore this book for that reason miss out on incredible truths God left for us to uncover. Esther is a book for every struggling Christian who can't seem to see God through the fog of life. It's a book for every discouraged Christian who is weighed down by persecution in a world that is so opposed to the Gospel.¹⁶

¹⁵ Fox, 146–47.

¹⁶ Stephen Davey, *Esther*, Wisdom Commentary Series (Apex, NC: Charity House Publishers, 2012), 140.

A summary of Fox's article *The Religion of the Book of Esther*.

Michael Fox offers a helpful article on the topic of God's presence (or God's lack of presence) in the book of Esther. I disagree with his logic. In fact, I often was more convinced by what he argued against than what he argued for. He even seems a bit uncertain, seeing that he wrote an article from the reverse perspective eight years earlier.¹⁷ As he addresses God's presence in Esther, I related well to the perspective he would soon argue against. He wrote:

The great majority of commentators consider the book "religious," meaning that it teaches, or at least assumes, that God is active in the events that it narrates. Traditional readers never doubted that it was God guaranteeing Israel's existence and shaping its salvation in Esther's time as always. The absence of God's name was just a curiosity; it evoked explanations but was of no more intrinsic significance than the similar absence in, say, Genesis 37. Since they were reading Esther as one segment of a larger text, the Hebrew Bible, they were right in their own terms. Meaning depends on context, and, in the context of the canon, both Jewish and Christian, the Scroll is part of a larger testimony to God's control of history. But Esther was not written as part of the Bible. Not only could the author not have known that there would be a Bible, but the lack of reference to God may show that he did not intend his book to be regarded as sacred scripture.¹⁸

Fox offers four typical proofs to demonstrate God's presence and activity in Esther. In the first half, he offers a traditional argument for the evidence, followed by his argument against the evidence. Here, Fox often was more convincing in his initial arguments for the view. Possibly, I connected more with his initial argument because he wrestled with the text of Esther, whereas his arguments against were logical but void of scriptural analysis.

A. Allusions¹⁹

- a. Both Mordecai (4:14) and Haman's associates (6:13) assert that the Jews will endure and prevail, but they do not indicate just what force ensures their victory.
- b. The Jews fast and cry out – actions whose only function can be to appeal to God's mercy.
- c. These hints are, indeed, significant, but hints are all they are. The author avoids mention of God even when that is most natural. This avoidance is as important as the affirmations which it skirts.

¹⁷ Michael V. Fox, "The Structure of the Book of Esther," *Jerusalem I. L. Seeligmann Memorial Volume* (1983): 291–304.

¹⁸ Fox, "The Religion of the Book of Esther," 137.

¹⁹ Fox, 139.

B. Coincidences²⁰

- a. The *coincidences* reported are so unlikely that they cannot be mere chance.
- b. These coincidences include the timely vacancy of the queenship at the Persian court, the opportune accession of a Jew to queenship, Mordecai's discovery of the eunuchs' plot, Esther's favorable reception by the king, the king's insomnia, Haman's early arrival at the palace, and Haman's reckless plea for mercy at Esther's feet.
- c. It is, however, difficult to imagine a better veil than silence. If God is present in Esther, He is certainly well-hidden. It may be true for some believers that chance means Divine governance, but can we assume that the author is one of these?
- d. Even though the author of Esther might be expected to interpret the coincidences as God's doing – many commentators clearly expect this – he does not do so. Rather than making coincidences into comforting signs of Divine control, he musters them as evidence of almost the opposite: the unpredictability of the choices that an erratic reality forces upon people. He thereby shows the need for alert and courageous Jews to deal with the constraints of an unpredictable reality.
- e. [Personal note] Fox seems to focus on the author's intent, which is appropriate and must be done. However, he does so with no acknowledgment of God's divine authorship. Possibly, the (a) author did not intend to display God's presence throughout the story while the (A) author did intend for his presence to be silently displayed.

C. Reversals²¹

- a. The book of Esther is structured on the principle of peripety – unexpected reversal of human expectations. This is explicit in 9:1: matters were "turned about" for the Jews.
- b. [Personal note] In a previous journal article, Fox argued the presence of God and the theology of Esther "is implied in the structure of reversals." ²² I don't personally consider this his most weighty argument, but he does offer a helpful look at the concept of reversals in that previous study.
- c. But like coincidence, peripety, in and of itself, is never used as an argument for God's control, but, rather, expresses confidence that God's justice will prevail. Elsewhere in the Bible, when peripety is intended to manifest God's

²⁰ Fox, 139–41.

²¹ Fox, 142–43.

²² Fox, "The Structure of the Book of Esther."

power, it is said to do so. The author of Esther could not expect his audience to deduce God's presence from peripety alone.

- d. But you cannot teach that something is hidden merely by hiding it. If you hide it too well, no one knows that it is there. The point of teaching that God is hidden would be to teach that he is actually present, in other words, not really hidden. To do so, one must show people how to read God's presence in events. This is done often in the Bible. For example, Joseph tells his brothers, "You planned evil against me but God planned it for the best, so as to achieve, as is now the case, the preservation of many people" (Gen 50:20).
- e. "The Lord was with Joseph, and he was successful ..." (Gen. 39:2), thereby reminding us that their success was not the reward of human wisdom alone. If that is the point of the author of Esther, he certainly fails to make it.

D. Themes²³

- a. The story's central concern, the preservation of the Jewish people, is inherently a religious one, for they are the people of God's covenant.
- b. Fox quotes from Meinhold's commentary on Esther. Meinhold wrote of Esther as a "religious book in non-religious language."
- c. [Personal note] Fox puts in little effort to contradict this point, which I find one of the more convincing. He appears to rely on his discussion concerning *coincidence* and *reversals* to be his critique.

Fox then goes on to discuss "What is (almost) said about God."²⁴

Although Mordecai avoids referring to God, his confidence that salvation arise for the Jews has theological implications: "For if you are silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another source [lit., 'place']"

He raises the possibility that, even before events began sliding toward disaster; some force was preparing the way for deliverance.

He is confident that the Jewish people will survive but is uncertain about how this will come to pass.

Fox concludes this discussion with an illustration. I think he intends to draw into question God's providence with the illustration, but I think he fails to do so.

In the same vein, one might believe, for example, that it might have been providential that an eloquent Zionist, Chaim Weizman, happened to be both a talented chemist and working in Manchester during World War I, for these circumstances allowed him access to Lloyd George and David Balfour, just at

²³ Fox, "The Religion of the Book of Esther," 143-44.

²⁴ Fox, 144-45.

the moment when Britain was seeking to keep the French out of Palestine as well as win the favor of American Jews - an impressive list of coincidences. Yet, such an assertion does not require assuming that God made Weizman a chemist and showed him how to synthesize acetone for explosives so that he could prepare the ground for the Balfour Declaration.

If you begin with the assumption God is sovereign and providentially working in every moment of life, you could then conclude God providentially placed Chaim Weizman at that place with those abilities for that particular time.

While I think Fox does a good job of addressing the right areas of concern, I fail to be convinced by his logic. His proofs for each point are stronger than his arguments against those points. However, in the end, I think he offers a very helpful conclusion in his section "Where is God?" Fox argues that:

ambiguity could have been banished by one word. Rather, the author is carefully creating and maintaining uncertainty. That is why he hints at God's role, but only obliquely; and mentions religious practices, yet avoids setting them in a religious context. The author must be aware that readers will be expecting a statement that the Jews fasted and cried out to God (as we must imagine them doing), or a declaration of faith that deliverance is from the Lord (from whom else?), or a report that the Jews gave thanks to God after their victory (what else would they do?), or an exhortation to thank God in future Purim celebrations (as Jews have, in fact, always done).²⁵

I very much appreciate a couple of Fox's concluding remarks. Fox well reflects the normalcy of most people's lives. As believers, we know, by God's grace, we will persevere to the end, but how that happens and what that looks like is almost always beyond us. We often wonder about God's presence and question whether he is active in our lives.

Israel will survive – that is the author's faith – but this will happen how he does not know. Events are ambiguous, and God's activity cannot be directly read out of them; yet, they are not random.... When we scrutinize the text of Esther for traces of God's activity, we are doing what the author made us do. The author would have us probe the events which we witness in our own lives in the same way.²⁶

²⁵ Fox, 145–46.

²⁶ Fox, 146–47.

Appendix A: Esther Block Diagram

Chapter 1: Three Banquets

Three Banquets

[Banquet 1 (6 months)]

- ¹ Now in the days of Ahasuerus,
the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia
over 127 provinces,
² in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel,
³ in the third year of his reign he gave a feast
for all his officials and
servants.
The army of Persia and Media
and the nobles
and governors of the provinces were before him,
⁴ while he showed the riches of his royal glory
and the splendor and pomp of his greatness
for many days, 180 days.

[Banquet 2 (7 days)]

- ⁵ And when these days were completed,
the king gave
for all the people present in Susa the citadel,
both great and small,
a feast
lasting for seven days
in the court of the garden of the king's palace.
⁶ There were
white cotton curtains and
violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and
purple to silver rods and
marble pillars, and
also couches of gold and silver
on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious
stones.
⁷ Drinks were served
in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and
the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king.

- 8 And drinking was according to this edict:
 "There is no compulsion."
 For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each
 man desired.

[Vashti's Banquet]

- 9 Queen Vashti also gave a feast
 for the women
 in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

Vashti Refuses Ahasuerus

- 10 On the seventh day,
 when the heart of the king was merry with wine,
 he commanded
 Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and 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 show the peoples and the princes her beauty,
 for she was lovely to look at.
12 But **Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command** delivered by the eunuchs.
 At this the king became enraged, and
 his anger burned within him.

King Seeks Counsel

- 13 Then the king said to the wise men
 who knew the times
 (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and
 judgment,
14 the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres,
 Marsena, and Memucan,
 the seven princes of Persia and Media,
 who saw the king's face,
 and sat first in the kingdom):
15 "According to the law,
 what is to be done to Queen Vashti,
 because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by
 the eunuchs?"

Memucan Responds

[This is the problem]

¹⁶ Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials,
“Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong,
 but also against **all** the officials and
 all the peoples
 who are in **all** the provinces of King
 Ahasuerus.

¹⁷ For the queen’s behavior will be made known to **all** women,
causing them to look at their husbands with contempt,
since they will say,
‘King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and
she did not come.’

¹⁸ This very day the noble women of Persia and Media
 who have heard of the queen’s behavior
will say the same to all the king’s officials,
and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty.

[Here’s a solution]

¹⁹ If it please the king,
let a royal order go out from him, and
let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes
 so that it may not be repealed,
 that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus.
And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she.

²⁰ So
 when the decree made by the king is proclaimed
 throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast,
all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.”

King Follows Counsel

²¹ This advice pleased the king and the princes, and
the king did as Memucan proposed.

²² He sent letters to all the royal provinces,
to every province in its own script and
to every people in its own language,
that every man be master in his own household and
 speak according to the language of his people.

Chapter 2: Queen Esther, Mordecai Averts a Plot

Esther Chosen Queen

[Young Men Propose Idea]

- ¹ After these things,
when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated,
he remembered Vashti
and what she had done
and what had been decreed against her.
- ² Then the king's young men who attended him said,
"Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king.
- ³ And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom
to gather all the beautiful young virgins
to the harem in Susa the citadel,
under custody of Hegai,
the king's eunuch,
who is in charge of the women.
Let their cosmetics be given them.
- ⁴ And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti."
This pleased the king,
and he did so.

[Esther Introduced]

- ⁵ Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel
whose name was Mordecai,
the son of Jair,
son of Shimei,
son of Kish,
a Benjaminite,
- ⁶ who had been carried away
from Jerusalem
among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah,
whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away.
- ⁷ He was bringing up Hadassah,
that is Esther,
the daughter of his uncle,
for she had neither father nor mother.
The young woman had a beautiful figure
and was lovely to look at,
and when her father and her mother died,
Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

[Esther Enters the Beauty Pageant]

- ⁸ So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed,
and when many young women were gathered
in Susa the citadel

in custody of Hegai,
 Esther also was taken
 into the king's palace
 and put in custody of Hegai,
 who had charge of the women.
 9 And the young woman pleased him
 and won his favor.
 And he quickly provided her with
 her cosmetics
 and her portion of food,
 and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace,
 and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem.
 10 Esther had not made known her people or kindred,
 for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known.
 11 And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem
 to learn how Esther was
 and what was happening to her.

[Esther Called in to King]

12 Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to King Ahasuerus,
 after being twelve months under the regulations for the women,
 since this was the regular period of their beautifying,
 six months with oil of myrrh
 and six months with spices and ointments for women—
 13 when the young woman went in to the king in this way,
 she was given
 whatever she desired to take with her
 from the harem to the king's palace.
 14 In the evening she would go in,
 and in the morning she would return
 to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz,
 the king's eunuch,
 who was in charge of the concubines.
 She would not go in to the king again,
 unless the king delighted in her
 and she was summoned by name.

 15 When the turn came for Esther
 the daughter of Abihail
 the uncle of Mordecai,
 who had taken her as his own daughter,
 to go in to the king,
 she asked for nothing
 except what Hegai ... advised.
 (the king's eunuch

who had charge of the women,)
Now Esther was winning favor
in the eyes of all who saw her.

[Esther crowned Queen with Great Feast]

- ¹⁶ And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus,
into his royal palace,
in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth,
in the seventh year of his reign,
¹⁷ the king loved Esther
more than all the women,
and she won grace and favor
in his sight more than all the virgins,
so that he set the royal crown on her head
and made her queen instead of Vashti.
¹⁸ Then the king gave a great feast
for all his officials and servants;
it was Esther's feast.
He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces
and gave gifts with royal generosity.

Mordecai Discovers a Plot

- ¹⁹ Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.
²⁰ Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him.
²¹ In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.
²² And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai.
²³ When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.

Chapter 3: Mordecai and Haman, Edict Against Jews

Mordecai and Haman: Round 1

Haman Introduced, Mordecai Refuses to Bow

- ¹ After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him.
- ² And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage.
- ³ Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's command?"
- ⁴ And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew.
- ⁵ And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury.
- ⁶ But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

Haman Plots to Kill all the Jews

- ⁷ In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar.
- ⁸ Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them.
- ⁹ If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries."
- ¹⁰ So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews.
- ¹¹ And the king said to Haman, "The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you."

The First Decree Goes Out: Kill all the Jews

- ¹² Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king's signet ring.
- ¹³ Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.

- ¹⁴ A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day.
- ¹⁵ The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

Chapter 4: Jews Lament, Esther Appeals to King

Mordecai and Jews Lament

- ¹ When Mordecai learned all that had been done,
Mordecai tore his clothes
and put on sackcloth and ashes,
and went out into the midst of the city,
and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry.
- ² He went up to the entrance of the king's gate,
for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth.
- ³ And in every province,
wherever the king's command and his decree reached,
there was great mourning among the Jews,
with fasting and weeping and lamenting,
and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

Under Mordecai's Direction, Esther Appeals to King

- ⁴ When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her,
the queen was deeply distressed.
She sent garments to clothe Mordecai,
so that he might take off his sackcloth,
but he would not accept them.
- ⁵ Then **Esther called** for Hathach,
one of the king's eunuchs,
who had been appointed to attend her,
and ordered him to go to Mordecai
to learn what this was and why it was.
- ⁶ **Hathach went** out to Mordecai
in the open square of the city
in front of the king's gate,
- ⁷ and **Mordecai told** him all that had happened to him,
and the exact sum of money
that Haman had promised
to pay into the king's treasuries
for the destruction of the Jews.
- ⁸ **Mordecai also gave** him a copy of the written decree
issued in Susa
for their destruction,
that he might show it to Esther
and explain it to her
and command her
to go to the king
to beg his favor
and plead with him on behalf of her people.

- 9 And **Hathach** **went**
and told Esther
what Mordecai had said.
- 10 Then **Esther** **spoke** to Hathach
and commanded him
to go to Mordecai and say,
- 11 “All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know
that if any man or woman goes to the king
inside the inner court
without being called,
there is but one law—
to be put to death,
except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter
so that he may live.
But as for me,
I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days.”
- 12 And **they told Mordecai**
what Esther had said.
- 13 Then **Mordecai told them** to reply to Esther,
“Do not think to yourself
that in the king’s palace
you will escape any more than all the other Jews.
- 14 For if you keep silent at this time,
relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews
from another place,
but you and your father’s house will perish.
And who knows
whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”
- 15 Then **Esther told them** to reply to Mordecai,
16 “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa,
and hold a fast on my behalf,
and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day.
I and my young women will also fast as you do.
Then I will go to the king,
though it is against the law,
and if I perish, I perish.”
- 17 **Mordecai** then **went** away
and **did** everything
as Esther had ordered him.

Chapter 5: Esther's First Banquet

Esther Prepares a Banquet

- ¹ On the third day
Esther put on her royal robes and stood
in the inner court of the king's palace,
in front of the king's quarters,
while the king was sitting on his royal throne
inside the throne room
opposite the entrance to the palace.
- ² |And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court,
she won favor in his sight,
and he held out to Esther
the golden scepter that was in his hand.
Then Esther approached and
touched the tip of the scepter.
- ³ And **the king said** to her,
"What is it, Queen Esther?
What is your request?
It shall be given you,
even to the half of my kingdom."
- ⁴ And **Esther said**,
"If it please the king,
let the king and Haman come today
to a feast
that I have prepared for the king."
- ⁵ Then **the king said**,
"Bring Haman quickly,
so that we may do as Esther has asked."
So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared.
- ⁶ |And as they were drinking wine after the feast,
the king said to Esther,
"What is your wish?
It shall be granted you.
And what is your request?
Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled."
- ⁷ Then **Esther answered**,
"My wish and my request is:
- ⁸ If I have found favor in the sight of the king,
and if it please the king to grant my wish and
fulfill my request,
let the king and Haman come to the feast

that I will prepare for them,
and tomorrow I will do as the king has said

Mordecai and Haman: Round 2

Mordecai Refuses to Bow – Again!

- ⁹ And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart.
| But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate,
that he neither rose nor trembled before him,
he was filled with wrath against Mordecai.

Haman Rehearses His Greatness to Friends and Family

- ¹⁰ | Nevertheless,
Haman restrained himself and
went home, and
he sent and
brought his friends and his wife Zeresh.
- ¹¹ And Haman recounted to them
the splendor of his riches,
the number of his sons,
all the promotions with which the king had honored him,
and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king.
- ¹² Then **Haman said**,
"Even Queen Esther let no one but me come
with the king to the feast she prepared.
And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king.

Haman Plots to Hang Mordecai

- ¹³ Yet all this is worth nothing to me,
so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate."
- ¹⁴ Then his wife **Zeresh** and all his **friends said** to him,
"Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made,
and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it.
Then go joyfully with the king to the feast."
This idea pleased Haman,
and he had the gallows made.

Chapter 6: Sleepless King, Honored Mordecai, Disgraced Haman

No Sleep and Some Late Night Reading

- ¹ On that night the king could not sleep.
And he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds,
the chronicles,
and they were read before the king.
- ² And it was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh,
two of the king's eunuchs,
who guarded the threshold,
and who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.
- ³ And the king said,
"What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?"
The king's young men who attended him said,
"Nothing has been done for him."

Ahasuerus and Proud Haman Discuss a Public Honor

- ⁴ And the king said, "Who is in the court?"
Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace
to speak to the king
about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows
that he had prepared for him.
- ⁵ And the king's young men told him,
"Haman is there, standing in the court."
And the king said,
"Let him come in."
- ⁶ So Haman came in,
and the king said to him,
"What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?"
And Haman said to himself,
"Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?"
- ⁷ And Haman said to the king,
"For the man whom the king delights to honor,
- ⁸ let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn,
and the horse that the king has ridden,
and on whose head a royal crown is set.
- ⁹ And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials.
Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and
let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city,

proclaiming before him:

'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.' "

- ¹⁰ Then the king said to Haman,
"Hurry; take the robes and the horse,
as you have said,
and do so to Mordecai the Jew,
who sits at the king's gate.
Leave out nothing that you have mentioned."

Haman Publicly Honors Mordecai

- ¹¹ So Haman took the robes and the horse,
and he dressed Mordecai
and led him through the square of the city,
proclaiming before him,
"Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor."

Mordecai Returns to Gate, Proud Haman Grieves at Home

- ¹² Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate.
But Haman hurried to his house,
mourning and with his head covered.
- ¹³ And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything
that had happened to him.
- Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him,
"If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people,
you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him."

Esther Reveals Haman's Plot

- ¹⁴ While they were yet talking with him,
the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast
that Esther had prepared.

Chapter 7: Esther's Second Feast

¹ So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther.

Esther Reveals Her Request

² |And on the second day,
as they were drinking wine after the feast,
the king again said to Esther,
"What is your wish, Queen Esther?
It shall be granted you.
And what is your request?
Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled."

The King asks Esther

³ Then Queen Esther answered,
"If I have found favor in your sight, O king,
and if it please the king,
let my life be granted me for my wish, and
my people for my request.

Esther responds

⁴ For we have been sold,
I and my people,
to be destroyed,
to be killed, and
to be annihilated.
|If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women,
I would have been silent,
for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king."

⁵ Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther,
"Who is he, and
where is he,
who has dared to do this?"

The King's follow up question

^{6a} And Esther said,
"A foe and enemy!
This wicked Haman!"

Esther responds

The Immediate Response to Esther's Request

^{6b} Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

Haman Terrified

⁷ And the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking and
went into the palace garden,
but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther,
for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king.

King mad & leaves

Haman begs for his life

The King responds, Haman dies

⁸ And the king returned
from the palace garden
to the place where they were drinking wine,
as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was.

And the king said,
"Will he even assault the queen
in my presence,
in my own house?"

|As the word left the mouth of the king,
they covered Haman's face.

⁹ Then Harbona ... said,
(one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king)
"Moreover,
the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai,
whose word saved the king,
is standing at Haman's house,
fifty cubits high."

And the king said,
"Hang him on that."

¹⁰ So they hanged Haman
on the gallows
that he had prepared for Mordecai.
Then the wrath of the king abated.

*The king returns to find
Haman assaulting Esther*

*Harbona alerts the king
to Haman's gallows*

*Haman dies and the king
settles down*

Chapter 8: Esther Saves the Jews, Edict for the Jews

Transition of Roles with Haman Gone

- ¹ On that day King
Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman,
the enemy of the Jews.
And Mordecai came before the king,
for Esther had told what he was to her.
- ² And the king took off his signet ring,
which he had taken from Haman, and
gave it to Mordecai.
And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

Esther Pleads with King for New Edict

- ³ **Then Esther spoke** again to the king.
She fell at his feet and **wept** and **pleaded** with him
to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and
the plot that he had devised against the Jews.
- ⁴ |When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther,
Esther rose and **stood** before the king.
- ⁵ And she **said**,
If it please the king, and
if I have found favor in his sight, and
if the thing seems right before the king, and
I am pleasing in his eyes,
let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman
the Agagite,
the son of Hammedatha,
which he wrote to destroy the Jews
who are in all the provinces of the king.
- ⁶ For how can I bear to see the calamity
that is coming to my people?
Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?"

The New Edict Written & Sent

- ⁷ Then **King Ahasuerus said** to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew,
"Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman,
and they have hanged him on the gallows,
because he intended to lay hands on the Jews.
- ⁸ But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews,
in the name of the king,
and seal it with the king's ring,
for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the
king's ring cannot be revoked."

9 The **king's scribes were summoned** at that time,
in the third month,
which is the month of Sivan,
on the twenty-third day.
And an **edict was written**,
according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews,
to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the
provinces from India to Ethiopia,
127 provinces,
to each province in its own script
and to each people in its own language,
and also to the Jews in their script and their language.

10 And **he wrote** in the name of King Ahasuerus and
sealed it with the king's signet ring.

Then **he sent** the letters

by mounted couriers riding on swift horses
that were used in the king's service,
bred from the royal stud,

11 saying
that the king allowed the Jews
who were in every city
to gather and defend their lives,
to destroy,
to kill, and
to annihilate
any armed force of any people or province
that might attack them,
children and women included, and
to plunder their goods,
12 on one day
throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus,
on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month,
which is the month of Adar.

13 A copy ... was to be issued
(of what was written)
as a decree in every province,
being publicly displayed to all peoples, and
the Jews were to be ready on that day
to take vengeance on their enemies.

14 So the **couriers, mounted** on their swift horses
that were used in the king's service,
rode out hurriedly,
urged by the king's command.
And the decree was issued in Susa the citadel.

Wording of Edict

Mordecai Rejoices with the Jews

- ¹⁵ Then **Mordecai went out** from the presence of the king
in royal robes of blue and white,
with a great golden crown
and a robe of fine linen and purple,
and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced.
- ¹⁶ The **Jews had light and gladness** and joy and honor.
- ¹⁷ |And in every province and in every city,
wherever the king's command and his edict reached,
there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday.
And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews,
for fear of the Jews had fallen on them.

Chapter 9: Jews Destroy Enemies

The Jews Destroy Their Enemies

- ¹ Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them.
- ² The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples.
- ³ All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them.
- ⁴ For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful.
- ⁵ The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them.
- ⁶ In Susa the citadel itself the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men,
- ⁷ and also killed Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha
- ⁸ and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha
- ⁹ and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha,
- ¹⁰ the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, but they laid no hand on the plunder.

Esther Requests an Additional Day

- ¹¹ That very day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel was reported to the king.
- ¹² And the king said to Queen Esther, "In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men and also the ten sons of Haman. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled."
- ¹³ And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict. And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows."
- ¹⁴ So the king commanded this to be done. A decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged.

- ¹⁵ The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed 300 men in Susa, but they laid no hands on the plunder.

The Jews Celebrate Their Victory

- ¹⁶ Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and got relief from their enemies and killed 75,000 of those who hated them, but they laid no hands on the plunder.
- ¹⁷ This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness.
- ¹⁸ But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness.
- ¹⁹ Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another.

Mordecai Institutes Purim

- ²⁰ And Mordecai **recorded** these things and
sent letters to all the Jews
who were in all the provinces of King
Ahasuerus, both near and far,
- ²¹ obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar
and also the fifteenth day of the same,
year by year,
- ²² as the days
on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and
as the month
that had been turned for them
from sorrow into gladness and
from mourning into a holiday;
that they should make them
days of feasting and gladness,
days for sending gifts of food to one another and
gifts to the poor.

The Jews Commit to Purim

- ²³ So the **Jews accepted**
what they had started to do, and

what Mordecai had written to them.
 24 For **Haman** the Agagite,
 the son of Hammedatha,
 the enemy of all the Jews,
 had **plotted** against the Jews to destroy them, and
 had cast Pur
 (that is, cast lots),
 to crush and to destroy them.
 25 | But when it came before the king,
 he **gave orders** in writing
 that his evil plan
 that he had devised against the Jews
 should return on his own head, and
 that he and his sons
 should be hanged on the gallows.
 26 Therefore **they called these days Purim**,
 after the term Pur.
 | Therefore,
 because of all that was written in this letter,
 and of what they had faced in this matter,
 and of what had happened to them,
 27 the **Jews** firmly **obligated**
 themselves and their offspring and all who joined them,
 that without fail they would keep these two days
 according to what was written and
 at the time appointed every year,
 28 that these days should be remembered and kept
 throughout every generation,
 in every clan, province, and city, and
 that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse
 among the Jews,
 nor should the commemoration of these days cease
 among their descendants.

Esther and Mordecai Send Formal Command for Purim

29 Then **Queen Esther**,
 the daughter of Abihail, and
 Mordecai
 the Jew
 gave full written authority,
 confirming this second letter about Purim.
 30 **Letters were sent** to all the Jews,
 to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus,

- in words of peace and truth,
³¹ that these days of Purim should be observed
at their appointed seasons,
as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them,
and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring,
with regard to their fasts and their lamenting.
³² The **command** of Esther **confirmed** these practices of Purim,
and it was recorded in writing.

Chapter 10

The Greatness of Mordecai

- ¹ King Ahasuerus imposed tax
on the land and
on the coastlands of the sea.
² And **all the acts** of his power and might, and
the full account of the high honor of Mordecai,
to which the king advanced him,
are they not **written** in the Book of the Chronicles
of the kings of Media and Persia?
³ For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus,
and he was great among the Jews and
popular with the multitude of his brothers,
for he sought the welfare of his people and
spoke peace to all his people.

Appendix B: Outlines of Esther

Frederic Bush (WBC)

Act 1. Introduction and Setting: Esther Becomes Queen of Persia (1:1–2:23)

- Scene 1. The deposal of Queen Vashti (1:1–22)
 - Episode 1. The banquets of King Ahasuerus: Persian pomp and circumstance (1:1–9)
 - Episode 2. Queen Vashti is deposed: Persian folly and foolishness (1:10–22)
- Scene 2. Esther becomes queen (2:1–18)
 - Episode 1. Ahasuerus decides to seek a new queen (2:1–4)
 - Episode 2. Esther is taken to the royal harem (2:5–11)
 - Episode 3. Esther is chosen queen (2:12–18)
- Scene 3. Mordecai uncovers a plot (2:19–23)

Act 2. The Crisis: Haman's Plot to Destroy the Jews (3:1–15)

- Scene 1. Haman decides to annihilate the Jews (3:1–6)
- Scene 2. Haman sets in motion a plot to annihilate the Jews (3:7–15)
 - Episode 1. Haman obtains the king's permission to annihilate the Jews (3:7–11)
 - Episode 2. Haman orders the annihilation of the Jews (3:12–15)

Act 3. Mordecai's Stratagem: Esther Must Consent to Appeal to the King (4:1–17)

- Scene 1. Mordecai and all the Jews lament over Haman's edict (4:1–3)
- Scene 2. At Mordecai's command Esther consents to appeal to the king (4:4–17)
 - Episode 1. Mordecai refuses the clothing Esther sends him (4:4)
 - Episode 2. Mordecai orders Esther to appeal to the king (4:5–9)
 - Episode 3. Esther consents to appeal to the king (4:10–17)

Act 4. Esther Begins Her Appeal: She Invites the King and Haman to a Banquet (5:1–8)

- Scene 1. Esther invites the king and Haman to a banquet (5:1–5a)
 - Episode 1. Esther gains an audience with the king (5:1–2)
 - Episode 2. Esther invites the king and Haman to a banquet (5:3–5a)
- Scene 2. Esther again invites the king and Haman to a banquet (5:5b–8)

Act 5. Haman's Stratagem Backfires: He Is Humiliated and Mordecai Honored (5:9–6:14)

- Scene 1. Haman's hubris: his wife and his friends persuade him to ask the king to hang Mordecai (5:9–14)
- Scene 2. Haman's humiliation: the king commands him to honor Mordecai (6:1–11)
 - Episode 1. The king discovers the failure to reward Mordecai (6:1–3)
 - Episode 2. Haman advises the king how to reward the man he wishes to honor (6:4–10)

Episode 3. Haman so honors Mordecai (6:11)

Scene 3. Haman's end: his wife and his friends predict his downfall (6:12-14)

Act 6. Esther Makes Her Appeal: The Fall of Haman (7:1-10)

Episode 1. Esther pleads with the king for her life (7:1-6a)

Episode 2. Haman attempts to plead with Esther for his life (7:6b-8b)

Episode 3. Haman loses his life (7:8c-10)

Act 7. Esther Appeals Again to the King: She and Mordecai Counter Haman's Plot (8:1-17)

Scene 1. Esther and Mordecai acquire authority to issue a counterdecree (8:1-8)

Episode 1. Mordecai is admitted into the king's presence (8:1-2)

Episode 2. The king grants Esther and Mordecai authority to write an edict on behalf of the Jews (8:3-8)

Scene 2. Mordecai issues the counterdecree (8:9-17)

Episode 1. The counterdecree is written and promulgated (8:9-14)

Episode 2. Mordecai leaves the king's presence with honor and the Jews rejoice (8:15-17)

Act 8. The Jews Are Victorious: They Put All Their Enemies to the Sword (9:1-5)

Act 9. The Festival of Purim Is Instituted: Mordecai, Esther, and the Jewish Community Set Its Dates and Establish Its Character (9:6-32)

Scene 1. The events that occasion the celebration of Purim over two days (9:6-19)

Episode 1. How the fighting in Susa took place on 13 and 14 Adar (9:6-15)

Episode 2. Why the Jews in Susa and the Jews elsewhere celebrate on two different days (9:16-19)

Scene 2. Mordecai, Esther, and the Jewish community set the dates of Purim and commit themselves to its perpetual celebration (9:20-32)

Episode 1. Mordecai writes to the Jews to require them to celebrate annually 14 or 15 Adar as days of joyful festivity (9:20-22)

Episode 2. The Jews commit themselves, their descendants, and all who join them to the perpetual annual observance of the two-day festival of Purim (9:23-28)

Episode 3. Esther writes to confirm the observance of Purim (9:29-32)

Act 10. Epilogue: An Encomium on Mordecai (10:1-3)¹

¹ Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 9:336-37.

Breneman (NAC)

- I. King Xerxes' Great Banquet (1:1–22)
 - 1. Introduction (1:1–3)
 - 2. The Splendor of the King (1:4–8)
 - 3. The Queen's Banquet (1:9)
 - 4. The King's Request Denied (1:10–12)
 - 5. The King's Counsel (1:13–15)
 - 6. The Seriousness of the Matter (1:16–18)
 - 7. The Queen's Punishment and the King's Decree (1:19–22)
- II. Esther Becomes Queen (2:1–18)
 - 1. A Proposal for a New Queen (2:1–4)
 - 2. Esther the Jewess in the King's Palace (2:5–9)
 - 3. Esther's Time of Preparation and Waiting (2:10–14)
 - 4. Esther Chosen as Queen (2:15–18)
- III. Mordecai Discovers a Plot (2:19–23)
 - 1. Mordecai at the King's Gate (2:19–20)
 - 2. The Plot to Kill the King (2:21–23)
- IV. Haman's Plot to Destroy the Jews (3:1–15)
 - 1. The King Honors Haman (3:1–2)
 - 2. Haman Plans Revenge (3:3–15)
 - (1) Haman's Anger (3:3–6)
 - (2) Haman Presents His Plan (3:7–11)
 - (3) Haman's Edict Published (3:12–15)
- V. Esther's Courageous Decision (4:1–5:14)
 - 1. Mordecai's Consternation (4:1–3)
 - 2. Esther and Mordecai Plot to Save the Jews (4:4–17)
 - (1) Esther's Concern for Mordecai (4:4–5)
 - (2) Mordecai Informs the Queen (4:6–8)
 - (3) Esther Hesitates (4:9–11)
 - (4) Mordecai Insists (4:12–14)
 - (5) Esther Risks Her Life (4:15–17)
 - 3. Esther Stands before the King (5:1–14)
 - (1) Esther in the King's Presence (5:1–4)
 - (2) Esther's Banquet (5:5–7)
 - (3) Haman's Pride and Anger (5:9–14)
- VI. Mordecai Honored (6:1–14)
 - 1. The King Reviews His Records (6:1–3)
 - 2. Mordecai Honored; Haman Humiliated (6:4–14)
- VII. Haman Condemned to Death (7:1–10)
 - 1. Esther's Second Banquet (7:1–2)
 - 2. Esther's Request (7:3–7)
 - 3. Haman Hanged (7:8–10)

- VIII. King Xerxes Helps the Jews (8:1–17)
 - 1. Mordecai Promoted (8:1–2)
 - 2. Esther’s Request to Save the Jews (8:3–6)
 - 3. A New Edict Published (8:7–17)
 - (1) The King Commands the Edict (8:7–8)
 - (2) The Edict Prepared (8:9–10)
 - (3) The Contents of the Edict (8:11–13)
 - (4) The Jews Rejoice (8:14–17)
- IX. The Triumph of the Jews (9:1–17)
 - 1. The Jews United and Strengthened (9:1–4)
 - 2. The Jews Destroy Their Enemies (9:5–17)
 - (1) The Jews in Susa (9:5–15)
 - (2) The Jews in the Provinces (9:16–17)
- X. The Feast of Purim Inaugurated (9:18–32)
 - 1. Mordecai’s Letter of Instructions (9:18–22)
 - 2. The Feast Established by the Jews (9:23–28)
 - 3. The Custom Confirmed by Queen Esther (9:29–32)
- XI. The Greatness of Mordecai (10:1–3)
 - 1. Mordecai Remembered in the Annals (10:1–2)
 - 2. Mordecai’s Work for the People (10:3)²

Duguid (REC)

- 1. Standing Firm against the Empire (1:1–22)
- 2. Beauty and the Beast (2:1–23)
- 3. Mordecai Makes a Stand (3:1–15)
- 4. The Dog That Didn’t Bark (4:1–17)
- 5. Meekness and Subtlety (5:1–14)
- 6. The Man the King Delights to Honor (6:1–14)
- 7. Coming Out in Susa (7:1–10)
- 8. It Ain’t Over (8:1–17)
- 9. A World Turned Upside Down (9:1–10:3)³

² Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 10:300–301.

³ Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, v.

Baldwin (TOTC)

- I. The scene is set (1:1–22)
 - a. Persian splendour (1:1–9)
 - b. The king defied (1:10–12)
 - c. The king avenged (1:13–22)
- II. Esther is chosen queen (2:1–18)
 - a. Regrets not permitted (2:1–4)
 - b. Esther introduced (2:5–11)
 - c. Esther becomes queen (2:12–18)
- III. A plot is disclosed (2:19–23)
- IV. Haman takes vengeance on the jews (3:1–15)
 - a. Haman's promotion (3:1–6)
 - b. The casting of lots (3:7–11)
 - c. The edict sent out (3:12–15)
- V. Esther agrees to intercede (4:1–17)
 - a. Mordecai's passionate outburst (4:1–3)
 - b. Esther takes the lead (4:4–17)
- VI. Esther finds favour (5:1–14)
 - a. Esther's petition (5:1–8)
 - b. Haman's vexation (5:9–14)
- VII. Haman inadvertently promotes Mordecai (6:1–13)
 - a. The king's bedtime book (6:1–3)
 - b. Haman's humiliation (6:4–13)
- VIII. Queen Esther's second feast (6:14–7:10)
- IX. Ahasuerus turns the tables (8:1–17)
 - a. Vacant places filled (8:1–2)
 - b. Reversal of the edict (8:3–14)
 - c. The popularity of the Jews (8:15–17)
- X. The Jews are seen to triumph (9:1–19)
- XI. Authority for the festival (9:20–32)
- XII. Normal life restored (10:1–3)⁴

⁴ Baldwin, *Esther*, 12:53–54.

Tomasino (EEC)

- I. Introduction: The Greatness of Xerxes (1:1–2)
- II. The Rise of Esther and Mordecai (1:3–2:23)
 - A. Queen Vashti Deposed (1:3–22)
 - 1. The Royal Banquets (1:3–9)
 - 2. The Queen’s Insubordination (1:10–12)
 - 3. The King’s Response (1:13–22)
 - B. Esther Chosen as Queen (2:1–18)
 - 1. The Contest Is Proposed (2:1–4)
 - 2. Introducing Mordecai and Esther (2:5–7)
 - 3. Esther Wins the Contest (2:8–18)
 - C. Mordecai Saves the King (2:19–23)
- III. The Threat to the Jews (3:1–4:17)
 - A. Mordecai Provokes Haman (3:1–7)
 - B. Haman’s Plot to Destroy the Jews (3:8–15)
 - 1. Haman Petitions the King (3:8–11)
 - 2. Haman Issues the Decree (3:12–15)
 - C. Esther Resolves to Help (4:1–17)
 - 1. Mordecai and the Jews Lament the Order (4:1–3)
 - 2. Mordecai Appeals to Esther (4:4–17)
 - a. Mordecai Refuses Clothing from Esther (4:4)
 - b. Mordecai Orders Esther to Intercede (4:5–9)
 - c. Esther Agrees to Intercede (4:10–17)
- IV. The Plot Reversed (5:1–7:10)
 - A. Esther’s First Banquet (5:1–8)
 - 1. Esther Invites the King and Haman to a Banquet (5:1–5a)
 - a. Esther Appears before the King (5:1–2)
 - b. Esther Issues an Invitation (5:3–5a)
 - 2. Esther Invites the King and Haman to a Second Banquet (5:5b–8)
 - B. Haman Plots to Kill Mordecai (5:9–14)
 - C. Mordecai Is Honored; Haman Humiliated (6:1–14)
 - 1. The King Discovers His Oversight (6:1–3)
 - 2. Haman Counsels the King on Honoring a Benefactor (6:4–10)
 - 3. Haman Is Forced to Honor Mordecai (6:11)
 - 4. Haman’s End Is Foretold (6:12–14)
 - D. Esther’s Second Banquet (7:1–10)
 - 1. Esther Appeals to the King for the Jews (7:1–6a)
 - 2. Haman Appeals to the Queen for His Life (7:6b–8a)
 - 3. Haman Is Condemned (7:8b–10)
- V. The Triumph of the Jews (8:1–9:32)
 - A. Esther and Mordecai Arrange Deliverance for the Jews (8:1–17)
 - 1. The King Promotes Mordecai (8:1–2)

2. Esther and Mordecai Are Authorized to Write an Edict (8:3–8)
3. Mordecai Issues the Decree (8:9–17)
 - a. The Counter-Decree Is Written (8:9–14)
 - b. Mordecai Leaves with Honor, and the Jews Rejoice (8:15–17)
- B. The Jews' Victories over Their Enemies (9:1–19)
 1. The First Wave of Victories (9:1–10)
 - a. Victories in the Provinces (9:1–5)
 - b. Victories over Enemies in the Palace (9:6–10)
 2. The Second Wave of Victories (9:11–15)
 - a. Esther Requests a Second Day of Carnage (9:11–13)
 - b. Five Hundred Killed in Susa (9:14–15)
 3. The Jews Celebrate Their Victories (9:16–19)
 - a. Celebrating the Victories in the Provinces (9:16–17)
 - b. Celebrating the Victories in Susa (9:17–19)
- C. Purim Established (9:20–32)
 1. Mordecai Establishes Purim (9:20–28)
 - a. Mordecai Issues the Order Establishing Purim (9:20–22)
 - b. The Jews Commit to the Perpetual Observance (9:23–28)
 2. Esther Confirms the Celebration of Purim (9:29–32)
- VI. Conclusion: The Greatness of Xerxes and Mordecai (10:1–3)⁵

⁵ Tomasino, *Esther*, 128–30.

Appendix C:

Additions to Esther

The Apocrypha: King James Version (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995).

Chapter 10

⁴Then Mardocheus said, God hath done these things. ⁵For I remember a dream which I saw concerning these matters, and nothing thereof hath failed. ⁶A little fountain became a river, and there was light, and the sun, and much water: this river is Esther, whom the king married, and made queen: ⁷And the two dragons are I and Aman. ⁸And the nations were those that were assembled to destroy the name of the Jews: ⁹And my nation is this Israel, which cried to God, and were saved: for the Lord hath saved his people, and the Lord hath delivered us from all those evils, and God hath wrought signs and great wonders, which have not been done among the Gentiles. ¹⁰Therefore hath he made two lots, one for the people of God, and another for all the Gentiles. ¹¹And these two lots came at the hour, and time, and day of judgment, before God among all nations. ¹²So God remembered his people, and justified his inheritance. ¹³Therefore those days shall be unto them in the month Adar, the fourteenth and fifteenth day of the same month, with an assembly, and joy, and with gladness before God, according to the generations for ever among his people.

Chapter 11

¹In the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemeus and Cleopatra, Dositheus, who said he was a priest and Levite, and Ptolemeus his son, brought this epistle of Phurim, which they said was the same, and that Lysimachus the son of Ptolemeus, that was in Jerusalem, had interpreted it. ²In the second year of the reign of Artaxerxes the great, in the first day of the month Nisan, Mardocheus the son of Jairus, the son of Semei, the son of Cisai, of the tribe of Benjamin, had a dream; ³Who was a Jew, and dwelt in the city of Susa, a great man, being a servitor in the king's court. ⁴He was also one of the captives, which Nabuchodonosor the king of Babylon carried from Jerusalem with Jechonias king of Judea; and this was his dream: ⁵Behold a noise of a tumult, with thunder, and earthquakes, and uproar in the land: ⁶And, behold, two great dragons came forth ready to fight, and their cry was great. ⁷And at their cry all nations were prepared to battle, that they might fight against the righteous people. ⁸And lo a day of darkness and obscurity, tribulation and anguish, affliction and great uproar, upon the earth. ⁹And the whole righteous nation was troubled, fearing their own evils, and were ready to perish. ¹⁰Then they cried unto God, and upon their cry, as it were from a little fountain, was made a great flood, even much water. ¹¹The light and the sun rose up, and the lowly were exalted, and devoured the glorious.

¹² Now when Mardocheus, who had seen this dream, and what God had determined to do, was awake, he bare this dream in mind, and until night by all means was desirous to know it.

Chapter 12

¹ And Mardocheus took his rest in the court with Gabatha and Tharra, the two eunuchs of the king, and keepers of the palace.

² And he heard their devices, and searched out their purposes, and learned that they were about to lay hands upon Artaxerxes the king; and so he certified the king of them. ³ Then the king examined the two eunuchs, and after that they had confessed it, they were strangled. ⁴ And the king made a record of these things, and Mardocheus also wrote thereof. ⁵ So the king commanded Mardocheus to serve in the court, and for this he rewarded him.

⁶ Howbeit Aman the son of Amadathus the Agagite, who was in great honour with the king, sought to molest Mardocheus and his people because of the two eunuchs of the king.

Chapter 13

¹ The copy of the letters was this: The great king Artaxerxes writeth these things to the princes and governours that are under him from India unto Ethiopia, in an hundred and seven and twenty provinces.

² After that I became lord over many nations, and had dominion over the whole world, not lifted up with presumption of my authority, but carrying myself away with equity and mildness, I purposed to settle my subjects continually in a quiet life, and making my kingdom peaceable,

and open for passage to the utmost coasts, to renew peace, which is desired of all men.

³ Now when I asked my counsellors how this might be brought to pass, Aman, that excelled in wisdom among us, and was approved for his constant good will and steadfast fidelity, and had the honour of the second place in the kingdom,

⁴ Declared unto us, that in all nations throughout the world there was scattered a certain malicious people, that had laws contrary to all nations, and continually despised the commandments of kings, so as the uniting of our kingdoms, honourably intended by us, cannot go forward. ⁵ Seeing then we understand that this people alone is continually in opposition unto all men, differing in the strange manner of their laws, and evil affected to our state, working all the mischief they can, that our kingdom may not be firmly established:

⁶ Therefore have we commanded, that all they that are signified in writing unto you by Aman, who is ordained over the affairs, and is next unto us, shall all, with their wives and children, be utterly destroyed by the sword of their enemies, without all mercy and pity, the fourteenth day of the twelfth month Adar of this present year:

⁷ That they, who of old and now also are malicious, may in one day with violence go into the grave, and so ever hereafter cause our affairs to be well settled, and without trouble.

⁸ Then Mardocheus thought upon all the works of the Lord, and made his prayer unto him,

⁹ Saying, O Lord, Lord, the King Almighty: for the whole world is in thy power, and if

thou hast appointed to save Israel, there is no man that can gainsay thee: ¹⁰ For thou hast made heaven and earth, and all the wondrous things under the heaven.

¹¹ Thou art Lord of all things, and there is no man that can resist thee, which art the Lord. ¹² Thou knowest all things, and thou knowest, Lord, that it was neither in contempt nor pride, nor for any desire of glory, that I did not bow down to proud Aman. ¹³ For I could have been content with good will for the salvation of Israel to kiss the soles of his feet. ¹⁴ But I did this, that I might not prefer the glory of man above the glory of God: neither will I worship any but thee, O God, neither will I do it in pride. ¹⁵ And now, O Lord God and King, spare thy people: for their eyes are upon us to bring us to nought; yea, they desire to destroy the inheritance, that hath been thine from the beginning. ¹⁶ Despise not the portion, which thou hast delivered out of Egypt for thine own self. ¹⁷ Hear my prayer, and be merciful unto thine inheritance: turn our sorrow into joy, that we may live, O Lord, and praise thy name: and destroy not the mouths of them that praise thee, O Lord.

¹⁸ All Israel in like manner cried most earnestly unto the Lord, because their death was before their eyes.

Chapter 14

¹ Queen Esther also, being in fear of death, resorted unto the Lord: ² And laid away her glorious apparel, and put on the garments of anguish and mourning: and instead of precious ointments, she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she humbled her body greatly, and all the places of her joy she filled with her torn hair. ³ And she

prayed unto the Lord God of Israel, saying, O my Lord, thou only art our King: help me, desolate woman, which have no helper but thee: ⁴ For my danger is in mine hand. ⁵ From my youth up I have heard in the tribe of my family, that thou, O Lord, tookest Israel from among all people, and our fathers from all their predecessors, for a perpetual inheritance, and thou hast performed whatsoever thou didst promise them. ⁶ And now we have sinned before thee: therefore hast thou given us into the hands of our enemies, ⁷ Because we worshipped their gods: O Lord, thou art righteous. ⁸ Nevertheless it satisfieth them not, that we are in bitter captivity: but they have stricken hands with their idols, ⁹ That they will abolish the thing that thou with thy mouth hast ordained, and destroy thine inheritance, and stop the mouth of them that praise thee, and quench the glory of thy house, and of thine altar, ¹⁰ And open the mouths of the heathen to set forth the praises of the idols, and to magnify a fleshly king for ever. ¹¹ O Lord, give not thy sceptre unto them that be nothing, and let them not laugh at our fall; but turn their device upon themselves, and make him an example, that hath begun this against us. ¹² Remember, O Lord, make thyself known in time of our affliction, and give me boldness, O King of the nations, and Lord of all power. ¹³ Give me eloquent speech in my mouth before the lion: turn his heart to hate him that fighteth against us, that there may be an end of him, and of all that are likeminded to him: ¹⁴ But deliver us with thine hand, and help me that am desolate, and which have no other help but thee. ¹⁵ Thou knowest all things, O Lord; thou knowest that I hate the glory of the unrighteous, and abhor the bed of the uncircumcised, and of all the heathen.

¹⁶Thou knowest my necessity: for I abhor the sign of my high estate, which is upon mine head in the days wherein I shew myself, and that I abhor it as a menstruous rag, and that I wear it not when I am private by myself. ¹⁷And that thine handmaid hath not eaten at Aman's table, and that I have not greatly esteemed the king's feast, nor drunk the wine of the drink offerings. ¹⁸Neither had thine handmaid any joy since the day that I was brought hither to this present, but in thee, O Lord God of Abraham. ¹⁹O thou mighty God above all, hear the voice of the forlorn; and deliver us out of the hands of the mischievous, and deliver me out of my fear.

Chapter 15

¹And upon the third day, when she had ended her prayers, she laid away her mourning garments, and put on her glorious apparel. ²And being gloriously adorned, after she had called upon God, who is the beholder and saviour of all things, she took two maids with her: ³And upon the one she leaned, as carrying herself daintily; ⁴And the other followed, bearing up her train. ⁵And she was ruddy through the perfection of her beauty, and her countenance was cheerful and very amiable: but her heart was in anguish for fear. ⁶Then having passed through all the doors, she stood before the king, who sat upon his royal throne, and was clothed with all his robes of majesty, all glittering with gold and precious stones; and he was very dreadful.

⁷Then lifting up his countenance that shone with majesty, he looked very fiercely upon her: and the queen fell down, and

was pale, and fainted, and bowed herself upon the head of the maid that went before her. ⁸Then God changed the spirit of the king into mildness, who in a fear leaped from his throne, and took her in his arms, till she came to herself again, and comforted her with loving words and said unto her, ⁹Esther, what is the matter? I am thy brother, be of good cheer: ¹⁰Thou shalt not die, though our commandment be general: come near.

¹¹And so he held up his golden sceptre, and laid it upon her neck, ¹²And embraced her, and said, Speak unto me. ¹³Then said she unto him, I saw thee, my lord, as an angel of God, and my heart was troubled for fear of thy majesty. ¹⁴For wonderful art thou, lord, and thy countenance is full of grace. ¹⁵And as she was speaking, she fell down for faintness. ¹⁶Then the king was troubled, and all his servants comforted her.

Chapter 16

¹The great king Artaxerxes unto the princes and governors of an hundred and seven and twenty provinces from India unto Ethiopia, and unto all our faithful subjects, greeting.

²Many, the more often they are honoured with the great bounty of their gracious princes, the more proud they are waxen,

³And endeavour to hurt not our subjects only, but not being able to bear abundance, do take in hand to practise also against those that do them good:

⁴And take not only thankfulness away from among men, but also lifted up with the glorious words of lewd persons, that were never good, they think to escape the justice of God, that seeth all things and

hateth evil. ⁵ Oftentimes also fair speech of those, that are put in trust to manage their friends' affairs, hath caused many that are in authority to be partakers of innocent blood, and hath enwrapped them in remediless calamities: ⁶ Beguiling with the falsehood and deceit of their lewd disposition the innocency and goodness of princes.

⁷ Now ye may see this, as we have declared, not so much by ancient histories, as ye may, if ye search what hath been wickedly done of late through the pestilent behaviour of them that are unworthily placed in authority. ⁸ And we must take care for the time to come, that our kingdom may be quiet and peaceable for all men, ⁹ Both by changing our purposes, and always judging things that are evident with more equal proceeding. ¹⁰ For Aman, a Macedonian, the son of Amadatha, being indeed a stranger from the Persian blood, and far distant from our goodness, and as a stranger received of us, ¹¹ Had so far forth obtained the favour that we shew toward every nation, as that he was called our father, and was continually honoured of all the next person unto the king. ¹² But he, not bearing his great dignity, went about to deprive us of our kingdom and life: ¹³ Having by manifold and cunning deceits sought of us the destruction, as well of Mardocheus, who saved our life, and continually procured our good, as also of blameless Esther, partaker of our kingdom, with their whole nation. ¹⁴ For by these means he thought, finding us destitute of friends, to have translated the kingdom of the Persians to the Macedonians.

¹⁵ But we find that the Jews, whom this wicked wretch hath delivered to utter destruction, are no evildoers, but live by most just laws: ¹⁶ And that they be children of the most high and most mighty living God, who hath ordered the kingdom both unto us and to our progenitors in the most excellent manner.

¹⁷ Wherefore ye shall do well not to put in execution the letters sent unto you by Aman the son of Amadatha. ¹⁸ For he, that was the worker of these things, is hanged at the gates of Susa with all his family: God, who ruleth all things, speedily rendering vengeance to him according to his deserts.

¹⁹ Therefore ye shall publish the copy of this letter in all places, that the Jews may freely live after their own laws. ²⁰ And ye shall aid them, that even the same day, being the thirteenth day of the twelfth month Adar, they may be avenged on them, who in the time of their affliction shall set upon them. ²¹ For Almighty God hath turned to joy unto them the day, wherein the chosen people should have perished.

²² Ye shall therefore among your solemn feasts keep it an high day with all feasting:

²³ That both now and hereafter there may be safety to us, and the well affected Persians; but to those which do conspire against us a memorial of destruction.

²⁴ Therefore every city and country whatsoever, which shall not do according to these things, shall be destroyed without mercy with fire and sword, and shall be made not only unpassable for men, but also most hateful to wild beasts and fowls for ever.

Appendix D:

Josephus 11.6.

Concerning Esther, and Mordecai, and Haman; And How, in the Reign of Artaxerxes, the Whole Nation of the Jews Was in Danger of Perishing

1. (184) After the death of Xerxes, the kingdom came to be transferred to his son Cyrus, whom the Greeks called Artaxerxes. When this man had obtained the government over the Persians, the whole nation of the Jews, with their wives and children, were in danger of perishing; (185) the occasion whereof we shall declare in a little time; for it is proper, in the first place, to explain somewhat relating to this king, and how he came to marry a Jewish wife, who was herself of the royal family also, and who is related to have saved our nation; (186) for when Artaxerxes had taken the kingdom, and had set governors over the hundred twenty and seven provinces, from India even unto Ethiopia, in the third year of his reign, he made a costly feast for his friends, and for the nations of Persia, and for their governors, such a one as was proper for a king to make, when he had a mind to make a public demonstration of his riches, and this for a hundred and fourscore days; (187) after which he made a feast for other nations, and for their ambassadors, at Shushan, for seven days. Now this feast was ordered after the manner following:—He caused a tent to be pitched, which was supported by pillars of gold and silver, with curtains of linen and purple spread over them, that it might afford room for many ten thousands to sit down. (188) The cups with which the waiters ministered were of

gold, and adorned with precious stones, for pleasure and for sight. He also gave order to the servants, that they should not force them to drink by bringing them wine continually, as is the practice of the Persians, but to permit every one of the guests to enjoy himself according to his own inclination. (189) Moreover, he sent messengers through the country, and gave order that they should have a remission of their labors, and should keep a festival many days, on account of his kingdom. (190) In like manner did Vashti the queen gather her guests together, and made them a feast in the palace. Now the king was desirous to show her, who exceeded all other women in beauty, to those that feasted with him, and he sent some to command her to come to his feast. (191) But she, out of regard to the laws of the Persians, which forbid the wives to be seen by strangers, did not go to the king; and though he oftentimes sent the eunuchs to her, she did nevertheless stay away, and refused to come, (192) till the king was so much irritated, that he brake up the entertainment, and rose up, and called for those seven who had the interpretation of the laws committed to them, and accused his wife, and said, that he had been affronted by her, because that when she was frequently called by him to his feast, she did not obey him once. (193) He therefore gave order that they should

inform him what could be done by the law against her. So one of them, whose name was Memucan, said that this affront was offered not to him alone, but to all the Persians, who were in danger of leading their lives very ill with their wives, if they must be thus despised by them; (194) for that none of their wives would have any reverence for their husbands, if they had “such an example of arrogance in the queen towards thee, who rulest over all.” Accordingly, he exhorted him to punish her, who had been guilty of so great an affront to him, after a severe manner; and when he had so done, to publish to the nations what had been decreed about the queen. So the resolution was to put Vashti away, and to give her dignity to another woman.

2. (195) But the king having been fond of her, he did not well bear a separation, and yet by the law he could not admit of a reconciliation, so he was under trouble, as not having it in his power to do what he desired to do: but when his friends saw him so uneasy, they advised him to cast the memory of his wife, and his love for her, out of his mind, (196) but to send abroad over all the habitable earth, and to search out for comely virgins, and to take her whom he should best like for his wife, because his passion for his former wife would be quenched by the introduction of another, and the kindness he had for Vashti would be withdrawn from her, and be placed on her, that was with him. (197) Accordingly, he was persuaded to follow this advice, and gave order to certain persons to choose out of the virgins that were in his kingdom those that were esteemed the most comely. (198) So when a great number of these virgins were

gathered together, there was found a damsel in Babylon, whose parents were both dead, and she was brought up with her uncle Mordecai, for that was her uncle’s name. This uncle was of the tribe of Benjamin, and was one of the principal persons among the Jews. (199) Now it proves that this damsel, whose name was Esther, was the most beautiful of all the rest, and that the grace of her countenance drew the eyes of the spectators principally upon her: (200) so she was committed to one of the eunuchs to take the care of her; and she was very exactly provided with sweet odors, in great plenty, and with costly ointments, such as her body required to be anointed withal; and this was used for six months by the virgins, who were in number four hundred; (201) and when the eunuch thought the virgins had been sufficiently purified, in the forementioned time, and were now fit to go to the king’s bed, he sent one to be with the king every day. So when he had accompanied with her, he sent her back to the eunuch; (202) and when Esther had come to him, he was pleased with her, and fell in love with the damsel, and married her, and made her his lawful wife, and kept a wedding feast for her on the twelfth month of the seventh year of his reign which was called Adao. (203) He also sent angari, as they are called, or messengers unto every nation, and gave orders that they should keep a feast for his marriage, while he himself treated the Persians and the Medes, and the principal men of the nations, for a whole month, on account of this his marriage. Accordingly, Esther came to his royal palace, and he set a diadem on her head; and thus was Esther married, without making known to the king what nation she was derived from. (204) Her

uncle also removed from Babylon to Shushan, and dwelt there, being every day about the palace, and inquiring how the damsel did, for he loved her as though she had been his own daughter.

3. (205) Now the king had made a law, that none of his own people should approach him unless they were called, when he sat upon his throne; and men, with axes in their hands, stood round about his throne, in order to punish such as approached to him without being called. (206) However, the king sat with a golden sceptre in his hand, which he held out when he had a mind to save anyone of those that approached to him without being called; and he who touched it was free from danger. But of this matter we have discoursed sufficiently.

4. (207) Some time after this [two eunuchs], Bigthan and Teresh, plotted against the king; and Barnabazus, the servant of one of the eunuchs, being by birth a Jew, was acquainted with their conspiracy, and discovered it to the queen's uncle; and Mordecai, by means of Esther, made the conspirators known to the king. (208) This troubled the king; but he discovered the truth, and hanged the eunuchs upon a cross, while at that time he gave no reward to Mordecai, who had been the occasion of his preservation. He only bade the scribes to set down his name in the records, and bade him stay in the palace, as an intimate friend of the king.

5. (209) Now there was one Haman, the son of Amedatha, by birth an Amalekite, that used to go into the king; and the foreigners and Persians worshipped him, as Artaxerxes had commanded that such honor should be paid to him; (210) but Mordecai was so wise, and so observant of

his own country's laws, that he would not worship the man. When Haman observed this, he inquired whence he came; and when he understood that he was a Jew, he had indignation at him, and said within himself, that whereas the Persians, who were free men, worshipped him, this man, who was no better than a slave, does not vouchsafe to do so. (211) And when he desired to punish Mordecai, he thought it too small a thing to request of the king that he alone might be punished; he rather determined to abolish the whole nation, for he was naturally an enemy to the Jews, because the nation of the Amalekites, of which he was, had been destroyed by them. (212) Accordingly he came to the king, and accused them, saying, "There is a certain wicked nation, and it is dispersed over all the habitable earth that was under his dominion; a nation separate from others, unsociable, neither admitting the same sort of divine worship that others do, nor using laws like to the laws of others, at enmity with thy people, and with all men, both in their manners and practices. (213) Now, if thou wilt be a benefactor to thy subjects, thou wilt give order to destroy them utterly, and not leave the least remains of them, nor preserve any of them, either for slaves or for captives." (214) But that the king might not be damnified by the loss of the tributes which the Jews paid him, Haman promised to give him out of his own estate forty thousand talents whensoever he pleased; and he said he would pay this money very willingly, that the kingdom might be freed from such a misfortune.

6. (215) When Haman had made this petition, the king both forgave him the money, and granted him the men, to do

what he would with them. So Haman, having gained what he desired, sent out immediately a decree, as from the king, to all nations, the contents whereof were these:—(216) “Artaxerxes, the great king, to the rulers of the hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India to Ethiopia, sends this writing. Whereas I have governed many nations and obtained the dominions of all the habitable earth, according to my desire, and have not been obliged to do anything that is insolent or cruel to my subjects by such my power, but have showed myself mild and gentle, by taking care of their peace and good order, and have sought how they might enjoy those blessings for all time to come; (217) and whereas I have been kindly informed by Haman, who, on account of his prudence and justice, is the first in my esteem, and in dignity, and only second to myself, for his fidelity and constant good will to me, that there is an ill-natured nation intermixed with all mankind, that is averse to our laws, and not subject to kings, and of a different conduct of life from others, that hateth monarchy, and of a disposition that is pernicious to our affairs; (218) I give order that these men, of whom Haman, our second father, hath informed us, be destroyed, with their wives and children, and that none of them be spared, and that none prefer pity to them before obedience to this decree; (219) and this I will to be executed on the fourteenth day of the twelfth month of this present year, that so when all that have enmity to us are destroyed, and this in one day, we may be allowed to lead the rest of our lives in peace hereafter.” (220) Now when this decree was brought to the cities, and to the country, all were ready for the destruction and entire abolishment of the

Jews, against the day before-mentioned; and they were very hasty about it at Shushan, in particular. Accordingly, the king and Haman spent their time in feasting together with good cheer and wine; but the city was in disorder.

7. (221) Now when Mordecai was informed of what was done, he rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth, and sprinkled ashes upon his head, and went about the city, crying out, that “a nation that had been injurious to no man, was to be destroyed.” And he went on saying thus as far as to the king’s palace, and there he stood, for it was not lawful for him to go into it in that habit. (222) The same thing was done by all Jews that were in the several cities wherein this decree was published, with lamentation and mourning, on account of the calamities denounced against them. But as soon as certain persons had told the queen that Mordecai stood before the court in a mourning habit, she was disturbed at this report, and sent out such as should change his garments; (223) but when he could not be induced to put off his sackcloth, because the sad occasion that forced him to put in was not yet ceased, she called the eunuch Acratheus for he was then present, and sent him to Mordecai, in order to know of him what sad accident had befallen him, for which he was in mourning, and would not put off the habit he had put on, at her desire. (224) Then did Mordecai inform the eunuch of the occasion of his mourning, and of the decree which was sent by the king into all the country, and of the promise of money whereby Haman brought the destruction of their nation. (225) He also gave him a copy of what was proclaimed at Shushan, to be carried to

Esther; and he charged her to petition the king about this matter, and not to think it a dishonorable thing in her to put on a humble habit, for the safety of her nation, wherein she might deprecate the ruin of the Jews, who were in danger of it; for that Haman, whose dignity was only inferior to that of the king, had accused the Jews, and had irritated that king against them. (226) When she was informed of this, she sent to Mordecai again, and told him that she was not called by the king, and that he who goes in to him without being called, is to be slain, unless when he is willing to save anyone, he holds out his golden sceptre to him; but that to whomsoever he does so, although he go in without being called, that person is so far from being slain, that he obtains pardon, and is entirely preserved. (227) Now when the eunuch carried this message from Esther to Mordecai, he bade him also tell her that she must not only provide for her own preservation, but for the common preservation of her nation, for that if she now neglected this opportunity, there would certainly arise help to them from God some other way: but she and her father's house would be destroyed by those whom she now despised. (228) But Esther sent the very same eunuch back to Mordecai [to desire him], to go to Shushan, and to gather the Jews that were there together to a congregation, and to fast, and abstain from all sorts of food, on her account, and [to let him know that] she with her maidens would do the same; and then she promised that she would go to the king, though it were against the law, and that if she must die for it, she would not refuse it.

8. (229) Accordingly, Mordecai did as Esther had enjoined him, and made the people fast; and he besought God, together with them, not to overlook his nation, particularly at this time, when it was going to be destroyed: but that, as he had often before provided for them, and forgiven them when they had sinned, so he would now deliver them from that destruction which was denounced against them; (230) for although it was not all the nation that had offended, yet must they so ingloriously be slain, and that he was himself the occasion of the wrath of Haman, "Because," said he, "I did not worship him, nor could I endure to pay that honor to him which I used to pay to thee, O Lord; for upon that his anger hath he contrived this present mischief against those that have not transgressed thy laws." (231) The same supplications did the multitude put up; and entreated that God would provide for their deliverance, and free the Israelites that were in all the earth from this calamity which was not coming upon them, for they had it before their eyes, and expected its coming. Accordingly Esther made supplication to God after the manner of her country, by casting herself down upon the earth, and putting on her mourning garments, (232) and bidding farewell to meat and drink and all delicacies, for three days' time; and she entreated God to have mercy upon her, and make her words appear persuasive to the king, and render her countenance more beautiful than it was before, (233) that both by her words and beauty she might succeed, for the averting of the king's anger, in case he were at all irritated against her, and for the consolation of those of her own country, now they were in the utmost danger of perishing: as also

that he would excite a hatred in the king against the enemies of the Jews, and those that had contrived their future destruction, if they proved to be condemned by him.

9. (234) When Esther had used this supplication for three days, she put off those garments, and changed her habit, and adorned herself as became a queen, and took two of her handmaids with her, the one of which supported her, as she gently leaned upon her, and the other followed after, and lifted up her large train (which swept along the ground) with the extremities of her fingers; and thus she came to the king, having a blushing redness in her countenance, with a pleasant agreeableness in her behavior, yet did she go in to him with fear; (235) and as soon as she was come over against him, as he was sitting on his throne, in his royal apparel, which was a garment interwoven with gold and precious stones, (236) which made him seem to her more terrible, especially when he looked at her somewhat severely and with a countenance on fire with anger; her joints failed her immediately, out of the dread she was in, and she fell down sideways in a swoon: (237) but the king changed his mind, which happened, as I suppose, by the will of God, and was concerned for his wife, lest her fear should bring some very evil thing upon her, (238) and he leaped from his throne, and took her in his arms, and recovered her, by embracing her, and speaking comfortably to her, exhorting her to be of good cheer, and not to suspect anything that was sad on account of her coming to him without being called, because that law was made for subjects, but that she, who was a queen, as well as he a king, might be entirely secure: (239)

and as he said this, he put the sceptre into her hand, and laid his rod upon her neck on account of the law; and so freed her from her fear. (240) And after she had recovered herself by these encouragements, she said, "My Lord, it is not easy for me, on the sudden, to say what hath happened, for so soon as I saw thee to be great, and comely, and terrible, my spirit departed from me, and I had no soul left in me." (241) And while it was with difficulty and in a low voice, that she could say thus much, the king was in great agony and disorder, and encouraged Esther to be of good cheer, and to expect better fortune, since he was ready, if occasion should require it, to grant to her the half of his kingdom. (242) Accordingly, Esther desired that he and his friend Haman would come to her to a banquet, for she said she had prepared a supper for him. He consented to it; and when they were there, as they were drinking, he bade Esther to let him know what she had desired; (243) for that she should not be disappointed, though she should desire the half of his kingdom. But she put off the discovery of her petition till the next day, if he would come again, together with Haman, to her banquet.

10. (244) Now when the king had promised so to do, Haman went away very glad, because he alone had the honor of supping with the king at Esther's banquet, and because no one else partook of the same honor with kings but himself; yet when he saw Mordecai in the court, he was very much displeased, for he paid him no manner of respect when he saw him. (245) So he went home and called for his wife Zeresh, and his friends, and when they were come, he showed them what honor

he enjoyed, not only from the king, but from the queen also, for as he alone had that day supped with her, together with the king, so he was also invited again for the next day; (246) "yet," said he, "am I not pleased to see Mordecai the Jew in the court." Hereupon his wife Zeresh advised him to give order that a gallows should be made fifty cubits high, and that in the morning he should ask it of the king that Mordecai might be hanged thereon. So he commended her advice, and gave order to his servants to prepare the gallows, and to place it in the court, for the punishment of Mordecai thereon, (247) which was accordingly prepared. But God laughed to scorn the wicked expectations of Haman; and as he knew what the event would be, he was delighted at it, for that night he took away the king's sleep: (248) and as the king was not willing to lose the time of his lying awake, but to spend it in something that might be of advantage to his kingdom, he commanded the scribe to bring him the chronicles of the former kings, and the records of his own actions; (249) and when he had brought them, and was reading them, one was found to have received a country on account of his excellent management on a certain occasion, and the name of the country was set down; another was found to have a present made him on account of his fidelity: then the scribe came to Bigthan and Teresh, the eunuchs that had made a conspiracy against the king, which Mordecai had discovered; (250) and when the scribe said no more but that, and was going on to another history, the king stopped him, and inquired, "whether it was not added that Mordecai had a reward given him?" and when he said there was no such addition, he bade him leave off;

and he inquired of those that were appointed for that purpose, what hour of the night it was; (251) and when he was informed that it was already day, he gave order that, if they found anyone of his friends already come, and standing before the court, they should tell him. Now it happened that Haman was found there, for he was come sooner than ordinary, to petition the king to have Mordecai put to death: (252) and when the servants said, that Haman was before the court, he bade them call him in; and when he was come in, he said, "Because I know that thou art my only fast friend, I desire thee to give me advice how I may honor one that I greatly love, and that after a manner suitable to my magnificence." (253) Now Haman reasoned with himself, that what opinion he should give it would be for himself, since it was he alone who was beloved by the king; so he gave that advice which he thought of all others the best; for he said, (254) "If thou wouldst truly honor a man whom thou sayest thou does love, give order that he may ride on horseback, with the same garment which thou wearest, and with a gold chain about his neck, and let one of thy intimate friends go before him, and proclaim through the whole city, that whosoever the king honoreth, obtaineth this mark of his honor." (255) This was the advice which Haman gave, out of a supposal that such reward would come to himself. Hereupon the king was pleased with the advice, and said, "Go thou, therefore, for thou hast the horse, the garment, and the chain, ask for Mordecai the Jew, and give him those things, and go before his horse and proclaim accordingly; for thou art," said he, "my intimate friend, and hast given me good advice; be thou then the minister of

what thou hast advised me to. This shall be his reward from us for preserving my life.” (256) When he heard this order, which was entirely unexpected, he was confounded in his mind, and knew not what to do. However, he went out and led the horse, and took the purple garment, and the golden chain for the neck, and finding Mordecai before the court, clothed in sackcloth, he bade him put that garment off, and put the purple garment on: (257) but Mordecai not knowing the truth of the matter, but thinking that it was done in mockery, said, “O thou wretch, the vilest of all mankind, dost thou thus laugh at our calamities?” But when he was satisfied that the king bestowed this honor upon him, for the deliverance he had procured him when he convicted the eunuchs who had conspired against him, he put on that purple garment which the king always wore, and put the chain about his neck, (258) and got on horseback, and went round the city, while Haman went before, and proclaimed, “This shall be the reward which the king will bestow on everyone whom he loves, and esteems worthy of honor.” (259) And when they had gone round the city, Mordecai went in to the king; but Haman went home, out of shame, and informed his wife and friends of what had happened, and this with tears: who said that he would never be able to be revenged of Mordecai, for that God was with him.

11. (260) Now while these men were thus talking one to another, Esther’s eunuchs hastened Haman away to come to supper: (261) but one of the eunuchs named Sabuchadas, saw the gallows that was fixed in Haman’s house, and inquired of one of his servants for what purpose they

had prepared it. So he knew that it was for the queen’s uncle, because Haman was about to petition the king that he might be punished; but at present he held his peace. (262) Now when the king, with Haman, were at the banquet, he desired the queen to tell him what gift she desired to obtain, and assured her that she should have whatsoever she had a mind to. She then lamented the danger her people were in; and said, that “she and her nation were given up to be destroyed, and that she, on that account, made this her petition: (263) that she would not have troubled him if he had only given order that they should be sold into bitter servitude, for such a misfortune would not have been intolerable; but she desired that they might be delivered from such destruction.” (264) And when the king inquired of her who was the author of this misery to them, she then openly accused Haman, and convicted him, that he had been the wicked instrument of this, and had formed this plot against them. (265) When the king was hereupon in disorder, and was gone hastily out of the banquet into the gardens, Haman began to intercede with Esther, and to beseech her to forgive him, as to what he had offended, for he perceived that he was in a very bad case. And as he had fallen upon the queen’s bed, and was making supplications to her, the king came in, and being still more provoked at what he saw, “O thou wretch,” said he, “thou vilest of mankind, dost thou aim to force my wife?” (266) And when Haman was astonished at this, and not able to speak one word more, Sabuchadas the eunuch came in, and accused Haman, and said, “He found a gallows at his house, prepared for Mordecai; for that the servant told him so much, upon his inquiry, when

he was sent to him to call him to supper:" he said further, that the gallows were fifty cubits high: (267) which, when the king heard, he determined that Haman should be punished after no other manner than that which had been devised by him against Mordecai; so he gave order immediately that he should be hung upon those gallows, and be put to death after that manner. (268) And from hence I cannot forbear to admire God, and to learn hence his wisdom and his justice, not only in punishing the wickedness of Haman, but in so disposing it, that he should undergo the very same punishment which he had contrived for another; as also, because thereby he teaches others this lesson, that what mischiefs anyone prepares against another, he without knowing of it, first contrives it against himself.

12. (269) Wherefore Haman, who had immoderately abused the honor he had from the king, was destroyed after this manner; and the king granted his estate to the queen. He also called for Mordecai (for Esther had informed him that she was akin to him), and gave that ring to Mordecai which he had before given to Haman. (270) The queen also gave Haman's estate to Mordecai; and prayed the king to deliver the nation of the Jews from the fear of death, and showed him what had been written over all the country by Haman the son of Ammedatha; for that if her country were destroyed, and her countrymen were to perish, she could not bear to live herself any longer. (271) So the king promised her that he would not do anything that should be disagreeable to her, nor contradict what she desired; but he bade her write what she pleased about the Jews in the king's name, and seal it with his seal, and

send it to all his kingdom, for that those who read epistles whose authority is secured by having the king's seal to them, would no way contradict what was written therein. (272) So he commanded the king's scribes to be sent for, and to write to the nations, on the Jews' behalf, and to his lieutenants and governors, that were over his hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India to Ethiopia. Now the contents of this epistle were these:—(273) "The great king Artaxerxes to our rulers, and those that are our faithful subjects, sendeth greeting. Many men there are who, on account of the greatness of the benefits bestowed on them, and because of the honor which they have obtained from the wonderful kind treatment of those that bestowed it, are not only injurious to their inferiors, (274) but do not scruple to do evil to those that have been their benefactors, as if they would take away gratitude from among men, and by their insolent abuse of such benefits as they never expected, they turn the abundance they have against those that are the authors of it, and suppose that they shall lie concealed from God in that case, and avoid that vengeance which comes from him. (275) Some of these men, when they have had the management of affairs committed to them by their friends, and bearing private malice of their own against some others, by deceiving those that have the power, persuade them to be angry at such as have done them no harm, till they are in danger of perishing, and this by laying accusations and calumnies: (276) nor is this state of things to be discovered by ancient examples, or such as we have learned by report only, but by some examples of such impudent attempts under our own eyes, so that it is not fit to attend any longer to

calumnies and accusations, nor to the persuasion of others, but to determine what anyone knows of himself to have been really done, and to punish what justly deserves it, and to grant favors to such as are innocent. (277) This hath been the case of Haman, the son of Ammedatha, by birth an Amalekite, and alien from the blood of the Persians, who, when he was hospitably entertained by us, and partook of that kindness which we bear to all men to so great a degree, as to be called my father, and to be all along worshipped, and to have honor paid him by all in the second rank after the royal honor due to ourselves, he could not bear his good fortune, nor govern the magnitude of his prosperity with sound reason; (278) nay, he made a conspiracy against me and my life, who gave him his authority, by endeavoring to take away Mordecai, my benefactor, and my savior and by basely and treacherously requiring to have Esther, the partner of my life, and of my dominion, brought to destruction; for he contrived by this means to deprive me of my faithful friends, and transfer the government to others:—(279) but since I perceived that these Jews, that were by this pernicious fellow devoted to destruction, were not wicked men, but conducted their lives after the best manner, and were men dedicated to the worship of that God who hath preserved the kingdom to me and to my ancestors, I do not only free them from the punishment which the former epistle, which was sent by Haman, ordered to be inflicted on them,—to which if you refuse obedience you shall dwell; (280) but I will that they have all honor paid them. Accordingly, I have hanged up the man that contrived such things against them, with his family, before the gates of

Shushan; that punishment being sent upon him by God, who seeth all things. (281) And I give you in charge, that you publicly propose a copy of this epistle through all my kingdom, that the Jews may be permitted peaceably to use their own laws, and that you assist them, that at the same season whereto their miserable estate did belong, they may defend themselves the very same day from unjust violence, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is Adar,—(282) for God hath made that day a day of salvation, instead of a day of destruction to them; and may it be a good day to those that wish us well, and a memorial of the punishment of the conspirators against us: (283) and I will that you take notice that every city, and every nation that shall disobey anything that is contained in this epistle, shall be destroyed by fire and sword. However, let this epistle be published through all the country that is under our obedience, and let all the Jews, by all means be ready against the day before mentioned, that they may avenge themselves upon their enemies.”

13. (284) Accordingly, the horsemen who carried the epistles, proceeded on the ways which they were to go with speed; but as for Mordecai, as soon as he had assumed the royal garment, and the crown of gold, and had put the chain about his neck, he went forth in a public procession; and when the Jews who were at Shushan saw him in so great honor with the king, they thought his good fortune was common to themselves also; (285) and joy and a beam of salvation encompassed the Jews, both those that were in the cities and those that were in the countries, upon the publication of the king’s letters, insomuch

that many of other nations circumcised their foreskin for fear of the Jews, that they might procure safety to themselves thereby; (286) for on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which according to the Hebrews is called Adar, but, according to the Macedonians, Dystrus, those that carry the king's epistle gave them notice, that the same day wherein their danger was to have been, on that very day should they destroy their enemies. (287) But now the rulers of the provinces, and the tyrants, and the kings, and the scribes, had the Jews in esteem; for the fear they were in of Mordecai forced them to act with discretion. (288) Now when the royal decree was come to all the country that was subject to the king, it fell out that the Jews at Shushan slew five hundred of their enemies: (289) and when the king had told Esther the number of those that were slain in that city, but did not well know what had been done in the provinces, he asked her whether she would have anything further done against them, for that it should be done accordingly: upon which she desired that the Jews might be permitted to treat their remaining enemies in the same manner the next day; and also, that they might hang the ten sons of Haman upon the gallows. (290) So the king permitted the Jews so to do, as desirous not to contradict Esther. So they gathered themselves together again on the fourteenth day of the month Dystrus, and slew about three hundred of their enemies, but touched nothing of what

riches they had. (291) Now there were slain by the Jews that were in the country, and in the other cities, seventy-five thousand of their enemies, and these were slain on the thirteenth day of the month, and the next day they kept as a festival. (292) In like manner the Jews that were in Shushan gathered themselves together, and feasted on the fourteenth day, and that which followed it; whence it is, that even now all the Jews that are in the habitable earth keep these days festivals, and send portions to one another. (293) Mordecai also wrote to the Jews that lived in the kingdom of Artaxerxes to observe these days, and to celebrate them as festivals, and to deliver them down to posterity, that this festival might continue for all time to come, and that it might never be buried in oblivion; (294) for since they were about to be destroyed on these days by Haman they would do a right thing, upon escaping the danger in them, and on them inflicting punishment on their enemies, to observe those days, and give thanks to God on them; (295) for which cause the Jews still keep the forementioned days, and call them days of Phurim [or Purim]. And Mordecai became a great and illustrious person with the king, and assisted him in the government of the people. He also lived with the queen; (296) so that the affairs of the Jews were, by their means, better than they could ever have hoped for. And this was the state of the Jews under the reign of Artaxerxes.

Appendix E:

Eight Questions Most Frequently Asked About the Book of Esther

By C.A. Moore¹

[There were several endnotes in this article. None of the information came through when copied to this document – only the numbers. So, I just deleted the numbers. There were 41 endnotes, which seemed quite helpful. Further study could benefit from checking out the endnote resources – available in the online version.]

Few books of the Hebrew Bible have generated more controversy among both Jews and Christians than the Book of Esther. It has been praised and damned, loved and rejected, all by good, God-fearing people. As the result of my studies of this controversial book over the years, I would like to discuss eight frequently asked questions about it.

1. Is the story true? Did it really happen?

Somehow the story seems improbable, more like fiction—a novella—than a historical account. On the other hand, there’s nothing impossible about it. Unlike many biblical books, there is nothing miraculous or supernatural in it.

The story is set in the time of the great Persian king Xerxes (Ahasuerus, in Hebrew), who reigned between 486 and 465 B.C. It takes place in the Persian capital of Susa.

During a lavish, days-long stag party, Xerxes orders Queen Vashti to appear before him so he can show off her beauty to his guests. When Vashti refuses this degrading request, Xerxes promptly deposes her, as a lesson to other wives—women are to show respect to their husbands! (chapter 1).

Xerxes then launches a full-scale search for a suitable replacement. Among the many beautiful maidens brought to the king’s bed—but only after a year’s elaborate beauty treatment—is Esther (or Hadassah), the niece and adopted daughter of Mordecai ben Jair, a Jew who sits at the King’s Gate. Eventually Esther is chosen as the new queen; somehow, Esther manages to keep her Jewish identity a secret from everyone, even after she becomes queen.

Later, her uncle Mordecai learns of a plot against the king by two of his bodyguards. He informs Esther who in turn informs the king in Mordecai’s name. The plot is foiled. Although Mordecai’s saving act is duly noted in the king’s daily record, it goes unrewarded at the time (chapter 2).

¹ Carey A. Moore, “Eight Questions Most Frequently Asked About the Book of Esther,” *Bible Review* 3, no. Spring (1987): 16–32. <https://library.biblicalarchaeology.org/article/eight-questions-most-frequently-asked-about-the-book-of-esther/>

Then enters Haman, the king's bloated prime minister and an Agagite. He is furious when he learns that Mordecai will not show him proper respect by bowing down to him. Haman persuades the king to permit a pogrom of the people (not otherwise identified) who have been such an obstacle to his plans for the empire. An edict is sent throughout the empire, declaring that all Jews—including women and children!—are to be killed and their property looted on the 13th day of Adar—that particular day having been chosen by lot (Babylonian, **puÆr**).

Mordecai persuades Esther to risk immediate death by appearing unsummoned before the king to intercede for her people (chapters 3–4). Although Esther thus breaks the law by appearing unsummoned before the king, he receives her warmly. Instead of immediately explaining her mission, Esther invites the king and Haman to attend a small dinner party just for the three of them. At the dinner, the king promises to grant Esther any wish; Esther asks only that he and Haman attend a similar party the next day.

On his way home, Haman is again infuriated to see Mordecai acting as if nothing terrible had happened—and still refusing to bow down to him! When Haman arrives home, his wife suggests that he ask the king's permission to hang Mordecai. Haman leaps at the idea and immediately erects a 75-foot gallows outside his home (chapter 5).

Unable to sleep that night, Xerxes has the court records read to him and is thus reminded that Mordecai had saved his life by informing the king of the bodyguards' plot and yet has gone unrewarded. Xerxes then asks Haman what the king should do for someone he wants to honor. Haman, thinking that the king has him in mind, recommends that a high official should parade the honored man, clothed in the king's robe and riding on a royal horse, while the high official calls attention to the honoree's royal treatment. To Haman's chagrin, the king tells Haman that Haman, personally, must do all this for Mordecai! (chapter 6)

During Esther's second dinner party later that day, she reveals to the king that, "thanks" to Haman, she, along with her equally innocent people, is about to be annihilated. Shocked by her disclosure, Xerxes bolts from the room, only to return a few seconds later to find Haman, "pawing" the queen, begging her to intercede for him. The king immediately sentences Haman death—he is to be hanged on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai (chapter 7).

Once Esther reveals to the king her relationship to Mordecai, Xerxes appoints him to Haman's post and gives Esther Haman's estate, and she in turn gives it to Mordecai.

However, the edict authorizing the pogrom against the Jews cannot be revoked, so the king does the next best thing: He allows Mordecai to draft a new edict that allows the Jews to defend themselves and even encourages others to help them. A number of gentiles do exactly that. Some even convert to Judaism (chapter 8).

On Adar 13, the appointed day, 75,000 enemies of the Jews are killed throughout the empire, as well as 510 in Susa. Among those killed in Susa are Haman's ten sons. Although granted specific permission to plunder, the Jews take no spoil.

Soon after, Mordecai and Queen Esther decree that their story be commemorated as a festival to be observed forever by all Jews and to be known as the festival of Purim. (The name is based on the fact that, earlier, Haman had cast “lots” (from Babylonian, **pu~~A~~Er**) to determine the propitious day for the destruction of the Jews (chapter 9).

Thus the Jews were saved by Queen Esther; and in his position as prime minister, Mordecai continues to serve effectively both his king and his people (chapter 10).

The story, in the Hebrew at least, is well told. Its plot is relatively simple, and its denouement sudden. The storyteller places his emphasis more on action and dramatic effect than on the development of his characters.

Apart from a few improbable details or embellishments, the story seems believable enough. It is a story of court intrigue and ethnic prejudices.

Moreover, the storyteller knew a lot about the time, place and setting for his tale. The rousing drinking parties with magnificent goblets (1:5–8), the seven princely advisers to the king (1:14), very efficient postal system (3:13; 8:10)—these and other “details of fact” have been attested Persia at this time by a number of ancient classical writers. And the narrator of the tale is obviously familiar with Persian terms; he uses a number of them, like the Persian words for nobles, kiosk, law, decree, satrapies, etc.

The characterization of Xerxes, the only indisputably historical figure in the story, seems reasonably compatible with what is known about him from non-biblical sources.

While archaeological excavations at Susa itself have not confirmed the various architectural features alluded to in Esther, discoveries elsewhere, especially in the palace of Darius and Xerxes at Persepolis, have provided us a very clear idea of the lavish Achaemenid royal buildings, their monumental ornamentation and their amazingly varied building materials.

Other archaeological discoveries have cast additional light on heretofore obscure Persian practices and objects. The text of Esther refers to year-long beauty treatment taken by all the virginal candidates for the queenship (Esther 2:12). William F. Albright has shown, on the basis of a cosmetic burner from the period when the story of Esther was supposed to have taken place, that this probably involved six months of cosmetic “fumigation.” Long ago, women like Esther—and like the seminomadic women of the eastern Sudan who continued the practice into modern times—fumigated themselves by saturating their skin, pores and hair with the aromatic fumes from cosmetic burners.

When the author of Esther alluded to Haman’s casting the **pu~~A~~Er**, or lot (Hebrew, *qwrl*; Esther 3:7), to determine the propitious day for destroying the Jews, he probably had in mind one of the many types of lots from the period discovered by archaeologists.

But in spite of all the literary and archaeological evidence that illuminates the Esther story, most modern scholars do not believe the tale reflects actual history. One reason for this is that some of the details in the story contradict extra-biblical sources whose basic accuracy is not suspect. For example, according to Herodotus, the fifth-century B.C. Greek

historian, Amestris, not Esther, was queen to Xerxes between the seventh and twelfth years of his reign; moreover, Persian queens had to come from one of seven noble Persian families. On both counts, Esther would have to be ruled out as queen. Also according to Herodotus, the Persian empire had 20 satrapies, not 127, as the author of Esther maintains (Esther 1:1). According to Herodotus, in the seventh year of Xerxes' reign (when, according to Esther 2:16, Esther was taken to the king's bed) Xerxes was still away fighting in Greece.

Taken individually, these contradictions may not seem sufficiently serious to undermine the essential historicity of Esther, because errors in detail can easily occur in an essentially true historical account. Together, they may have more weight.

Ultimately, however, those scholars who reject the historicity of the story do so on the basis of literary considerations and the improbabilities of the story—from Vashti's refusal to obey the king's command to the king's granting permission—a year ahead of time (Esther 3:12–13)—to slaughter an entire people within his empire, to the elevation of an ordinary Jewish girl to be queen of Persia, to the appointment of a non-Persian, Mordecai, to be prime minister.

Literary critics have shown that the primary motif of the book is feasting and that its four basic literary themes are power, loyalty to God and Israel, inviolability of the Jewish people and sudden reversal of situations (or peripety, to use the rhetorical term).

Neither side in this debate about the historicity of the story can prove its case with certainty, and each reader must weigh the evidence for himself or herself.

Perhaps, and that is another reason scholars sometimes cite in arguing against the book's historicity.

2. Aren't the names of the heroine and hero, Esther and Mordecai, derived from the names of pagan gods?

As early as the late 19th century, some scholars maintained that the name Mordecai should be equated with the Babylonian god Marduk, and Esther should be equated with the Babylonian goddess Ishtar.

Moreover, Haman, it was argued, should be identified with the Elamite god Humman, and Vashti with the Elamite goddess Mashti.

The Book of Esther, these scholars argued, represents the historization of a myth or myths.

Fragments of these myths were purportedly found in such Babylonian mythological accounts the Gilgamesh Epic, the Tammuz-Ishtar myth and Enuma Elish (the Babylonian creation myth).

Based on these name associations as well as other evidence, one scholar has argued that there is a historical case, or at least a historical basis, for the Esther story, but that it goes back a conflict at Susa between Mardukians (that is, worshippers of Marduk [Mordecai] and Ishtar [Esther]) and the Bagaiaans (devotees of the god Mithra) in the days of

Artaxerxes 2 (405–358 B.C.), who is the king in the Septuagint (i.e., the Greek version of the story of the Book of Esther).

The case for the Esther = Ishtar equation is not quite as strong as the Mordecai = Marduk equation; “Esther” (Hebrew, *’str*) may relate to the name “Ishtar,” the Babylonian goddess of love and war, but it may as easily represent the Persian *staÆra* (meaning “star”).

The name “Mordecai” is clearly theophorous (based on the name of a god). But so is the American name Martin. Yet parents who name their sons Martin certainly have no intention of honoring the Roman god of war, Mars.

Incidentally, the authenticity of the name Mordecai has been confirmed by archaeological evidence, and is indeed well attested. It appears in an Aramaic letter of the fifth century B.C. as *Mrdk* and in three variant syllabic spellings on the cuneiform Treasury Tablets found at Persepolis. And an accountant named *MardukaÆ* visited Susa in either the last days of Darius or the first years of Xerxes. So it could be argued that the name Mordecai supports—or is at least consistent with—the historicity of the story. (In addition, the name of one of Haman’s sons has also been attested archaeologically. The name “Pharshandatha” [Hebrew, *Prsûndt’*; Esther 9:7], occurs as *Prsûndt* on an Achaemenid cylinder seal of the fifth century B.C.)

3. Is the festival of Purim based on a pagan festival?

In a sense, yes; and that is another element in the argument that the Book of Esther represents the historization of a pagan myth, rather than actual history.

The origin of Purim, which celebrates the Jews’ delivery from Haman’s genocide plan, is still observed annually by Jews, at which time the Book of Esther, or *megillah* (scroll) as it is called, is read in the synagogue. Yet, like the great Christian festivals of Easter and Christmas, Purim contains pagan elements, if not a pagan origin. Somewhere, somehow, a pagan festival was adopted and adapted to its present status. The scholars who have spearheaded this research claim to have found the pagan prototype for Purim in the Persian New Year festivals. Purim’s pagan (i.e., Babylonian) name certainly suggests pagan or non-Jewish origin.

4. Is Esther the only book of the Bible that does not mention the name of God?

Yahweh, the personal name of the Hebrew God, does not appear in the Book of Esther. Esther is one of three biblical books in which it does not appear. Moreover, even the more generic name for God, *Elohim*, is absent from the Book of Esther. Esther and the Song of Songs are the only books of the Bible in which it does not appear.

This, too, it is claimed, suggests a story Persian origin somehow adapted by the Jews for their own didactic purposes.

By contrast, the Persian king is mentioned 190 times in 167 verses.

Not only is the name of God absent from the Book of Esther, but so are such basic themes and institutions of the Hebrew Bible as law, covenant, prayer, temple, and dietary laws (*kashrut*).

Despite the absence of explicitly religious elements in the story, however, it may nevertheless be understood as a profoundly religious book. As one scholar, David J. A. Clines, has argued:

"It is not so much the absence of the name of God from the book as the presence in it of critical coincidences working for the good of the Jewish people that defines its theological position. I would identify two primary elements in the book's theological statements: (i) the providence of God is to be relied on to reverse the ill-fortunes of Israel; (ii) divine action and human initiative are complementary and both [are] indispensable for success or 'salvation.' "

Although the name of God is not explicitly mentioned, it is surely alluded to. When Mordecai informs Queen Esther of Haman's plot to exterminate the Jews and asks her to intercede to save her people (Esther 4:8), she at first seems to hesitate: To appear before the king unsummoned risks death. Mordecai then tells her that she should not suppose that just because she is in the king's house, she will be exempt from Haman's evil decree. Moreover, if she fails to help at a time like this "deliverance for the Jews will appear from another *quarter* (*makoÆm*)" (Esther 4:14a). *MakoÆm*, "from another quarter or another place," is surely an allusion to God.

Mordecai's faith in God's providential care is clearly expressed in his admonition to Esther: "It's possible that you came to the throne for just such a time as this" (4:14b).

That Esther is a religious book, despite the absence of God's name, is also confirmed by the fact that Esther orders Mordecai and her countrymen to fast for her before she risks her own life by going to the king unsummoned to intercede for her people. To fast for her means to *pray* for her, for in the Old Testament, prayer routinely accompanied fasting (As for the residual risk, Esther was prepared to accept it: "And if I perish, I perish" [4:16].)

To the secular mind, the Book of Esther is filled with lucky coincidences: Esther's becoming queen (2:17), Mordecai's saving the king's life (2:21-23), the king's sleeplessness resulting in his being reminded of Mordecai's discovery of the plot to kill the king (6:1-2), Haman's asking the king for permission to hang Mordecai (6:4-10), etc. To the religious consciousness, however, the hand of God is seen at work here. God isn't mentioned in the Esther drama, but he is clearly working behind the scenes, setting the stage and directing the players.

One other point about the absence of God's name in the Book of Esther: Maybe it was there in an earlier version of the text and was taken out in the so-called proto-Masoretic period, before the text of the Hebrew Bible known as the Masoretic text was fixed in its present form in about the tenth century A.D. In the Mishnaic discussion^d of the joyous, almost abandoned way in which Jews should celebrate the festival of Purim, the Mishnah records a ruling that Jews are to drink so much on Purim that they cannot distinguish

between “Blessed be Mordecai!” and “Cursed be Haman!” (*Megillah* 7b). It is the one time in the year Jews are admonished to get drunk. This ruling alone may explain the absence of sacred elements from the version of the story that has come down to us in the Hebrew Bible. A later editor may have removed all religious elements lest, when the story was being told, they be profaned by drunken revelers.

5. Isn't the story immoral? Doesn't the festival of Purim commemorate the massacre of innocent women and children?

Certainly many critics have claimed that. More than one scholar has opined that Queen Vashti, who refused to appear before King Xerxes and was deposed for her refusal, is the only decent person in the story. The other major characters are deceitful and cruel, their hands full of blood. Vashti at least had the good sense—and decency—not to degrade herself by appearing before a bunch of drunken, reveling men. (Some ancient Jewish exegetes interpreted Esther 1:11—where we are told that Vashti was ordered to appear “wearing the royal turban”—to mean that she was to appear in *only her royal turban*, i.e., naked!)

Ingenious efforts have been made to explain away the embarrassing fact that 75,000 people, including innocent women and children, were massacred on Adar 13, the date Haman fixed for the massacre of the Jews (Esther 9:16). Recently Robert Gordis has argued that, contrary to over 2,000 years of universal agreement on the matter, Mordecai's royal edict in Esther 8:11 *did not* grant Jews permission to kill innocent noncombatants. Rather, the phrase “along with their women and children” in 8:11 referred to the *Jews' women and children*, not their enemies'.

While such an explanation is perhaps comforting, in that it eliminates a vengeful and vindictive phrase incompatible with Judaism, Gordis's interpretation is probably not correct. For one thing, the destruction of enemy men, women and children is perfectly consistent with the principle of peripety, the sudden reversal that appears as a basic rhetorical theme throughout the entire book. In Esther 3:13 Haman's decree permitted the annihilation of “all the Jews—men and boys, women and children.” The sudden reversal occurs in Esther 8:11, where the Jews are given permission “to defend themselves” by slaughtering their enemies, “those who were hostile to them, along with their women and children.” It seems unlikely that the last phrase refers to Jewish women and children who may defend themselves against their enemies.

The author of Esther, like many a modern person, would probably argue that Haman had initiated an all-out war of extermination against the Jews, a Holocaust if you will, that demanded an exceedingly strong response. From time immemorial, when it comes to a nation's or a people's survival, winning is evidently everything. While some philosophers and theologians may decry the axiom “All's fair in love and war,” the historian knows and the average person suspects that, for better or worse, mankind has nearly always played by that rule. The Allied bombing of Dresden or the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki is now perceived by many Americans as an immoral act—now that we have the luxury of reexamining our conduct in a war we long ago won. While both

Judaism and Christianity certainly decry murder and assassination, I suspect that many decent, law-abiding Jews and Christians devoutly wish that the foiled assassination plot against Hitler had succeeded.

But when all is said and done, many Jews are probably as embarrassed by the vengeful, blood-thirsty, measure-for-measure retaliation of Esther 8:11 and 9:16 as Christians are embarrassed by the cry of the Crusaders who, on attacking a certain “infidel” city containing “innocent” Christians, cried, “Kill them all! God knows his own!” In any event, the festival of Purim celebrates not so much the destruction of the enemy as the deliverance of the Jews (Esther 9:21–22), an important distinction to remember.

6. How did the Book of Esther manage to get into the Bible?

It probably wasn’t easy, for the book has been controversial from the beginning.

Apparently, the Book of Esther was not acceptable to the Jews who collected the famous Dead Sea Scrolls in their library at Qumran (c. 150 B.C.–68 A.D.) on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea. At least fragments of every book of the Old Testament *except Esther* have been found at Qumran. Moreover, the festival of Purim, the *raison d’être* of the Book of Esther, was not part of the liturgical calendar observed at Qumran. So it may well be that the Book of Esther was not considered part of their Bible.

Moreover there is no evidence that the Book of Esther was accepted as canonical by the Jewish Academy of Jabneh (the Council of Jamnia), which considered the content of the Jewish canon about 90 A.D.

Although there is evidence that it was considered part of the Jewish canon by the rabbis of the Academy of Ousha in about 140 A.D. and by other rabbis in about 200 A.D., there were rabbis in the third century A.D. and possibly even in the early fourth century who were still contesting its canonicity.

By contrast, the great Jewish scholar Maimonides (1135–1204 A.D.) ranked Esther as second only to the Five Books of Moses. And among extant medieval manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible, copies of the *megillah* are especially common, thereby attesting to the book’s great popularity among Jews.

Nevertheless, Esther continues to have its Jewish critics, even today. The Israeli exegete S. Ben-Chorin advocated abandoning the book and the festival of Purim. The American Rabbi Samuel Sandmel confessed that he would “not be grieved if the Book of Esther were somehow dropped out of Scripture.”

Given the book’s mixed reviews among Jews, we shouldn’t be surprised to learn that Christians have reacted much the same way. While the Church Fathers in the West seem to have accepted the book as canonical, a number of Eastern Church Fathers excluded Esther from the canon.

The view of Martin Luther (1483–1546) is well known and oft-quoted: “I am so hostile to this book [2 Maccabees] and to Esther that I could wish that they did not exist at all; for they judaize too greatly and have much pagan impropriety” (*Table Talks*).

7. Is there even more than one version of Esther?

Yes, the Greek edition of Esther was translated for the Jewish community of Alexandria sometime between 114 and 78 B.C. and is part of the Septuagint. It differs very significantly from the received Hebrew text (the Masoretic text).

For one thing, the Septuagint (LXX) contains six major passages, consisting, of 107 verses, not found in the Masoretic text (MT). Scholars refer to these additions as Adds A, B, C, D, E and F. Because these Adds are not in the Hebrew text, Jerome relegated them to the end of the book in his Latin translation of the Bible known as the Vulgate. In the Vulgate these Adds constitute Esther 11–16. At the time of the Reformation, these Adds were stamped as apocryphal and were rejected from the Protestant canon. However, Roman Catholics, at the Council of Trent in 1546, reaffirmed the canonicity of the Adds, and therefore they continue to be part of the Catholic Bible as chapters 11 through 16.

What do the Adds add?

A dream of Mordecai's in which the events of the story are foreshadowed (Add A); the king's edict, dictated by Haman, authorizing the extermination of the Jews (Add B); a prayer of Mordecai and of Esther (Add C); an account of Esther's appearance before the king (Add D); the king's edict, dictated by Mordecai, counteracting Haman's edict against the Jews (Add E); and an interpretation of Mordecai's dream recounted in Add A in which the various details of the dream are explained (Add F).

To complicate the textual problems of Esther still further, there are two very different Greek versions of Esther.³⁶ In addition to the Septuagint version, there is the so-called Lucianic recension. These two Greek versions both contain the Adds, but they are different from one another in other respects. The Lucianic recension is a translation of a Hebrew text that is quite different at some points both from the Hebrew text presupposed by the Septuagint and by the Hebrew text ancestral to the received text. The Septuagint translation is a "literary" translation; it translates freely rather than literally, sometimes to the point of being paraphrastic. The translator preserved the content but not the exact wording of the Hebrew text. The Lucianic recension is shorter and omits passages found in the Septuagint.

While Jerome's Vulgate collected the Adds at the end of the book, as chapters 11 through 16, the Septuagint and Lucianic texts preserve the Adds in their original position, so that we know from where, within the text, they were taken.

In the Adds, Esther comes through as a more religious person than in the Masoretic text; her character and personality are more fully developed in the Adds; she is less two-dimensional than in the Hebrew account. For instance, not only does Esther acknowledge in her prayer her great fear and trepidation at the thought of approaching the king unannounced, but when she actually appears before him, "her heart was pounding with fear" (Add D:5b); and as the king "looked at her in fiercest anger, the queen stumbled, turned pale and fainted, keeling over on the maid who went before her" (Add D:7). As the king holds her in his arms, she is revived and says to him, "My Lord, I saw you like an angel

of God, and I was upset by your awesome appearance. For you are wonderful, my lord, and your face is full of graciousness" (Add D:13). All this is in sharp contrast to Esther 5:1–2 of the Hebrew text, where the Queen appears calm, cool and collected.

On the other hand, the Adds transform what is essentially a story of court intrigue or ethnic rivalry into a universal antagonism between Jew and gentile. In Mordecai's dream, "two great dragons" contend, "every nation got itself ready for battle that it might fight against the righteous nation, and a "mighty river arose" (Add A:4–8). This is explained in Add F:3–8 as symbolizing Mordecai and Haman (the two great dragons), *all* the gentile nations and Israel (the nations who prepare to fight the righteous nation) and Queen Esther (a mighty river). What in the Hebrew text had been a struggle between Mordecai and Haman becomes in the Greek—by virtue of the Adds—a universal and cosmic struggle where *all gentiles are enemies of the Jews*. Small wonder the Jews of antiquity rejected the Esther version with the Adds.

Finally, in the Greek version, the king's attitude toward the unannounced Esther constitutes the climax: "Raising his face, flushed with color, the king looked at her in fiercest anger. ... But God changed the king's spirit to gentleness" (Add D:7a, 8:a).³⁹ The Hebrew text, on the other hand, emphasizes the establishment of Purim, which, according to chapter 9 of the Hebrew text, is the *raison d'être* of the entire story. Not surprisingly, the Church Fathers, who knew the Greek version or the Latin Vulgate, rather than the Hebrew account, also stressed Esther's courage or God's miracle in changing the king's response from anger to gentleness, rather than the establishment of Purim, a Jewish festival not adopted by the Christian church.

8. I've heard that the story of Esther is patterned on the story of Moses and Exodus. Is this correct?

That's what Gillis Gerleman of Germany has argued; and if he's right, that is another reason to question the historicity of the story. Gerleman contends that:⁴⁰ "All the essential features of the Esther narrative are already there in *Exodus* 1–12: the foreign court Egypt], the mortal threat [Pharaoh's decree that all male Hebrew children are to be killed], the deliverance [the plagues and passing through the Red Sea], the revenge [the ten plagues] the triumph [the drowning of the Egyptians], and the establishment of a festival [Passover]."

According to Gerleman, not only were the plot and central theme of Esther patterned after the Exodus narrative, but even its details were. Thus, Esther (like Moses) was an adopted child who concealed her Jewish identity. Esther (like Moses) was at first reluctant to intercede for her people, and approached the king several times. As Moses was responsible for the death of many of his people's enemies, so was Esther. As Moses had great trouble with the Amalekites (*Exodus* 17:8–26), so did Esther—Haman was an Agagite (Esther 3:1), a descendant of Agag the Amalekite (*1 Samuel* 15:8). These are but a few of the details, in Esther that, according to Gerleman, were patterned after the Exodus narrative.

Thus far, Gerleman's thesis has gained little scholarly support.

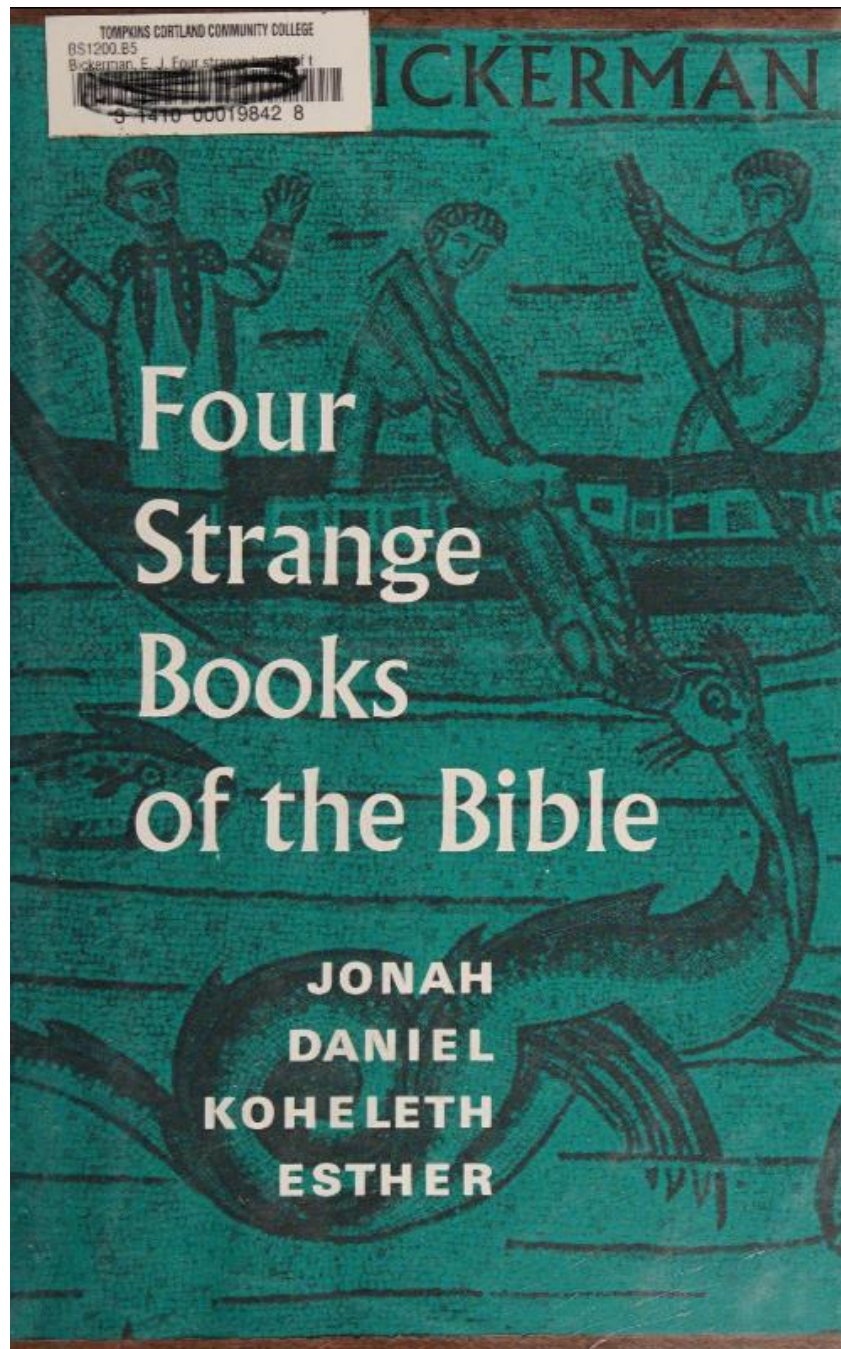
The consensus of scholars seems to be that while there may be a core of historicity to the Esther story (that is there may have been an Esther/Hadassah who on some occasion saved her people, and an unrelated story of court intrigue featuring a Mordecai), the plot and its details were prompted by literary considerations rather than by the Exodus narrative, as suggested by Gerleman.

If the Book of Esther does have a kernel of truth then kernel like a grain of sand in an oyster shell, has been covered over by layer upon layer of lustrous material.

Appendix F:

Four Strange Books of the Bible

Elias Bickerman, Schocken Books, New York, 1967 (from archive.org)



Four Strange Books of the Bible

JONAH / DANIEL / KOHELETH / ESTHER

Elias Bickerman

SCHOCKEN BOOKS • NEW YORK



The Double Plot

THE Scroll of Esther narrates how the plan to slay all the Jews in the Persian Empire was thwarted by a providential interposition, how the Jews in self-defense annihilated their enemies, and how a feast of deliverance was instituted. This feast, Purim, is still celebrated by the Jews.

The straightforward style of the narrative gives it the appearance of a factual report. An ancient Christian commentator, however, makes us realize the complexity of the biblical book:¹ he asks why the Book of Esther bears her name although the principal character in the story is Mordecai. (In fact, in II Maccabees 15:36 Purim is called "the day of Mordecai.") His answer is that she was a queen and ready to sacrifice her life for her people. The commentator reproduces the rabbinical question and answer of which only the latter has been preserved in Jewish tradition. After saying that three things are called after Moses, the anonymous source of the Midrash on Exodus 30:4 adds: "and similarly Esther risked her life for Israel, and they [some things] were called after her and it is written: to make supplication before him [the king] for her people" (Esther 4:8).

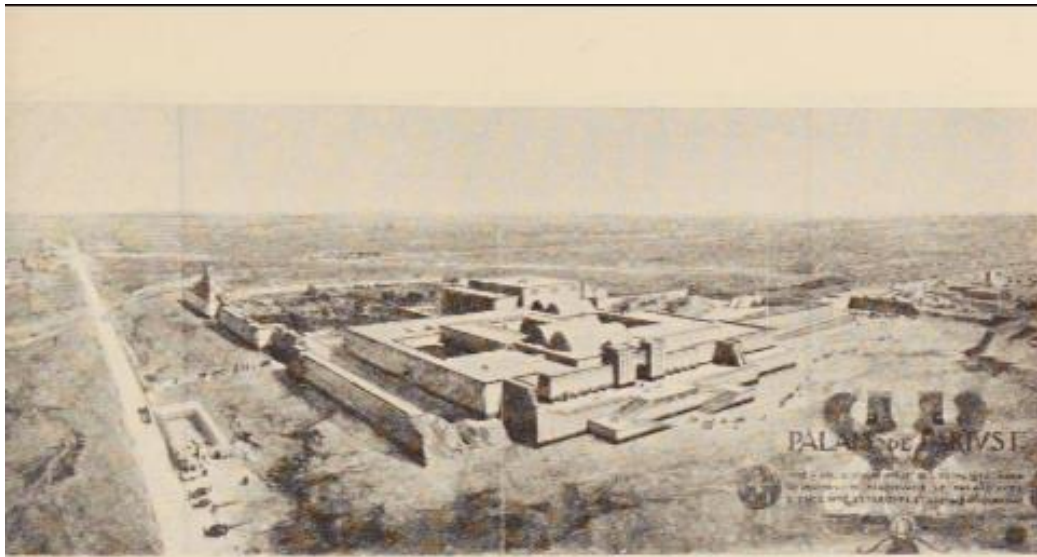
As often in ancient interpretations of venerable texts, be it Bible or Homer, it is not the solution but the problem posed which is important. The ancient readers read seriously and took their texts seriously. Their ear heard every dissonance. The problem of the title of the Book of Esther, once formulated, makes the structure of

this book evident. It has two heroes because it has two plots. In the first, Esther, a Jewess, becomes a Persian queen, but the enmity of Haman, the king's vizir, endangers her position and life. She succeeds in saving herself and her people and in bringing Haman to the gallows. In the second, Mordecai, a Jewish courtier, is hated by the vizir Haman. The latter prepares the gallows for his enemy but by accident the king discovers Mordecai's past services and orders Haman to honor his rival. In other words, the book has two heroes and two plots, but the villain is the same in both. The author combined two plots and two tales with extraordinary skill, but some stitches are apparent. Thus, though both the king (6:10) and Haman (5:13; 6:13) know that Mordecai is a Jew, they remain ignorant of the race of Esther, who is the cousin and adopted daughter of Mordecai.



Mordecai's Pride

Let us first examine Mordecai's story. The theme is taken from Oriental court life and from the Oriental novel. It is the struggle between the vizir who is established in royal favor and a new dashing courtier, a man from nowhere who by his cleverness and by chance outwits the vizir and in turn becomes the favorite of the king. The last story of the Arabian Nights tells how Marouf, a cobbler of Cairo, lying and scheming, becomes a son-in-law of the khalif; how the khalif's vizir warns his master and for a time succeeds in his evil designs; and



A reconstruction of the Persian Palace at Susa, by M. Pillet, the architect of the French excavations there. Although somewhat fanciful, it gives an idea of how the palace might have looked. In the foreground, the gate where Mordecai sat as royal courtier. In the background, the marble audience hall. Lower buildings, in brick, contained the king's private apartments, the harem, service quarters, etc.





Fresco in the Dura-Europos synagogue, painted c. 245 C.E. Left: Mordecai, in regal Iranian garments, rides a white steed, led by Haman, dressed as a stable boy. Right: Ahasuerus and Esther (identified by Aramaic inscriptions) occupy the throne, attended by courtiers. In the center, four bystanders.

how at the end, with the help of his wife the princess, Marouf overthrows the vizir.

We can trace the theme back at least to the seventh century B.C.E. An Aramaic book, already read in the fifth century by the Jews at Elephantine, at the southern end of Egypt, and which became extremely popular later (its hero appears on a Roman mosaic in Germany), tells the story of Achiqar. From a Babylonian text composed in 171 B.C.E. we now know that "Ahuqar" was the name given by the Arameans to Aba'enlidarli, a Babylonian who was the "sage" at the court of Esarhaddon of Assyria (680-69).² In the present Aramaic version he is placed for some reason under Sennacherib (704-681). Chief minister of the Assyrian king, Achiqar is brought down by the intrigues of his nephew Nadab. Condemned to death, he is saved by his executioner whom he had obliged on some occasion; he remains hidden in the dungeon and reappears when the king is in dire need of his wisdom. His nephew is put into the same dungeon, where he dies.

There are numerous variations on this popular theme. It is used twice in the cycle of Daniel's tales (ch. 3, 6). The theme charmed the Christians in the Middle Ages no less than the Arabs listening to the stories of Scheherezade, and it passed into folklore: a falsely accused minister reinstates himself by his cleverness, a variant also known from Persian sources.³ The folk tale mirrored life. At every court, from the palace of Esarhaddon to the White House, the best way of advancement is to trip up one's chief. The difficulty for the inventor of Mordecai's story was how to make his rise to power attractive to the hearer, who generally does not like upstarts. Of course the reader can be amused by a knave like Marouf, but the tale of Mordecai was for its

author not a story of the Arabian Nights, but a new example of divine favor to the Chosen People.

Mordecai is a courtier. He lives in the royal citadel at Susa and sits, like Daniel before him (Dan. 2:49), "in the king's gate" (2:21; 6:10; 6:12), that is, at the entrance to the royal palace where the officials received petitioners and dealt with government business. In Greek sources the term "the Royal Gate" means the court of the Persian king. For a similar reason, the government of Turkish Sultans was known in Europe as "the Sublime Porte." The visitor at Persepolis, one of the capitals of the ancient Persian Empire, having passed the double gate of the palace, can still sit on the stone benches once used in the days of Ahasuerus by Mordecai and his fellow courtiers.

At the gate, Mordecai learns of the conspiracy of two eunuchs who were guardians of the threshold. Since the eunuchs had direct access to the royal apartment, they were particularly in a position to slay the monarch. The eunuch Bagoas poisoned Artaxerxes Ochus (338), had his successor Arses assassinated (336), tried to poison Darius III (336), and was compelled by the latter to drink poison himself. On the other hand, the plot of Darius to kill his father, Artaxerxes Memnon, in his bed chamber was betrayed by a eunuch. The framework of the Egyptian collection of wise sayings by Onchscheshonqy is the story of a plot against the life of the Pharaoh. A conspirator speaks of the plot to Onchscheshonqy and a guard overhears the conversation. The plotters are thrown into a flaming furnace and Onchscheshonqy is put into prison.⁴ In the Esther story Mordecai denounced the plot, the eunuchs were hanged, but nothing was done for Mordecai, although the Persian kings set great store on rewarding their benefactors. It seems that in Mordecai's tale the delay was explained by

the selection of virgins for the royal harem, which happened at this time. The compiler of Esther preserves the rudimentary motif but since he has already narrated the gathering of the girls among whom Esther was chosen (2:3), he now (2:19) speaks of the "second" selection, an expression that puzzles commentators. (The rabbis thought the new bevy of virgins was called to make Esther jealous.) It is a motif which often occurs in Oriental stories and also in Persian history that the monarch in his fondness for the concubines neglects the affairs of state.

As the continuation of the story shows (ch. 6) and as tales of the Arabian Nights illustrate, the right reward for Mordecai would be to promote him to chief minister, but the forgetful king exalts Haman, and all the servants of the king who are in the gate of the king must reverence Haman, whose seat is placed above all the grandees who are with him (3:1). As an ancient Jewish commentator noted, this was an act of ingratitude with regard to Mordecai.⁵ Now we understand how the narrator can side with Mordecai against Haman, the royal minister, who has appropriated the rank which rightfully belongs to Mordecai. So Mordecai never bows or pays homage to Haman (3:2). The commentators misunderstand Mordecai's behavior. The Greek translator makes Mordecai say (in an insertion in ch. 4) that he is unwilling to make the worshipful gesture to any but God. Mordecai here refuses to follow the Persian etiquette, which appeared impious to the Greeks. Josephus invents a Jewish law forbidding one to pay obeisance to a mortal man. The rabbis imagined that Haman had an idolatrous image on his robe, or had been a former slave of Mordecai, and so on.

In fact, Mordecai fights for his honor. A man from whom the due reward is withheld by the king protests

even if it should cost him his life, as happened to the men who struck down the pretender Cyrus the Younger and dared to say that Artaxerxes II had appropriated the glory of their deed. The Persians kissed their equals on the lips, and kissed the cheek of a person of lower rank. The inferior man meeting a grandee raised the forearm of the right hand and kissed it.⁶ The reliefs of Persepolis illustrate this gesture. For Mordecai to pay this respect to Haman would be to "lose face" and acknowledge the new rank of his rival.

The other officials tried to reason with Mordecai but he paid them no heed, though he was transgressing the royal commandment (3:3-4). Then they informed Haman, who in the crowd of flatterers obviously had not noticed Mordecai's behavior. They went to see whether "the words of Mordecai would stand up," that is, as Jerome rightly understood, whether Mordecai would dare to affront the vizir openly. (The compiler of Esther here inserts the notice that Mordecai told them he was a Jew; he needs it to link the two plots, of Mordecai and of Esther.) Haman naturally becomes angry when Mordecai openly defies him (3:5, repeated 5:9). Now he has lost face. He consults his friends (5:14) and decides to hang Mordecai on a gallows fifty cubits high so that everybody can see how he punishes the offender of his honor. The next morning he plans to obtain from the king the condemnation of Mordecai (5:14). But on this night the king cannot sleep and orders the court diaries⁷ read to him (6:1). When an Oriental king is sleepless, he wants to be amused. Harun al-Rashid in the Arabian Nights calls a poet or a storyteller to entertain him. From the court journal the king learns how Mordecai has saved his life, and hears from his attendants that nothing has been done for Mordecai. When Haman comes to the royal levee to demand Mordecai's head,

he is first asked by the king what should be done to a man whom the king would like to honor. Haman, of course, thinks that the honor is for him and suggests that the royal robe be given to the man to be exalted. This was an exceptional favor. The king now charges Haman to bestow the decoration on Mordecai. This indicated the coming downfall of Haman. As a matter of fact, he ends on the gallows which he has prepared for Mordecai (7:10), just as Nadab is thrown into the dungeon of Achiqar. We do not know how it actually happened. Haman's end was told in the original story of Mordecai. The compiler, combining Esther's and Mordecai's tales, omitted the relevant part of the latter. Did Mordecai tell the king that Haman had been involved in the conspiracy of the eunuchs? The Greek version adds that Haman sought to destroy Mordecai because of the two eunuchs of the king. But it may be only a guess of the translator.

We have here a typical tale of palace intrigue that could as well find a place in the Persian histories of Herodotus and Ctesias, or in the Arabian Nights. The only Jewish element of the tale is that, according to the author, Mordecai is a Jew. The name occurs in Babylonian documents of the Persian period as Mar-duk-a and also appears in the list of the Jews who came back to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:2). But the name, which means "man of Marduk" or "worshiper of Marduk," the principal god of Babylon, is not Jewish at all. We may wonder whether the hero of the original tale was a Jew.



Harem Intrigue

The tale of Esther parallels that of Mordecai. This time it is the queen who brings about the downfall of the vizir. The theme is again common in annals and legends of the Oriental courts. Under Khalif al-Mustansir (1036-94) a Jewish leader through influence of the queen mother overthrew a vizir. Roxolana, the famous concubine of Suleiman the Magnificent, made and unmade vizirs. For instance, Ahmed, Suleiman's brother and omnipotent minister, was murdered in the seraglio on March 15, 1536. The chronicles of the court of the Persian kings, as recounted by Ctesias, the Greek physician of Artaxerxes II (405-359), are full of conflicts between royal ministers and the king's wife or mother. These tender females torture, flay, and crucify the favorites of the king, generally eunuchs, who on his order have executed some relatives of the princesses.

In the present text the conflict between the queen and the vizir is accidental. Haman does not know that Esther is Jewish, but his edict against the Jews threatens her life, as Mordecai makes clear (4:13). But this cannot be her motive in the original tale of the conflict. Oriental Jews, followed by the great Moslem savant al-Biruni, knew the habits of Oriental courts and rather imagined that the queen wanted to save her cousin Mordecai from Haman's vengeance. The rabbis, in the same vein, supposed that Haman wanted to marry his daughter to the king, and for this reason they identified him with the

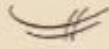
councilor who advised the king to repudiate Vashti, his first wife (1:16). But in the book it is not Haman who plots against Esther but she who traps Haman. This is also the theme of the above-mentioned incidents in Persian annals. For instance, the eunuchs of the queen mother Parysatis trick Mithridates, whom she hates, into offending King Artaxerxes II by his boasting, and he is put to death by the king. Likewise, in the Book of Esther, Haman is a thoughtless victim of the queen's cunning. A significant remnant of the original Esther tale seems to have been preserved as a rudimentary motif in 7:8. At the second banquet, during a momentary absence of the king, Haman gets up from his seat to beg Esther for his life. When the king re-enters he sees Haman "fallen upon the couch" of Esther. Since it was a deadly crime even to approach a royal concubine, the rabbis could not understand Haman's gesture. They surmised that the angel Gabriel gave him a push. But by falling upon the couch of Esther, Haman hoped that the queen would protect him with her own body, as Parysatis saved Cyrus the Younger by interposing herself between her guilty son and the royal guards. In the present setting, where Esther is Haman's accuser, the scene makes no sense. An accuser at the Persian court did not waste pity on a fallen foe, for the simple reason that the forgiven enemy would have no forgiveness himself: Cyrus the Younger, pardoned by Artaxerxes II, wanted to avenge his humiliation.

By his foolish act Haman forfeited his life, and was put to death without further ado. Similarly, in 333, Charidemus, a Greek in Persian service, was suspected by the king's friends of conspiring with Alexander. He offended Darius III by his words. The king touched his belt, and Charidemus was dragged off; his throat was cut while he was still appealing to the king. (That Haman

was hanged on the gallows made for Mordecai comes from the story of Mordecai.)

In the Bible, Esther, chosen among the virgins brought into the seraglio, becomes queen. Kings' concubines were selected from among "all the women of Asia," as they still were for Alexander centuries later. But the queen came from the royal family or one of the seven princely houses. In the original tale Esther was only a concubine. For thirty days she did not have the honor of the royal couch (4:11)—the women of the harem were sent to the king in regular turns—and she could not come to the king except on his summons. Nobody but the heads of the seven princely houses and the king's wife and mother (as Persian court stories show) was allowed to approach the king without invitation. Eunuchs barred the entry to the men's apartments in the palace. To obtain an audience, it was necessary to approach the chief of the royal guard who was also the head of the administration, or to be favored by an influential eunuch. Esther could not make her request to Haman, nor would a eunuch risk his life, or at least his position, by bringing an unwanted concubine to the king. For the Persian king regarded everybody, except his wife, as a slave.⁸

In the harem Esther kept hidden the secret of her kinship and her people. This could be done and was done. For instance, the future mother of Harun al-Rashid presented herself as an orphan and did not inform the khalif about her family until after the birth of her two sons.⁹ In the present setting, there was no reason for Esther to keep the secret. If in the original tale she was the daughter or sister of some rebel put to death by the vizir, her discretion and her hate for Haman would be natural. But here we leave the field of conjectures to enter the fairy-land of guesses.



The Story of Vashti

To make the rather trite story of the conflict between the harem and the chancellery more exciting, the author of the Esther tale prefaced it with the story of Vashti. The king makes a feast for his people. The Assyrian king Ashurbanipal celebrated the completion of his royal residence by a banquet for 69,574 guests, as he himself relates; and Ctesias mentions a banquet for 15,000 guests given by Artaxerxes II. On the seventh day, "when the heart of the king was merry with wine" (1:10), he ordered Vashti the queen to be brought, to show the people and the grandees her beauty. It is the Candaulus theme, as Voltaire and Gibbon noted, and as the rabbis believed, saying that Vashti was to appear naked. King Candaulus of Lydia praised the beauty of his wife to everybody, and to prove that she was the fairest of all, without her knowledge gave a friend of his an opportunity to view her naked. He lost her and his life. According to the rabbis, Vashti told the king: "If I come before the lords of the kingdom they will kill you and marry me." By custom, the wedded wives could be present at Persian dinners (Neh. 2:6). But they left when the drinking bout was to begin.¹⁰ At this time, concubines and courtesans came in. At Belshazzar's feast (Dan. 5:2) only harem women and concubines are present. The queen comes into the banquet hall only when Belshazzar is endangered by the writing on the wall (Dan. 5:10).

By coming to the king's party, Vashti would lose face, she would degrade herself to the position of a concubine. But her refusal poses a grave legal question. In the Persian view, the king is the Law himself. This was the answer of the royal judges when Cambyses wanted to marry his sister.¹¹ Was Vashti to be allowed to violate the "law" (1:15)? Thus the Candaulus theme passes into another folklore theme: the test of a wife's obedience to her lord. The legal advisers tell the king that Vashti, if pardoned, would make all women flout the orders of their husbands—again the motive is that of losing face. The king accordingly degrades Vashti to the status of a concubine—"she may not come before the king" (1:19)—and explains his decision in a manifesto that reminds women to honor their lords.



The Contamination of the Two Plots

Whatever was the origin of the two tales we have tried to reconstruct, in Jewish folklore the hero and the heroine naturally became Jewish. Later, Jewish readers of the Esther book were embarrassed by the behavior of this Jewish queen who obviously disregards the ritual food laws and does not feel out of place in the harem of a heathen. Lysimachus, the author of the Greek Esther, as early as c. 80 B.C.E. makes Esther say that she abhors the bed of the uncircumcised, does not partake of the food offered, and has had no joy since the day of the change of her destiny. The rabbis assured themselves¹²

that in the embrace of Ahasuerus, Esther remained inert like a clod. Christian theologians spoke in this vein of the attitude of the Holy Virgin during the conception of the Savior.¹³ The Persian Jews, proud to imagine that one of their kin became chosen by their absolute Lord and Master from among all the virgins of the empire, did not pay attention to these ritual reservations. Nor did the pious Jews of Poland condemn Esterka, the mistress of King Casimir III (1333-70).

Having heard two parallel tales about a Jewish courtier and a Jewish queen who struggled with and overthrew the evil minister of their sovereign, the author of the Book of Esther thought that the stories represented two complementary versions of the same events and accordingly combined them. This was the standard method of ancient writers, who, believing that there is only one truth and that it is attainable, equated and confounded various reports of some historical happening. The rabbis compared the stories of Joseph and Esther. The biblical history of Joseph is also composed of two strains: Joseph is sold by his brethren to the Ishmaelites, yet he is drawn out of the pit by the Midianites who sell him to the Ishmaelites, and so on.

In Jewish folklore, Mordecai the Jewish courtier somehow figured as the savior of the Jews of Susa from some plot of Haman. As we have mentioned, the 14th Adar was sometimes called "the day of Mordecai." The author of the Book of Esther rearranged both popular tales so that his work could become the authoritative explanation of the feast of Purim. He succeeded in this task.

Esther is now the adopted daughter of her uncle Mordecai, and she always takes his advice (2:20). Through his wisdom (2:15) and her own good judgment, she obtains the favor of the head eunuch, pleases

the king, and is made queen in the place of Vashti (2:17). Here the author introduces the conflict between Haman and Mordecai.



Haman

Modern commentators anachronistically misinterpret Haman. A German theologian who in Hitler's time had the courage to defend the Book of Esther said that it set the Jewish problem with absolute precision.¹⁴ But there is no "Jewish problem" in the Scroll of Esther. Dante understood the book better. On the terrace of anger in Purgatory he sees victims of blind fury. Procne punished her husband, who had outraged her sister, by killing her own son and serving him as a meal to his father; Amata killed herself because her daughter had been married against her plans. Between them was the crucified Haman, and beside his gallows were Ahasuerus, Esther, and the just Mordecai who was of perfect rectitude in word and deed. In our organized society, we rarely encounter fits of rage and "seeing red." But ancient philosophers wrote extensively on anger, and Dante knew well that proud wrath avenges an insult. Darius I suspected his friend Intaphernes of conspiring against him. He put him and all his kin to death. Haman wanted to kill Mordecai and his whole tribe "the people of Mordecai" (3:6), be they Jews or, say, Kurds, to wash out in a sea of blood the stain of a public insult.

Ahasuerus, the Shah, is like a modern general who gives routine approval to the reasoned opinion of his

chief of staff. Haman argues as follows (3:8): "There is a certain unimportant people,¹⁵ scattered and separated among the peoples of the realm. Their laws differ from the laws of all other peoples." The inference is that the king may proceed against this people without endangering the general peace of the empire. Secondly: "The laws of the king they do not observe." This marks them as subversive. Darius I and Xerxes again and again, and in identical words, stress the "law" or "laws" of the king as keeping the multinational empire together. This law should be feared so that the strong do not destroy the weak. Enumerating his provinces, the Great King adds that by favor of the supreme god Ahuramazda these countries show respect toward his law.¹⁶

In both his arguments, Haman implies that "it is not suitable for the king to let them rest [as they are now]." There may be various solutions to the governmental problem posed by the sagacious vizir. For instance, Persian kings often transplanted unruly subjects into some other province. But since the people in question are already scattered, this measure would not help. So Haman proposes to destroy them, and he offers to pay 10,000 talents of silver to the royal treasury. As Josephus noted, this is the head price for the people who might have been sold as slaves for the profit of the king.



Haman's Edict

According to the Babylonian view accepted in the whole Near East, at the beginning of each year the gods

predetermined men's destinies. When the sixth day came, "lucky lots" were distributed by Heaven among the earth's inhabitants. For this reason the Persians called this day "the day of hope."¹⁷

The author of the Book of Esther believed, and rightly, that the word "Purim" means "lots" (3:7). He therefore supposed that Haman, insulted by Mordecai, awaited the next New Year's festival period (probably Nisan 6th) to cast lots before him to find out the favorable day for his vengeance. Afterwards, he went to the king to obtain the royal consent to his decree, and sent copies of the order into all the king's provinces on the thirteenth of the first month (3:12).

Purim, however, was celebrated in Adar, the twelfth month, and thus the author of the Book of Esther had to place the date of the massacre eleven months after the issuance of Haman's decree. This delay did not trouble the author or his readers. The synchronization of administrative actions demanded time in the conditions of ancient technology. In 88 B.C.E. Mithridates VI of Pontus ordered a general slaughter of "all who were of Italic race," men, women, and children of every age, in the Roman province of Asia which he had just conquered. The killing was to be done at the same time everywhere, namely on the thirtieth day after the date of the royal order. The Roman province of Asia covered the western part of Asia Minor. Ahasuerus, however, reigned over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia (1:1). Haman needed much more time than Mithridates to bring about the simultaneous massacre on the given day in all these provinces. An order of Antiochus III, issued in February, 193 B.C.E., was forwarded by his viceroy in Iran on June 25th.¹⁸

Mithridates' orders to satraps and cities were sealed.

The construction of the plot in the Book of Esther demands that Haman's orders be made public immediately. Thus, from Voltaire on,¹⁹ modern authors wonder why the Jews did not use the months between Nisan and Adar for attacking their enemies or simply for flight.

Yet the author of Esther like a Puck complicates the problem: Mordecai's counteracting edict is issued on the 23d day of the third month (8:9). If Haman terrified the Jews for some seventy days, Mordecai keeps both the Jews and their enemies in suspense for almost nine months. The problem of delay was solved by Bossuet. In his fifth "Avertissement" to the Protestants (1690) he contrasts the conduct of the Jews with the later plots against Louis XIV. The Jews, even in danger of extermination, did not undertake anything against their lawful sovereign. In the Persian view, the king ruled by the will of the Creator. As Xerxes said, "Ahuramazda gave us the earth, the sky, the mankind, and he also made Xerxes rule the multitude." Darius said that the subject countries were given him by Ahuramazda. "What was said unto them by me either by night or by day, was done."

In the political theology of the Persian kings, their will was identical with truth and righteousness, the attributes of the Supreme God. A rebel was also faithless, and his insubordination a "lie."²⁰ Thus, to quote Bossuet again (*Histoire universelle*), the Jews could only hope that, touched by their tears, God would change the heart of Ahasuerus.

Esther became the instrument of salvation. The rabbis made Ahasuerus reproach the queen for having concealed her origin. Had he known it, he would not have given the order for destruction. But in Esther's Scroll the king does not even know the name of the people to be destroyed. He does not even seal (that is, ratify) the

decree. Trusting in his minister, he gives him his signet ring (3:10). But Haman does not know that the queen is Jewish and thus he falls into her trap.

It is unnecessary to dwell on the decision of Esther to come to the king uninvited, to tell again how her charms conquered Ahasuerus—various painters (Tintoretto, Veronese, Rubens, Poussin, Claude Lorrain) and Racine understood the magical effects of the scene—nor to repeat what has been said about the fate of Haman. Mordecai succeeded him as vizir, and the tables were turned in favor of the Jews.



Mordecai's Decree

After the fall of Haman, Esther asked Ahasuerus to annul Haman's decree, but the king answered that the royal order signed with the king's ring is irrevocable (8:8). The idea that the royal word is unalterable comes from theology. Of Oriental gods it is said again and again that their decision is unalterable. A capricious and fickle omnipotence would be insufferable. "A human king," say the rabbis, "may choose whether or not to obey his own decree. But if God issues a decree, He is the first to obey it."²¹

In this respect, the Oriental kings imitated the gods.²² It means not that every utterance of the king was unchangeable but that "the statutes of Persia and Media," could not be changed. In expressing this idea, the authors of Daniel (6:9, 6:13) and of Esther (1:19) use the Persian loan-word *dat*. To become a statute, the order

must be in writing and the writing ratified by inscription of the royal name by means of the royal seal, as we learn from Daniel 6:9-11 and Esther 8:8. According to Esther 1:19, the decree, to become irrevocable, must also be entered "into the statutes of Persia and Media." In the present state of our ignorance of Persian institutions we are unable to check the exactness of these data.

Unable to cancel Haman's decree, the new vizir must circumvent it. Thus, to understand Mordecai's edict we have first to realize the legal effects of Haman's edict. Haman does not mobilize royal forces against the Jews. The central government and its satraps would be unable to cope with the task of organizing and carrying out a massacre on the whole territory of the immense empire. But Haman's edict, published in all the provinces, marks the Jews as outlaws. The protection of the king is withdrawn from them. They may be killed and deprived of property by anybody with impunity. Mithridates outlawed the Romans in the same way, but added that the bodies of the victims should remain unburied.

An outlaw became a common enemy. It was fitting to cleanse the land from his contamination. When Antiochus III executed his vizir Hermias, the latter's wife was killed by women and her sons by boys of the city of Apamea. Therefore, Haman calls on "all peoples" in Ahasuerus' empire to slay the Jews. Likewise, the Greek cities of Asia and city mobs carried out the massacre of Romans as ordered by Mithridates. Both Haman and Mithridates addressed their letters not only to the royal governors but also to the local authorities: "to the lords of every people" (3:12). Likewise the massacre on the day of St. Bartholomew (Aug. 24, 1572), though plotted by the court and approved by Charles IX, was organized by the magistrates of Paris on his order.

Mordecai's edict grants the right of self-defense to

the outlawed Jews. They may gather and "stand for their life." They may (with impunity) kill those who would "harass" them, their wives and children, and plunder their goods. The edict describes these would-be enemies as "all armed forces of people and provinces" (8:11) and the letters were prepared to every province in its script and to every people (translated) in its language (8:9; cf. 1:22; 3:12).²³ We may again note the massacre of the Romans in the Greek cities of Asia and the day of St. Bartholomew, on which the "provost of merchants," sheriffs, and aldermen of Paris assembled and armed the citizenry to kill the Huguenots.²⁴ Following the edict of Mordecai the Jews "laid hands upon such as sought to harm them" (9:2). Their enemies also attacked (9:16), but were defeated, and the Jews could "avenge themselves upon their enemies."

The royal government remained neutral. No mention is made of royal forces called to destroy or to protect the Jews, although in the end, because of Mordecai, the provincial governors helped the Jews (9:3) as they would have aided their enemies if Haman had still been at the helm of the empire. (In III Maccabees, a book written in the highly centralized Egypt of the Ptolemies, the Jews are rounded up by royal forces and are to be massacred by royal elephants.)

The neutrality of the king amid a civil war in his empire may seem to us absurd. To the ancient Persians who boasted that anyone could travel unmolested through the empire it would seem absurd that the omnipotent governments of today remain neutral in labor conflicts which close all ports of the country.

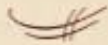
Ancient empires were far from being omnipotent. They were, indeed, weak superstructures. Man's first loyalty was to his tribe or his city, and feuds between cities and tribes were endemic. Describing the army of

Vespasian marching against Jerusalem, Tacitus mentions "the band of Arabs hostile to the Jews whom they hate as is usual between neighbors." Tacitus was a Roman senator living in the age when the emperors maintained with difficulty the *pax romana* on the whole earth from London to Baghdad. The Persian kings did not and could not have the same ambition. They intervened in petty wars of subject peoples haphazardly and for opportunist reasons. Letters of Artaxerxes II compelled his satrap Datames to raise the siege of Sinope. The same king listened to the appeal of three cities of Cyprus threatened by the ambitions of Euagoras of Salamis after the latter had reduced other cities of Cyprus. Under Artaxerxes I, Nehemiah, the royal governor of Judea, begins to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The neighboring Samaritans led by the royal governor Sanballat, the Arabs, the Ammonites on the other side of the Jordan, and the city of Ashdod on the Mediterranean coast form a coalition "to come and fight against Jerusalem . . . slay them and make the work cease" (Neh. 4). Nehemiah mobilizes the people and comforts the Jews by appealing to God's awful might. He does not appeal to Artaxerxes II.

Mordecai's edict established parity between the Jews and their enemies. In the ensuing war, the Jews won. Who were these enemies? The author does not say and does not need to say. In a society where every tribe remained a separate unit but where at the same time men of various tribes lived in the same localities and rubbed shoulders with one another, frictions were inevitable. The Jews, like any group, had their enemies, and Haman's edict would naturally swell their number and lead to an explosion of greed and hate: blood and booty are powerful means of recruitment. In turn the Jews hate and kill their enemies. The author tells about it with the detachment of a reporter and the satisfaction of a man of folk

wisdom: "Who digs a pit shall fall therein" (Prov. 26:27). A famous German nursery tale describes with pleasure how Gretel threw the witch into her own oven.

But the Book of Esther breathes no hate against the Gentiles. On the contrary, the author goes out of his way to isolate Haman, to show that his decree was an act of personal vengeance. Even his wife and his advisers warn him (6:13). The king was deceived by Haman: it is significant that Haman does not name the people he wants to slay in his report to the king. When Haman's edict was published, the city of Susa was grieved (3:15), and the same city rejoiced at Mordecai's appointment (8:15).



Haman, the New Amalek

Yet the story has a second plan. As Josephus understood, Haman and Mordecai followed the law of vendetta. Haman was an Agagite, a descendant of the king Agag of the Amalekites, who had been captured by Saul and slain on the insistence of Samuel. He is of the race of which the Torah says: "The Lord will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (Exod. 17:16), and again "You shall blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven" (Deut. 25:19). Mordecai is a descendant of Saul. The personal conflict of two courtiers is also a part of the providential plan. As Rabbi Levi, a Palestinian of the fourth century, explained, had Saul not spared Amalek there would have been no Haman.²⁵

The author did not need to labor the point. The

mention of Kish, Saul's father (I Sam. 9:1), at the end of Mordecai's genealogy (2:5) and the statement that Haman was an Agagite (3:1) oriented the readers. They understood that while the decrees of both Haman and Mordecai allowed each side to take the spoils of the adversary, and that while Haman counted on the booty (3:13)—"We are sold," cries Esther to the king (7:4)—the Jews did not plunder their victims (9:10). They were not selfless, but remembered that the Amalekites, the most ancient foes of Israel, should be utterly destroyed (I Sam. 15:21) with their spoils. On this second level, we may say by hindsight that the issue of the conflict is foreordained. The reader knows in advance that Amalek cannot destroy Israel.

Readers may well wonder why in a book in which the Persian king and kingship are mentioned some 250 times, God is never mentioned; why, except for the fast appointed by Esther before her going to the king (4:16), no religious action is referred to. The Greek translator accordingly interpolated long prayers and other religious trappings. But for the author of Esther, the merit of salvation belongs not to Esther, or Mordecai, or the Jews of Susa, or to their tears and supplications, but to God alone who pursues His plan independent of human wishes or fears. He saves the Jews of Susa and of the Persian Empire not for their sake but because their would-be slayer is a cursed Agagite. Matthew Henry, nonconformist New England divine, wrote in his *Exposition of the Old and the New Testament* (1704): "Though the name of God is not in it, the finger of God is, directing many minute events for the bringing about of His people's deliverance." And he quotes the Psalm (37:12): "The wicked plots against the righteous, and gnashes his teeth at him; but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for He sees that his day is coming."

Israel should never forget that Amalek had attacked the faint and weak at the rear of Israel's train marching in the wilderness (Deut. 25:18). But that does not mean that God knew that from Agag would rise an adversary of the Jews, as the rabbis said with reference to Haman.²⁶ This resuscitation in contemporary history of the primeval history of a nation is foreign to the mentality of the ancient Near East. As late as the fourth century, for the Chronicler (I Chron. 4:42) the destruction of the rest of the Amalekites in the time of King Hezekiah had no symbolic meaning.

The recurrent influence of motifs of the hoary past is rather a Greek peculiarity. In 480 the Cretans ask the Delphic Oracle whether they should take part in the Persian war. Apollo replies that they are fools. Though the Greeks had not paid for the death of the Cretan king Minos in Sicily, the Cretans fought in the Trojan war to exact retribution for the rape of Helen, and then were punished by famine and pestilence. Euripides is said to have been bribed by the Corinthians to make Medea (and not the Corinthians) kill her sons in his tragedy. Agathocles of Syracuse replied to the Corcyrans that he devastated their land because their forebears had received Odysseus who had blinded the Sicilian Polyphemus.²⁷ After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. the rabbis, in the Greek manner, identify Rome with Amalek and Esau, who was Amalek's grandfather (Gen. 36:12).

In their view, the deliverance of the Jews of Susa and Persia from a new Amalek became a part of the universal pattern of history. Purim should be kept yearly by all the Jews and by all who should join themselves to them everywhere and forever (9:27). Though the Book of Esther is the only one in the Bible and among the Apocrypha that contains no reference to the Holy Land, it was translated into Greek in Maccabean Jeru-

saalem to make it accessible to the whole Diaspora. In 78/77 this "Epistle of Phurim" (cf. 9:30) was brought to the Jews of Alexandria and registered there. The Synagogue reads the condemnation of Amalek (Deut. 25:17) on the Sabbath which precedes Purim.



Purim

Yet the Book of Esther is not a *Te Deum* of triumph, and Purim does not commemorate a victory, or even a deliverance. The Greeks often established a commemorative feast. For instance, the city of Oxyrhynchus in Egypt, two centuries after the event, continued to celebrate a victory over the Jews during the great Jewish rebellion of 117 C.E. In the same Greek style, after the victory over Nicanor, a general of Demetrius I of Syria, the Jews of Jerusalem in 160 B.C.E. founded an annual commemoration of their success. But Purim is celebrated by feasting and gladness and sending dainties to one another on the day which follows the battle. It is a day of feasting which became a "day of pleasure" (9:19).²⁸ This is strange. The Passover is celebrated on the day on which Israel came out of Egypt (Exod. 13:3) and not the next day. But the author of the Book of Esther did not understand the feast whose origins he wanted to explain.

The explanation may lie elsewhere. Young men form bands which fight one another just for the sheer pleasure of fighting and of breaking routine. In our organized society this universal phenomenon of immature power is treated as juvenile delinquency. The pre-industrial world

channelized much of youthful passion by making its expressions, such as the fist fights between two groups, a part of some general festival. The theologians hallowed the same phenomenon by giving it a magical significance. In Babylon a battle was conceived as taking place annually between Tiamat, the force of Chaos, and Marduk, the divine patron of Babylon, at the New Year festival in Spring.²⁹ Hittite texts of the second millennium B.C.E. describe the Autumn festival of the god Yarris at which the young men were divided into two bands, "men of Hatti" and "men of Masa," which fought each other. Of course, the "men of Hatti" won and devoted a captive to the god. Such sham fights are often referred to in classical and medieval sources and were common in Europe until our century.³⁰

Modern scholars taking the ritualist trappings for the real thing imagine that these mock conflicts were seasonal rites originally representing the victory of Summer over Winter, and so on. Ancient scholars preferred a historical interpretation. For instance, the Persians celebrated an uproarious—"bacchic," as the Greeks said—festival of *Sacaea*. Greek (or native) savants concluded from its name that this festival commemorated the victory over the Sacae, a Scythian people. According to one version, heard at Zela in Pontus, the Sacae on one of their raids plundered Zela, got drunk, and were killed to the last man by Persian generals, who then established the festival in honor of the goddess Anahita. According to another version, the Sacae celebrated a victory and on this occasion were cut to pieces by Cyrus. Another Persian festival, celebrated at Susa, was explained as the commemoration of "the slaughtering of the Magi" after the overthrow of a Magus who, passing himself off as Smerdis, brother and successor of King Cambyses, for two

years occupied the throne (522–520). On that festival day no Magus dared to appear in the streets. In a later interpretation, Alexander was charged with murdering the Magi.³¹ As a matter of fact, the whole story of Pseudo-Smerdis seems to have been a propaganda trick of Darius I, who killed the successor Cambyses. According to Darius, this happened in Media. But the local tradition, repeated by Herodotus, placed the death of the Magus at Susa, to give a quasi-historical explanation of a seasonal festival. Ritual combats between two halves of the same tribe or two parts of the same town were common in Iran. In Moslem times such combats developed into fights between Shiites and Sunnites, between different Sunni movements, between different sects, and so on. For instance, the anniversary of the death of the hated Khalif Omar (634–644) was yearly celebrated in Persia. The populace cursed Omar and at times an Armenian was hired to impersonate him.³²

In Susa, the Jews were numerous and rich and proud of their city, the ancient capital of Persian kings. A relief on a gate of the Herodian Temple in Jerusalem represented the city of Susa.³³ Their seasonal mock fight was performed for two days, the 13th and the 14th Adar, that is in the early Spring, just a month before Passover. In the surrounding villages the Jews, less rich and less numerous, had the same performance on one day only: the 13th Adar. The bands were called "the Jews" and the anonymous "enemies" and, of course, "our side" triumphed. This was a good omen, and in the evening, that is, according to the lunar reckoning on the next calendar day, the Jews happily rested and enjoyed the "day of pleasure." The Jews of Susa also told stories about a beautiful Persian queen of Jewish race who overthrew a vile vizir and about a wise Mordecai, who likewise cast

from power an evil vizir, became minister himself, and, of course, "sought the good of his people, and worked for the welfare of all his kindred" (10:3).



The Purim Tale

A Jew from Susa, writing probably in the second century B.C.E. (see p. 187), combined the two popular stories and used them to explain the Purim feast of Susa and its countryside. The operation produced some duplications which perplex modern scholars. They ask, for instance, why, after the execution of Haman and the elevation of Mordecai, did Esther need to supplicate the king to counteract Haman's massacre order (8:3-7)? But it was Esther who in the folk tale had saved her kin. The author of the Scroll, a master of literary craft, knew how to add the charm of variety to his parallel accounts. As the Greek version and rabbinical commentaries show, ancient readers did notice repetitions and contradictions in the Scroll. Its author had two heroes and had to explain two different dates of Purim: the 14th Adar in villages (9:19) and the 15th Adar at Susa. He made Mordecai take care of the provincial Jews (9:2-5) and, as in the original Mordecai's tale, execute Haman's sons (9:7). This involved the destruction of the enemies in "the fortress of Susa" (9:6), that is, the royal residence, and explained the mock fights of the 13th Adar in Susa and the countryside. But in Susa, the ritual battle continued on the 14th Adar. This gave the author the occasion to assign a role to Esther: she obtains from the

king the permission to continue the fight on the 14th Adar in order to clean up the city (not the fortress) of Susa, and to hang Haman's sons (9:12-14). (The catastrophe of the hateful vizir in the Esther tale naturally involved his kin.) In this way the author adroitly separates the parallel actions of Esther and Mordecai in time and space.

Chronological discrepancies are more disconcerting. Esther's marriage falls in the seventh year of Artaxerxes (2:16), but Haman's decree was issued in the beginning of the twelfth year of the same king (3:7). This five-year gap is unexplained and is unnecessary in the present narrative. The author, professing to write history, probably found both dates in his sources.

As we have mentioned, Purim was originally a feast of the Jews at Susa and its countryside. The country Jews who dwelt in unwalled places celebrated Purim on the 14th Adar (9:19) whereas the Jews of Susa kept it on the 15th (9:18). But the author of the Scroll wants to make this local feast recognized by all Jews. Accordingly, he makes Haman and Mordecai issue a general order and a counterorder concerning all "the 127 provinces" of the realm, and speaks generally of the "cities" in these provinces (9:2), and again summarizes this universal danger for the Jews (9:2-5) to explain the institution of Purim on the 14th Adar (9:5). Again, having two heroes, he can twice develop his ecumenical appeal. First Mordecai sends the message to the Jews in all the provinces of the realm to keep the 14th and the 15th Adar (here the author generalizes the ritual difference between the Jews of the City of Susa and the dwellers in its countryside. Then Esther and Mordecai write again to "confirm" the celebration of Purim on the appointed days. It was "the commandment of Esther" which gave the statutory quality to the festival. For this reason her letter was recorded

in "the roll" (cf. Ezra 6:2), that is, the register of royal acts (9:31-32).

It is remarkable that the orders coming from Susa are supplemented by the resolutions of the local Jewish communities. The Jews "impose on themselves and accept" what Mordecai has written to them (9:23, 27), and they are called to "institute" the celebration of Purim as they had ordained "for themselves and their seed" fastings in bygone times (9:31).³⁴ Thus, at least theoretically, they could also refuse to accept the festival, but they agreed "not to transgress" this obligation forever (9:27). We are no longer in the Persian Empire but in the Hellenistic Age. Each community of the Diaspora is an independent unit. In the same manner, according to III Maccabees, the Jews of Egypt, delivered from a great peril, decide to celebrate the anniversary of the event. The supposititious letter of Judah Maccabaeus to the Jews of Egypt at the beginning of II Maccabees offers a parallel to the Purim Scroll. Judah allegedly going to establish Hanukkah tells relevant events, and suggests to the Jews of Egypt that they will do well if they also keep this festival. Again, the apocryphal Book of Baruch (in the Greek and Latin Bibles) was allegedly sent by the Jews of Babylonia to the Jews of Jerusalem to be read in the Temple.

Greek cities and devotees, in the same way, made propaganda for their respective gods and published records attesting their power. But in idolatrous worship, a man, say the Egyptian priest Apollonius, could bring "his god with him" at Delos. A transmission of a new festival meant the introduction of a new cult. The cities rather preferred to become places of pilgrimage to their shrines. The God of the Jews was omnipresent, although His sacrificial worship had to be performed in Jerusalem. Thus, a new Jewish festival could be accepted in other

Jewish communities. In the same way many Christian feasts, for instance those in honor of the Blessed Virgin, started as local celebrations, were imitated elsewhere, and then became ecumenical. The Jews of Susa and of Persia gladly accepted the scroll that flattered them and perfectly agreed with the historical sight of the age. For instance, the Greek inhabitants of Lampsacus narrated that the first settlers had learned from the daughter of the king of their barbarian neighbors that the latter planned to attack and slay them because of envy and fear. Under the pretext of sacrifice, they made the plotters come into the *faubourg* of the city, destroyed them, named their city after the benefactress, and lived happily ever after.

The triumph of the Hasmoneans made the Book of Esther particularly welcome to the Dispersion. They too could now boast of divine intervention on their behalf. They read in the book that after the appointment of Mordecai, "many of the peoples of the earth" (Deut. 28:10) "gave themselves out as Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them" (8:17). The promise given to the Chosen People in the Holy Land (Exod. 23:27) was also fulfilled in the Diaspora: if you will obey God's commandments, God will lay the fear of you upon the nations (Deut. 11:25).

A Hebrew-reading Jew of Greek culture found everything he could desire in the Book of Esther. Here the people whom God saved were no longer the uncouth patriarchs and the wild prophets but men of polite society who could have held office at the Hellenistic court. The king who, as a rabbi later said, sacrificed his (first) wife to a friend and then his friend to his (second) wife, who could promise to grant any request (5:3), and who would refuse money offered him (3:11) looked like a double of a Seleucid, a Ptolemy, or a Parthian ruler. The reader was happy to find in a Hebrew book motifs fa-

miliar from the Greek school. Mordecai advising Esther to go to Ahasuerus was like Otanes in Herodotus instructing his daughter Phaedyne, a concubine of Pseudo-Smerdis, to learn the latter's true identity. Like Esther, Phaedyne hesitates to risk her life; like Esther, she obeys her outside master; like Esther she wins.³⁵

The Esther Scroll also offered the attraction of local color, a feature much in demand by Hellenistic readers, who enjoyed historical novels about bygone royalty, be it Ninus of Assyria or Esther of Persia. Touches stressing the Persian background of the story also impress the modern reader of Esther. As a matter of fact, most of these details are rather permanent features of Oriental despotism. The shahs seen by J. B. Chardin (1643-1713) during his stays in Persia are like Ahasuerus. The reader of his voyages feels the atmosphere of the Book of Esther. A French missionary of the eighteenth century could offer a very instructive "parallel between Chinese manners and the Book of Esther."³⁶

Some court ceremonies remained essentially the same over millennia. Giving royal garments as a reward (6:8) was practiced by the Macedonian rulers of Persia as well as by the shahs in the seventeenth century. Genesis (41:43), Esther (6:11), I Maccabees (10:62), and the traveler Chardin all describe how the man honored by the king was led through the city by royal officers proclaiming his merits. Receiving the royal signet (3:10; 8:2), marked the elevation to viceregal authority in the days of the Pharaohs (Gen. 41:42) as well as in the age of Alexander and his successors.

As a matter of fact, the author's knowledge of the Persian court is not precise enough. The king set Haman's seat "above all the lords who were with him" (3:1). Thus, Haman appears as a great vizir, the foremost man of a collegiate government similar to or identical with the

council of seven in Esther 1:14. As a matter of fact, the man "next to the king" (10:3) was the commander of the bodyguard and for this reason functioned as his representative and his chief officer. This "chiliarch," as the Greeks translated the Persian title, held "the second rank in power," as a Latin author says. The chiliarch was "the most trusted man," as Herodotus tells us.³⁷ The military position of Haman probably explains why Esther invited him twice and attacked him only at the second banquet (7:1). She had first to lull Haman's suspicions. Otherwise, the commander of the pretorians might be able to get rid of her and of the king himself. Xerxes, called Ahasuerus in the Bible (cf. Ezra 4:6) was assassinated in 465 by the commander of his guard. But the author of Esther's Scroll did not understand the hints in his source. He lived in the Hellenistic age and his Seleucid king had a sort of Secretary of State for all departments.

The author wrote before 78/77 B.C.E., the date at which the Greek version of his Scroll was brought to Alexandria.³⁸ Thus, he must have lived in the second or third century B.C.E. But if his exact date as yet remains uncertain, there can be no doubt as to the place of his activity. A man who wrote to make a festival of Susa ecumenical was a man of this city. Several Greek authors of the same age tried to render the same service to their respective cities. For instance, a decree of Chersonesus, in the Crimea, praises the local historian Syriacus for having reported the wondrous deeds of the city goddess.³⁹

The topographic references in the Scroll of Esther are rather general. Every palace would have gates (2:19; 4:6; 5:9), inner and outer courts (4:11; 5:1; 6:4), and gardens (7:7). The "broad place of the town" before the palace gate (4:6; 5:9), again, has no definition. Unfortunately, the palace area was excavated at a time when archaeological method was as yet unknown. Today the

visitor at Susa finds only deep pits burrowed by the excavators in the flank of the mounds. But the author of Esther exactly and rightly distinguishes between *Shushan ba birah*, "the fortress of Susa" (2:5; 9:11. Cf. 1:2; 3:15; 8:14), where the palace stood, and *ba ir Shushan*, "the town of Susa" (3:15; 8:15), which lay at the foot (eastward) of the acropolis. Modern commentators imagine that the author here committed an error. They are misled by the terminology of the French excavators, who called the southern mound "acropolis" and the northern mound "palace." In fact, the "fortress of Susa" probably embraced both hills. In any case, Nehemiah tells us (Neh. 1:1) that he, just like Mordecai after him (2:5), lived in "the fortress of Susa."

As a man of Susa, the author of Esther could easily find picturesque traits such as the twelve months of cosmetic preparation for every new concubine of the king (2:12) in the folklore of the ancient capital of the Achaemenids, where the palace built by Darius still dominated the city.⁴⁰

Southeast of Susa the semi-independent rulers of Elymais (Elam) continued the Achaemenid tradition. Farther southeast, some twenty days of caravan travel from Susa, in the heart of Persia proper, at Pasargadae there was another semi-independent Persian court. As the coin legends of these principalities show, their official language was Aramaic, that is, the mother tongue of the Eastern Jews in the Hellenistic age, the language currently spoken also in Susa. (In a Greek hymn written at Susa, Apollo is called *mara*, that is, "Lord" in Aramaic.) Vocabulary and syntax of the Book of Esther betray Aramaic influence.⁴¹

Susa obeyed the Macedonian Seleucids until c. 147 B.C.E., when the city came into the hands first of a king of Elymais, then of the Parthians. But even if the author

of Esther wrote before c. 147, he lived in an environment that was permeated by Iranian traditions. The Persian administrative terms he uses were loan words in Aramaic—he does not need to explain them. The thirty-odd Persian personal names in the book, such as Memucan (1:16), the Zoroastrian name meaning “good thought,” he could find by looking around among his Iranian neighbors.⁴² But his heroes Mordecai and Esther bear Babylonian names. Mordecai is named after Marduk, the tutelary deity of Babylon. Esther is Ishtar, the Venus of the Babylonians. The Jews of the Hellenistic age did not scruple to give this kind of name to their children. Often a Jew had two names: a Jewish one and a Greek, e.g., Jonathan/Apollonios. Thus, the author says (2:7), that Esther was also called Hadassah. Hadassah is generally understood as “myrtle” but it was probably a Babylonian word meaning “bride.”⁴³

“Ishtar who dwells in Susa” was worshiped in the Persian capital, but the main deity of the city was Nanaia, called Artemis by the Greeks. The author, however, wanted to stress the Babylonian origin of Mordecai and Esther. As in the case of Daniel (Dan. 1:13), it was desirable for a Diaspora family to descend from the people who were carried away with Jehoiakim, king of Judah, in 597 (Esther 2:6), because this captivity included the nobility of Jerusalem (II Kings 24:12) while the deportation in 586 concerned the commoners (II Kings 25:11). As Mordecai and Esther symbolized the Jewry of Susa, the author indirectly flattered his community.

The Book of Esther had a beautiful heroine and a royal romance, just like Greek love novels, and like them contained no unseemly word. Beautifully written, the Scroll offended no one. Except Haman, there is no evil man, and, as the great Austrian playwright Grillparzer (1791–1872) wrote, if Haman represented vainglory

Mordecai represented pride.⁴⁴ The success of this "best seller" was such that in Alexandria someone soon invented a parallel story: Ptolemy Physcon (c. 144 B.C.E.) decides to destroy all the Jews of Alexandria but they are saved by the intervention of his favorite, Irene.

The authorities of the Holy Land never granted the status of a holy day to Purim. The *Hallel* (Psalms of Praise, 113-8, recited every morning of the Hanukkah festival) is not recited in the Synagogue on Purim, nor is manual work forbidden on that day. Though the Scroll of Esther was read in the Synagogue before 70 C.E., the recital of the usual benedictions before and after the reading was unknown as late as 200 C.E., and is not mentioned before 400 C.E. In fact, the rabbis objected to Esther's and Mordecai's presumption in establishing a national festival arbitrarily.

But the literary success of Esther's Scroll carried Purim to triumph. It is significant that the Scroll is the only portion of Scripture that may be read in any language in the Synagogue. It is no less indicative that all Purim rules of the rabbis were based on the Scroll.⁴⁵ Later, when the dark age came and real Hamans played the role of the fictitious Agagite so efficiently, Purim and Esther and her Scroll became the palladium of the Diaspora. For the Marranos who had to hide their true faith, Esther was the symbol of their own fate. In her *Corinna* (1807) Madame de Staël relates that the Jews of Papal Rome refused to pass under the Arch of Titus, the destroyer of Jerusalem. She adds: "I hope the anecdote is true. It would honor the Jews. Long remembering goes with long sufferings." (*Les longs souvenirs conviennent aux longs malheurs.*)

NOTES TO ESTHER

1. G. Mercati, "Osservazioni a proemi del Salterio," *Studie Testi*, CXLII (1948), p. 48, n. 1. It was this observation of a Byzantine scholiast that revealed to me the composition of the Book of Esther. I alluded to it in my "Notes on the Greek Book of Esther," *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research*, XX (1951), p. 124, and lectured about it at Yale in February, 1963. In the meantime, several scholars came independently to a similar conclusion. See H. Cazelles, in *Festschrift H. Junker* (1961), pp. 17 ff., and H. Bardtke, "Das Buch Esther," in *Kommentar zum Alten Testament*, XVII, 4, 5 (1963), p. 250. We have been preceded by some playwrights of the sixteenth century who separated the Mordecai and Esther themes. See F. Rosenberg in *Festschrift A. Tobler* (1905), p. 337.

2. H. Lenzen (ed.), *XVIII Vorläuf. Bericht über die Ausgrabungen in Uruk-Warka* (1962), p. 58.

3. A. H. Krappe, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, LXI (1941), p. 280; E. Benveniste, *Mélanges R. Dussaud* (1939), II, 249.

4. S. R. K. Glanville, *Catalogue of Demotic Papyri in the British Museum II* (1955).

5. I. Katzenellenbogen, *Das Buch Esther in der Aggada*, Diss. Würzburg (1913), p. 12. The Haggadists represented Haman as an upstart (*Megilla* 16a).

6. *La Parola del Passato* 91 (1963), p. 241. The gesture of obeisance at the Sassanian court was to prostrate oneself before the king and kiss the ground before him. Cf. W. Sundermann, *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Orientforschung* (Berlin Academy), X (1964), p. 245. Cf. J.-B. Chardin, *Voyages en Perse* (Collection 10/18), p. 59, describing the ceremonial of the royal audience: "se mettre à genoux aux pieds du roi, à quelques pas de distance, et se prosterner trois fois la tête en terre."

7. Cf. Plutarch *Themistocles* 13: at the battle of Salamis,

the scribes near Xerxes' seat "recorded the incidents of the battle." Cf. R. A. Bowman, *American Journal of Semitic Languages*, LVIII (1941), p. 302; Ezra 4:15; and on the royal ephemerids generally, see my observations in *Aegyptus*, XVIII (1933), pp. 350 ff. The Persian kings kept a record of their benefactors (Herodotus 8. 85), but the Book of Esther speaks of the "ephemerids."

8. Herodotus 3. 77; Plutarch *Ad Principem Ineruditum* 2.

9. N. Abbott, *Two Queens of Baghdad* (1940), p. 29.

10. Plutarch *Coniugalia praecepta* 16; *Artaxerxes* 26; Macrobius *Saturnalia* 7. 1. 3.

11. Herodotus 3. 31.

12. Abaye in *Sanhedrin* 74b. I owe the explanation of this passage to Boaz Cohen. He refers to *Baba Kama* 28b and *Niddah* 27b, where the same expression (*karke olam*) is used by Samuel.

13. *Harvard Theological Review*, LVIII (1965), p. 133.

14. Wilhelm Visher, *Das Buch Esther* (1937), p. 14.

15. On the expression *'am-³echad* (3:8) as meaning "unimportant," cf. H. J. Flowers, *Expository Times*, No. 66 (1954-55), p. 273. Of course, "one" is sometimes equivalent to the indefinite article. But in our passage, *'am-³echad* explains the indifference of the king as to the massacre proposed by Haman. Ahasuerus does not care and does not need to care which is the anonymous "insignificant" people spoken of by Haman.

16. R. G. Kent, *Old Persian* (1953), p. 189.

17. al-Biruni, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, trans. E. Sachau (1879), p. 201. On the meaning of the word "Purim," see J. Lewy, *Hebrew Union College Annual* XIV (1939), p. 125.

18. L. Robert, *Hellenica*, VII (1949), p. 22.

19. Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, ch. 27. Cf., e.g., J. G. Eichhorn, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (3rd ed.; 1803), II, 637.

20. M. Smith, *JAOS*, LXXXIII (1963), p. 14; Molé, *Le problème zoroastrien*, p. 27.

21. S. Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (1942), p. 144.
22. Cf. E. Szlechter, *Revue internationale des droits de l'antiquité*, XII (1965), p. 63.
23. Cf. J. Lewy, *HUCA*, XXV (1954), p. 169.
24. A decree of the Parliament of Paris issued on June 30, 1562, allowed everybody *prendre, tuer et massacrer* those who pillaged churches or who favored the pillards. Encouraged by this decree, the mob killed Protestants. Piguierre, *L'histoire de France*, Book VI, 12, p. 413, of the (anonymous) edition printed in 1581. According to J. W. Thompson, *The Wars of Religion in France* (1909), p. 213, the same Parliament on May 2, 1562, invited all the Catholics to organize a military league against the Huguenots.
25. *Midrash Esther*, Introduction 7, p. 2b in "Horeb" edition (1924).
26. *Megillah* 12a, 19a.
27. Herodotus 7. 169; *Scholia in Euripidem Medea*, vs. 9. 264; Aelianus *Variae Historiae* 5. 21; Plutarch *De Sera Numinum Vindicta* 557 f.
28. F. Rosenthal, *HUCA*, XVIII (1944), p. 157.
29. W. C. Lambert, *Iraq*, XXV (1963), p. 189.
30. J. G. Frazer (*The Scapegoat*, 1913) was the first, I believe, to recognize that Purim was a seasonal feast. Now cf. T. Gaster, *Purim and Hanukkah* (1960), p. 15; Gaster, *Thespis* (1961), p. 267. It does not mean, of course, that every detail of Esther's story should be explained as mirroring seasonal rites. Mordecai was no temporary "carnival" king. Demaratus of Sparta also obtained the privilege of having the Persian crown placed on his head and being led through the city in the same manner as the king (Plutarch *Themistocles* 29). When, in 1388, Richard II caused the Earl of Suffolk to sit next to him in royal robes, it provoked no little envy against Suffolk (F. R. Scott, *Speculum*, XVIII [1943], p. 84).
31. W. Henning, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1944), p. 133; M. A. Dandamaev, *Iran Under the First Achaemenids* (1963), p. 151 (in Russian).

32. S. G. Wilson, *Persian Life and Customs* (1893), p. 201. On the duality of ancient Iranian society and the ritual combats that followed from this duality, cf. Molé, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

33. *Mishnah Middot* 1. 3. Cf. E. Unger, *Babylon* (1931), p. 81.

34. Modern commentators find here a reference to the fast on Adar 13th, which commemorates the fast ordered by Esther for the Jews of Susa before her going to the king (4:16). But the pre-Purim (or sometimes post-Purim) fast is first mentioned in post-talmudic times. H. L. Ginsberg gave me a new explanation of the passage. In 9:30, the expression "words of peace and truth" are borrowed from Zech. 8:19. The prophet promises that four days of fast shall become days of joy. The "fasts" spoken of by Esther (9:31) are these "fasts" of Zechariah (7:3, 5; 8:19). The Jews, having adopted these fasts to commemorate their misfortunes, ought now adopt the new holidays to remember their deliverance.

35. Cf. A. H. Krappe, *American Journal of Philology*, LIV (1933), p. 260.

36. Cibot in *Mémoires concernant l'histoire des Chinois*, XIV (1789). In the reign of Mahomet Khudabanda of Persia, the royal decrees were sealed by the Queen Mother (cf. Esther 9:32). H. Busse, *Untersuchungen zum islamischen Kanzleiwesen* (1959), p. 55. Cf. also V. Minorski, *Persia in A.D. 1478-1490* (1957), p. 108.

37. J. Marquart, *Philologus*, LV (1896), p. 228.

38. *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXIII (1944), p. 339.

39. M. Rostovtzev, *Klio*, XVI (1920), p. 203.

40. Cf. G. Le Rider, *Suse sous les Séleucides et les Parthes* (1965), p. 392.

41. Cf. G. Widengren, *Iranisch-Semitische Kulturbeziehungen in Parthischer Zeit* (1960). On Aramaic in western Iran, the use of which is attested as early as the eighth century, cf. A. Dupont-Sommer, *Iranica antiqua*, IV (1964), p. 108. In the Hellenistic period, Aramaic became a vehicle of the Zoroastrian faith (*ibid.*, p. 120).

42. J. Duchesne-Guillemain, *Le Muséon*, LXV (1953), p. 106.
43. J. Lewy, *HUCA*, XIV (1939), p. 129.
44. F. Grillparzer, in the prose outline of his drama *Esther*. *Gesammelte Schriften* (R. Backmann, ed.), III (1946), p. 149.
45. S. Jampel, *Die Beurteilung des Estherbuches*. Diss. Bern (1905), p. 5.
46. It seems that only the Abyssinian church gave Esther a place on its calendar. But the story of Esther is hopelessly confused in Ethiopic tradition. Cf. E. A. W. Budge, *The Book of Saints of the Ethiopic Church*, II (1928), p. 404.
47. *HTbR*, LVIII (1965), p. 150.
48. M. Luther, *Tischreden*, Nos. 3391, 475 (Vol. XXII of the Weimar edition). Luther I, p. 5; IV, p. 499 (Weimar edition).
49. N. S. Doniach, *Purim* (1933), p. 190; J. Knox, *History of the Reformation in Scotland* (W. C. Dickenson, ed.) (1949), I, 79. The letter of Pius V is quoted in Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 213. J. L. Morley, *The Rise of the Dutch Republic*, III, ii.
50. Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, ch. 27; J. Orcibal, *La genèse d'Esther et d'Athalie* (1950), p. 21; J. Lichtenstein, *Racine poète biblique* (1934), p. 22.
51. R. Schwartz, *Esther . . . in Drama . . . des Reformationszeitalter* (1899); F. Rosenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 333; E. Forsyth, *La tragédie française de Jodelle à Corneille* (1962), pp. 169 ff., 228 ff.
52. J. G. Carpzow, *Introductio ad libros . . . Veteris Testamenti* (1731), p. 368.
53. S. Maréchal, *Pour et contre la Bible* (1803), p. 74.
54. J. S. Semler, *Apparatus ad liberam V. T. interpretationem* (1773), p. 152.
55. W. M. L. De Wette, *Introduction to . . . the Old Testament* (1843), I, 339.
56. H. Taine, *History of English Literature*, Book V, iv; A. Geiger, *Nachgelassene Schriften* (1876), I, 170; J. P.

Peters, *The Religion of the Hebrews* (1914), p. 24; H. H. Rowley, *The Growth of the Old Testament* (1950), p. 154.

57. P. Heinisch, *Theology of the Old Testament* (1955), p. 215; G. E. Wright and R. H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God* (1960), p. 208.

58. L. B. Paton, *The Book of Esther* (1908), p. 297; De Wette, *op. cit.*, p. 339. On the influence of De Wette in New England, cf. S. Puknat, *Proceedings of the American Philological Society*, No. 102 (1958), pp. 376 ff.

Appendix G:

Two Misconceptions About the Book of Esther

Bruce Williams Jones, *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (April 1977), pp. 171-181
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43714268>

The Book of Esther has been popular among Jews, but for centuries Christians have regarded it with hostility because of its apparent cruelty and Jewish nationalism. Martin Luther wished that the book did not exist because it “Judaized” and because it contained too much “pagan impropriety.” Down into the present century, many have argued that “Christianity . . . has neither occasion nor justification for holding on to it.”¹ More recently, liberated women have found reason to dislike Esther because of the chauvinistic attitude toward women which they see in it. In the present paper, I shall argue that (1) the objection to the status of women and (2) the objection to cruelty and nationalism in the book are misguided. Both stem from a common source, namely, not paying sufficient attention to the humorous nature of the book.

Humor is integral to the author’s intent. One of the purposes of the book—underlying the more obvious purpose of justifying Purim—is to reconcile Jewish readers to their status as a minority among gentiles, whose attitudes toward Jews may vary unpredictably from honor to persecution. W. Lee Humphreys has said, rightly, that the book illustrates a “life-style for diaspora.”² The book is written for Jews who are subject to gentile rulers. The author intends to show them how to survive in such a situation. There is no agreement about the precise date of the book, but the contents

¹ Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) 511, 512. Jews, too, have been offended by the book. Samuel Sandmel says, “I should not be grieved if the book of Esther were somehow dropped out of Scripture.” *The Enjoyment of Scripture* (New York: Oxford, 1972) 44. For an extended discussion of the issue, see Carey A. Moore, *Esther: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 7B; Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) xxi-xxxi.

² “A Life-style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel,” *JBL* 92 (1973) 211-223. He notes the way figures such as Nehemiah, Joseph, Ahiqar, and Daniel, as well as Mordecai and Esther, are models of persons who remain loyal Jews while functioning creatively in gentile courts. The last verse of Esther praises Mordecai’s ability to serve both the gentile and the Jewish communities. In my opinion, that verse represents a climax in terms of the author’s purpose.

suggest that it was addressed to some situation in which Jews needed comfort or advice because of their treatment at the hand of gentiles.³ The continuing minority status of Jews helps to explain the persistent popularity of Esther.

Esther's particular response to a hostile environment makes use of humor. Unfortunately we know too little about the nature of humor in the ancient world,⁴ but this paper assumes that it is easier to bear pain or subjugation if one can mock those in authority or those responsible for the pain.

I.

It is possible, of course, to make a case against the book because of its portrayal of women. For example, Vashti and Esther are sex-objects. Vashti is important to her husband only as an ornament to be displayed to his friends so that he may boast about what a beautiful wife he has. Above all, she must be obedient to her husband, and when she is not, she is discarded for another.⁵ When a new queen is sought, the only requirements are that she be beautiful and that she be a virgin.⁶ Esther, who is selected, is beautiful, but dumb, supposedly the ideal wife. Esther accomplishes what

³ David Daube has suggested that even though the book is addressed to Jews, the author also has considered the reactions of possible gentile readers. The book includes "a definite political purpose," to demonstrate "that a government has more to gain by orderly taxation than by giving over the Jews to massacre." One of the ways Jews could survive in a hostile world was "to show that the course benefiting them was also the course benefiting the prince." "The Last Chapter of Esther," *JQR* 37 (1946-47) 140, 146-47.

⁴ See the important seminal study by Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965). See also the forthcoming Vanderbilt University dissertation by Sandra Berg.

⁵ Thus, Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty cite the incident of Vashti to indicate that wifely obedience was expected, even if not always given (*All We're Meant To Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation* [Waco, TX: Word Books, 1974] 93). In *The Woman's Bible* (ed. Elizabeth Cady Stanton *et al.*, part II; New York: European Publishing Company, 1898; reprinted New York: Arno, [1972] 86, 87), Lucinda Chandler applauds Vashti's refusal to be exhibited as one of the king's possessions and her courage in revolting against the will of her husband.

⁶ Ms. Chandler points out, "The king in those days had the advantage of the search for fair young virgins, in that he could command the entire collection within his dominions. The only consideration was whether or not the maiden 'pleased' him. There is no hint that the maiden was expected to signify her acceptance or rejection of the king's choice. She was no more to be consulted than if she had been an animal Down to the present the average man sums up his estimate of a woman by her 'looks.' " Stanton *et al.*, *The Woman's Bible*, part II, 91.

she accomplishes because her wise cousin Mordecai tells her what to do and when to do it.⁷

There is a great deal of truth in these characterizations, at least as they apply to the first part of the book, but they overlook the development in the character of the heroine, and they overlook the total thrust which the author has given to the story. The objectionable features of the book are deliberate absurdities which the author has used skillfully.

The inferior position of women is immediately clear in the first verse which mentions them (1:9). Vashti gives a segregated banquet for the women while their husbands are enjoying themselves. "Separate" means "unequal" here, because the royal house where "the girls" assemble is not really theirs. The narrator takes the time to point out to us that it is the property of King Ahasuerus.

The request for Vashti's presence at the banquet is obviously a crude form of male chauvinism, and the reaction to her refusal is even more chauvinistic. The male courtiers magnify Vashti's disobedience into a crime against every husband in the empire: What if all women follow Vashti's example and have contempt for their husbands?

The interest in women for the sake of their beauty is underlined in chap. 2 where the same words which had described Vashti are repeated, but now applied to her potential successors. There is a monotonous repetition of the *מראה*, "pleasing of appearance" (1:11; 2:2, 3, 7). The repetitiveness is even greater when we consider the other usages of *טוב* and its verbal cognates in the immediate context: "The king's heart is glad with wine" (1:10), "if it please the king" (1:19), "to another better than she" (1:19), "and the word pleased the king" (1:21, 2:4), "the maiden who pleases the king" (2:4, cf. 2:9).

In all these instances the pleasure of the king is paramount. The exaggerated emphasis on what seems good to the king is part of the total exaggeration which scholars have noted throughout the book, and particularly in the opening scenes: King Ahasuerus has 127 provinces. His first banquet lasts six months only to be followed by a second. Haman's gallows reaches up into the sky 50 cubits (ca. 75 feet) just to hang one man. The narrator expects us to be amused by the absurdity of all this. He gives an

⁷ Moore is not this harsh toward Esther in his recent commentary, but he says, "Between Mordecai and Esther the greater hero . . . is Mordecai, who supplied the brains while Esther simply followed his directions," p. lii. Werner Dommershausen argues that the book intends to depict Mordecai as the initiator; without his direction Esther could have done little. *Die Estherrolle: Stil und Ziel einer alttestamentlichen Schrift* (SBM; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1968) 137.

elaborate description of the rich furnishings of the Persian court, and he includes some rare words intended to dazzle the reader. The long lists of Persian names would be just as strange to the Hebrew ear as they are to ours. The Jews do not rule over 127 provinces, but they can still laugh at those who do.

The narrator even plays with Vashti's name in order to make us smile at the excesses of the court. We are told, "And the manner of drinking was according to the law; there was no compelling" because everyone drank as he pleased. V 8 begins with a hapax *והשתיה*, and v 9 opens with *בם ושתי המלכה*. "Also, Vashti the queen made a feast for the women." Her name itself reminds us of the heavy drinking (*שתי*) of the Persians.

The narrator is not praising the Persian court. He is laughing at it. The attitude of the king and his courtiers toward Vashti is part of this burlesque. We ought not to be surprised that the Persians do not know how to treat women. The narrator is saying, in effect, "What do you expect from such people?"

His own attitude to Esther is quite sympathetic, and—in my opinion—so is his attitude toward Vashti. Many maidens are good to look at (*טובות מראה*). That is, they please the fancy of the king or other onlookers, but only Vashti and Esther are described as beautiful, having the quality of beauty in themselves. Vashti has *יפי* (1:11). Esther is *יפה תאר* (2:7). It is remarkable, considering how much the looks of the women is an issue, that neither word appears again in the book.

Even Hegai, the chief eunuch of the harem, who might be expected to be inured to feminine beauty, recognizes the uniqueness of Esther, and she won his favor (2:9).

One other word should be said about Vashti. We are not told why the queen refused to come to the banquet. Some ancient commentators thought she was ordered to appear naked, and modern ones recall the story of King Candaules and his wife, recounted by Herodotus (*Persian Wars*, 1:8-12). However, if the author wanted us to think along these lines, he was either extremely subtle or extremely prudish in his reluctance to say so. If there was any Persian custom which would have been violated by the king's request, it was probably the one indicated by Bickerman, following Plutarch. Wives might attend banquets, but they left when the drinking began. At that point, only concubines and harem women would be present, and Vashti did not want to degrade herself to that level.⁸ It may be more im-

⁸ Elias Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible: Jonah, Daniel, Koheleth, Esther* (New York: Schocken, 1967) 185ff. He cites Plutarch, *Coniugalia praecepta*, 16; *Artaxerxes*, 26; Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 7:1:3.

portant to notice that the narrator does not explain Vashti's motivation. We are simply given a picture of a proud woman who refused to be manipulated by a man, even by a king. Her role is only incidental to the story, setting the stage for Esther, but what little we see of her stands in stark contrast to the drunken, impulsive king and his fawning courtiers who magnify the event into a constitutional crisis.

The humor of this first episode culminates in 1:22, where the outcome of all the advising and all the deliberation is an imperial decree—issued in simultaneous translations—to the effect that, after all, “every husband should rule in his own house.”*

Meanwhile, the degradation of the process of selecting a new queen is underlined in 2:12-14. The virgin goes to the king in the evening, and the next morning she goes to a second harem, with the concubines, and she is never again to come to the king unless she is an exceptional case. If she had delighted the king sufficiently that he happens to remember her name later, he may choose to send for her again.

Does the narrator tell us this simply to titillate his male readers? Not at all. Such an explanation misses the point completely. This detail is elaborated for us as another example of the foolishness of the gentiles. The king's sexual delights are prefaced by a twelve-month period of preparation in each case. Each young virgin is anointed for six months with oil of myrrh and for six months with balsam and “ointments of women” before she visits the king. This is “conspicuous consumption” in the extreme.

Even the constitutional needs of the monarchy are subordinated to the sexual pleasures of this king. The process of testing virgins has taken four years, and he has had no queen between his third year (1:3) and his seventh (2:16). Remember, too, that Vashti would still have been queen if it were not for his excessive drinking and concomitant anger, aided and abetted by his seven wise princes who escalate Vashti's modesty into an imperial crisis.

As noted above, it has also been alleged that Esther appears stupid in the book. At first impression she is either dumb or at least helpless. Mordecai makes her decisions for her. He commands her not to report that she is Jewish (2:10). He also checks up on her every day, walking in front of the harem to learn of her health (2:11). Her obedience is singled out a few verses later (2:20) when we are told that she did the bidding of Mordecai just as she

* As David Noel Freedman has said, “There is some irony in the fact that this decree by which the king establishes the supremacy of the male in his own household initiates a story whereby the king having got rid of one recalcitrant wife ends up with one who controls him completely.” Private communication quoted by Moore, 14.

had done when she was in his care, being raised by him. Esther continues to be only a pawn in Mordecai's hand when he discovers the plot against the king. He is the active party and Esther merely conveys a message "in the name of Mordecai" (2:22). She is not even mentioned in chap. 3, but chap. 4 marks a turning point in Esther's role and a reversal in the relative positions of Esther and Mordecai. At the beginning of chap. 4, Mordecai is still giving fatherly advice, telling Esther what she ought to do to stop the impending annihilation of all the Jews. She did not even understand what was happening under her nose until Mordecai told her. Then, she suddenly matures in response to the crisis. She acts decisively, and it is she who gives orders to Mordecai. The events from here on are planned by Esther and carried out by Esther. Mordecai's question in 4:14, "And who knows whether you have come to dominion for a time like this?", indicates that Esther is in the key position now. Mordecai cannot save the Jews; he was the one who precipitated their predicament. However, Esther can. She is in a position to exercise her influence on their behalf. In 4:17 the narrator says explicitly that Mordecai did "all that Esther commanded him." From this point in the book onward, Esther is clearly the initiator, not Mordecai.¹⁰

In 8:1,2 Mordecai is elevated to a new position.¹¹ The writer makes clear the importance of Esther in the change. The king's ring is taken from Haman and given to Mordecai, along with the office it signified. However, Mordecai is allowed to see the king in the first place only "because Esther had made known what he was to her." The narrator uses the same word that he had used in 2:10 when Esther was told not to make known her people. She had been obedient before, but now Mordecai's advancement depends upon her making known who she is. Further, Haman's property is given to Esther and she appoints Mordecai her steward. For both new responsibilities Mordecai is dependent upon Esther.

When the letter goes out in the king's name to allow the Jews to kill their attackers, Mordecai naturally composes the letter, since he is the prime minister now. We should note, however, that permission to write had been granted in response to a request from the queen. Again, Esther is the initiator.

¹⁰ Against Dommershausen; see note 7.

¹¹ Humphreys has pointed out that conflict between courtiers is a popular literary theme, *JBL* 92 (1973) 215, 216. However, he has failed to note the unusual feature whereby the victorious courtier is elevated by a woman's action, not his own.

There is an intervening episode in which Haman's intention to hang Mordecai is thwarted by the king's command that Haman honor Mordecai, but this event transpires by chance or by divine providence, not because of any initiative or wisdom on the part of Mordecai.

Shemaryahu Talmon is one of the few writers who has noticed the growth of Esther's character and importance as the story develops:

In the course of events she ascends from the role of Mordecai's protégée to become her mentor's guardian. In fact she completely overshadows her uncle and outclasses his adversary Haman in the art of crafty planning and successful execution. In the end it is Esther's superior cleverness which saves the day . . . It is clearly Ester who plays the decisive role in the development of events.¹²

He also points out, correctly, that the prototype of the courageous, effective woman already exists in older books of the Bible.¹³ Their importance is almost taken for granted, in fact. It is not until the book of Judith that a narrator feels the necessity to point out, somewhat self-consciously, that God is acting to deliver his people by the hand of a woman (Jdt 9:10; 13:15; 16:5,6).

Talmon's work has confirmed my own impressions about Esther. He has pointed out certain wisdom motifs in the book. The figure of Esther, he says, is presented as a sage. Such a role is uncommon for a woman, but she fills it, even surpassing Mordecai. Talmon has noticed that Mordecai does not have the gifts of skillful speech which a wise courtier ought to have. In contrast, Esther frequently demonstrates that she has mastered the elegant forms of the court.¹⁴ She is a sage, not a sex-object.

Talmon also points to the slow, gradual weaving of the plot, in which Esther fasts and risks her life, only to invite the king to dinner (4:16-5:4). The purpose of that banquet is to invite the king to a second one (5:8), and it is only there that the queen asks to save the lives of the Jews (7:3). The delay is partly a narrative device to increase suspense in the reader, but Talmon points out that it is precisely such patient planning which marks a wise sage.¹⁵ As Proverbs 25:15 says, "By patience is a ruler persuaded, and a soft tongue will break a bone" (*NAB*). These words are not intended to describe feminine weakness, but the triumph of the wise person regardless of sex.

II.

Now, let us consider the cruelty and "Jewish nationalism" in the book. The book has been criticized because it seems to delight in the slaughter of

¹² *VT* 13 (1963) 449.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 450.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 437.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

the enemies of the Jews. Admittedly, there are cruelty and nationalism in the book, but, again, the critics have failed to note the context, particularly the author's humorous intent.

The slaughter is made possible by the second of two royal edicts. Both of them are described in less-than-serious terms. Each is a classic example of "overkill." The first edict originates because Haman is upset: Mordecai will not bow down to him.¹⁶ It would be drastic enough to kill Mordecai for this breach of etiquette, but Haman wants to kill *all* Jews in the empire. The narrator is aware of the ancient enmity between Benjaminites and Amalekites, going back to the time of Saul and Agag. He takes pains to point out that Mordecai belongs to Saul's family (2:5) and that Haman is a descendent of the King Agag (3:1), and 3:10 alludes to the long-standing hostility. However, the story itself dwells on Mordecai's refusal as the occasion for the plot (3:5-6; 5:9, 13-14) as if to emphasize Haman's extremism. The narrator calls attention to the excessiveness by the literary device of heaping up superfluous synonyms: the Jews are to be destroyed, slain and annihilated—**להשמיד לזרע ולאבד**—all of them, including young and old, women and children (3:13). Later, Esther repeats the same three verbs of destruction when she tells the king what Haman has ordered (7:4). They are used a third time when the edict is reversed (8:11; cf. 9:12). Further, the thoroughness of the edict's promulgation is underlined by the repetition. Notice:

"... written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the princes of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language . . . Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces . . . A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. The couriers went in haste . . . and the decree was issued" etc. (3:12-15, RSV).

The word **כל** is used five times in three verses, **ועם** twice and **ומדינה ומדינה** three times. Observe, also, that the people have a full eleven months to prepare for the event. The dates are noted carefully and precisely. The procedure of communicating the decree may or may not be

¹⁶ Robert Gordis has shown that Mordecai was already a petty official in the Persian hierarchy ("sitting at the king's gate"), "Studies in the Esther Narrative," *JBL* 95 (1976) 48, and 3:1-3 confirms that, because the order to bow down to Haman, which obligated Mordecai, applied only to "all the king's servants." This episode contributes to the overall purpose of the book, noted above, by demonstrating that a Jew can be a civil servant and can successfully refuse to give what he considers excessive honor to a gentile superior, in this case to an anti-Semite.

more elaborate than usual. The narrator's description of it is certainly elaborate.¹⁷

The reversal of the first edict continues the exaggeration and the repetitiveness, with some added details. All the receiving officers are named, as before, but now the provinces are specified "from India to Ethiopia, a hundred and twenty-seven provinces" (8:9). Simultaneous translations are mentioned again in "writing" and in "tongue," but this time also to the Jews in their writing and tongue. The description of dispatching the copies is described in detail again, and now it is emphasized that the special royal horses are used. The description of the second edict is even more elaborate than the previous description.

After the first edict is published, "the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Susa was perplexed" (3:15). After the second decree the city of Susa "shouted and was glad"—with a somewhat more elaborate description of the reversed emotions. Also, there is feasting. This time, the feasting is not limited to two people but is enjoyed by all the Jews, in every province. Nor are the gentiles left out of the description. Many of them convert "for the fear of the Jews was fallen upon them" (8:17).

There is irony, of course, in 8:8 when the king explains to Esther that anything written in the king's name and sealed with his ring cannot be revoked. Such an explanation would be unnecessary for the queen¹⁸ and for

¹⁷ It is instructive to compare 3:12-15 and 8:9-14 with 1:22. The latter describes the same process of issuing edicts, but without the literary embellishments of chaps. 3 and 8.

The Persian system of transmitting messages enjoyed a high reputation in the ancient world. Herodotus, *Persian Wars* 8:98, said that nothing traveled as fast, and he described the method of placing horses and riders a day's journey apart. Herodotus was intending to praise the Persian efficiency, whereas our narrator takes that efficiency for granted and uses repetition to emphasize that all parts of the empire received the message. By calling attention to the dates, could he be suggesting that the haste is redundant, given the eleven months of advance notice?

I am not aware of other evidence for the use of so many languages in distributing a royal decree. The Behistun inscription used three languages, but ordinarily Aramaic was the means of communication throughout the empire (Moore, *Esther*, xlv), as attested by the wide distribution of Aramaic texts. This unhistorical statement about *all* the languages is the narrator's way of calling attention to the importance of the decree. Also, as Dommershausen says (*Die Estherrolle*, p. 35) "Das ist Hyperbel des Erzählers."

Many of the languages of the empire were not written down until the Aramaic alphabet was adopted for that purpose. The Aramaic script "served as the basis for most, if not all, of the writing systems in Iran until the Islamic period" (M. J. Dresden, *IDB*, III 740). Even the Persian language was written in Aramaic characters (A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948] 116), but our narrator insists that every province received its edict in its own script (כתבם).

¹⁸ Moore, *Esther*, 79.

someone as close to the court as Mordecai. Even more striking is the fact that the explanation is being given in the context of reversing an order written in the name of the king and sealed with his name.¹⁹ The king's **אֵין לְהַשִּׁיב** is an echo of Esther's **לְהַשִּׁיב** in 8:5 when she petitions for a reversal. Thus the king is changing a royal decree while simultaneously explaining that such decrees are unchangeable. Once again the gentile power becomes the object of humor.

There is another subtle kind of exaggeration in the report of the second edict. It only grants the Jews the right of self-defense against their attackers, literally "to stand for their life," to destroy, slay and annihilate "all the forces of the people and province who show hostility (**הַצִּיִּים**) to them" (8:11).²⁰ If an enemy did not attack the Jews first, he was in no danger. Who would be so foolish as to make himself subject to the second edict? It would be suicide to attack the Jews. Who would be so stupid as to observe Haman's obsolete edict, not knowing of the second one, published more efficiently? The answer is that 800 people in Susa and 75,000 in the provinces were so stupid! It is unfortunate that so many readers have failed to see that the account is a deliberate hyperbole.

As a corrective they ought to read 9:12 slowly and carefully. Surely, the author did not expect his readers to keep a straight face while hearing the great king rejoice that so many of his own subjects have been killed.

The humor of the scene is accentuated by deliberate repetition. First we hear the words in straight reporting in 9:6, "And in Susa the capital, the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men." Undoubtedly we are supposed to laugh when we hear identical words six verses later, but this time in the mouth of the king. The effect is almost slapstick: "If they have done that well in Susa, think what it must be like in the rest of the provinces!" The repetition of the ten long names of Haman's ten sons must have added to the pleasure of the listeners.

Those who are offended by the blood and by the so-called Jewish nationalism are either literalists or are acting as if they were. Even when they recognize that the story is fiction, they treat it more seriously than it was in-

¹⁹ Theodore H. Gaster argues that the first edict could not be formally rescinded, but that the second decree "would nevertheless cancel out its effect" (*Purim and Hanukkah in Custom and Tradition* [New York: Henry Schuman, 1950] 32). It is not obvious from the text, however, that the narrator is making such a distinction.

There is no evidence outside of the OT for the irrevocability of Persian law, but Jewish tradition seems to take it for granted (Dan 6:9-16); cf. Moore (*Esther*, 10f.) and Domershausen (*Die Estherrolle*, 33) who point to the irony.

²⁰ See also Gordis' helpful comments on this verse, *JBL* 95 (1976) 49-52.

tended. Pity the theologians who were offended because they could not laugh. By contrast, the Jews who maintained a sense of humor in the face of adversity were better able thereby to survive that adversity.

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Appendix H:

Why Should the Book of Esther be Canonical?

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This paper was originally presented by a Red Village Church member to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Systematic Theology I course.

The Issue

Since its composition, Esther has been a controversial book. Several issues, such as the book's secular nature, late acceptance into the Hebrew canon, and the absence of any reference to the book in the New Testament have made the canonicity of Esther the subject of much debate among modern scholars, reformers and even the ancients.

In this paper, the traditional evangelical/Protestant position will be defended: namely, that the Hebrew Book of Esther – but not the additions in the Septuagint – is historically truthful and divinely inspired, and therefore belongs in the canon recognized by the Church. In this paper, some of the major positions on Esther's historicity and canonicity (that is, the positions of modern secular scholarship, the Roman Catholic Church, and of Martin Luther) will be discussed and critiqued, considering relevant historical and literary evidence. It should be granted that the author of this paper is a committed evangelical Christian, and as such is approaching the issue with certain principles taken as axiomatic: that the God of the Bible exists, and that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh. Those who start with different truth statements as axioms may have their position on the matter challenged, but likely will remain unconvinced by the position of this paper.

Positions on the Issue of Esther's Canonicity

Modern Scholarship on the Date and Historicity of the Book of Esther

There is no consensus among modern scholars concerning the date of composition for Esther. The book, along with its later additions, was included in the Greek Septuagint translation, which was likely completed before 132 BC.[1] In addition to this, the reference to "Mordecai's Day" in 2 Maccabees 15:36 (NRSV) shows that the festival of Purim (and therefore, likely the book of Esther as well) was in existence at least by the time of the Maccabees in the 160s BC.[2] The Book of Esther describes events that took place during

the reign of King Ahasuerus, who has been identified as Xerxes I, who reigned from 486-465 BC. Verse 10:2 speaks as though his reign has already ended, so on the basis of internal evidence the earliest reasonable date for the book would be the mid-fifth century B.C.[3]

The two main positions are that the book was either written in the Persian period (mid-5th century to 331 BC) or the Greek period (331 BC to 160s BC). About a century ago, most scholars preferred a Greek dating, but in recent times dating the book to the Persian period has become more popular. For example, Friedberg makes an argument from the way that Esther describes months using both the older Jewish and the newer Babylonian nomenclature that the latter had not yet fully been accepted. Therefore, he argues, it is best to date the composition of the book of Esther in the late 5th century BC before Ezra-Nehemiah, which exclusively uses the Babylonian system.[4] Furthermore, it has been widely acknowledged that the author of the book of Esther displays an excellent familiarity with Persian court life and institutions, a fact that supports a date in the Persian period. These factors, plus the complete lack of Greek words in the book, make the Persian period the most probable solution.[5] This would mean that the book was composed sometime in the 130 years following the events described in the book. Since this is a relatively short time lapse in terms of ancient historical accounts, the composition date itself should not be considered a threat to the historical truthfulness of the work.

Among modern secular scholars, there is very little agreement the degree to which the book is historical, fictitious or somewhere in between.[6] The trend of scholars to choose an “in between” strategy reflects the tension between the accurate dates and details of Persian court life (supporting the historical view) and the lack of archaeological evidence of Vashti or Esther and some of the exaggerated features of the story (supporting the fictional view). This has led many scholars to consider the book to be a work of historical fiction – a story with an accurate setting but with some fictional characters and events.[7]

Larue’s arguments represent a typical argument against the historicity of Esther. He points out that the Greek historian Herodotus recorded Xerxes’ wife as Amestris but did not mention Esther or Vashti. However, he also admits that the Persian kings were known for having numerous concubines, so it’s possible that Esther and/or Vashti were among his concubines. He also cites the numeric details of the extermination of 75,000 people, the height of Haman’s pole at 75 feet, and Haman’s expected bounty of 10,000 talents as intentionally exaggerated to make the story entertaining.[8] While these issues are certainly notable, none of them are conclusive evidence that the book is non-historical. The lack of archaeological evidence for Esther and Vashti is largely an argument from silence, and this may be disproved by further archaeological discoveries. Furthermore, Gordis points out that “Amestris” could be related to the name “Esther,” so it is possible that they could be the same person.[9] Also, the surprising numbers in the story are not completely beyond the realm of possibility, and similar numbers have been reported in the ancient world in other contexts.[10]

The Catholic Church and the Canonization of the Additions to Esther

In the Council of Trent in 1546, the Roman Catholic Church declared the apocryphal portions of the Latin Vulgate to be sacred and canonical.[11] This included the additions to Esther from the Greek Septuagint, which were compiled by Jerome at the end of the book, rather than being interspersed through the narrative as in the Greek. It should be noted at this point that Jerome himself apparently doubted the authenticity of the additions to Esther, since he separated them out from the narrative and placed them all at the end, resulting in an incohesive narrative. In his preface to the Vulgate version of Esther, Jerome stated that the book of Esther had been “corrupted by various translators,” possibly referring to these additions in the Septuagint.[12] So it seems inconsistent that the Council of Trent declared Jerome’s translation of the additions to Esther to be canonical when Jerome himself most likely doubted their authenticity.

Likewise, most modern scholars agree that the additions were not original to the text but were added later. Moore argues that the colophon at the end of Addition F, if authentic, would identify at least additions A and F as being translated into Greek from a Semitic version around 114 BC, but that the letters contained in additions B and E were clearly originally written in Greek – a product of the author’s imagination. However, Moore suggests that even additions A and F were not a part of the original book since the Hebrew version stands as a complete narrative, and the additions introduce contradictions that are hard to rationalize. [13]

The additions to Esther differ from the Hebrew version of the book most notably in the fact that God is explicitly mentioned, and the story of Esther is explained as the work of God. The easiest explanation for this would be that the additions were fabricated in later generations to make the book seem more religious, making it acceptable to pious Jews. For these reasons, there is no compelling reason to consider the additions to Esther to be divinely inspired Scripture.

Martin Luther’s Objections to Esther

Martin Luther is possibly the most famous opponent of the canonicity of the book of Esther. Because of his status as one of the major reformers, his position on the topic continues to influence Christians today. In Luther’s Table Talk, he states, “I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities.”[14] It is clear from this quotation that his objection primarily stemmed from the theological content of the book rather than historical evidence. It has also been noted that Luther similarly objected to some books of the New Testament (such as James) on theological rather than historical grounds.[15] However, objections based on theological interpretation of a book can be answered by a better interpretation of the book.

Some have objected to the fact that the book seems to paint Esther and Mordecai in a positive light despite her questionable actions such as her marriage to a pagan, participation in pagan banquets, and vengeful retribution against the enemies of the Jews.[16] It is likely that Luther was referring to these or similar things when he spoke of

“heathen unnaturalities.” However, it is not necessary to interpret the book of Esther as endorsing every action of Esther and Mordecai, even though the storyline clearly portrays them as the protagonists. Anderson, for example, takes an interpretation that there are no noble characters in the book of Esther, but the point of the book remains as a piece of history about how God preserved the people of Israel.[17]

Defending Esther’s Canonicity

How was Esther used Before Christ?

The evidence of how the book of Esther was used before the first century A.D. is sparse. The reference to the festival of Purim in 2 Maccabees (as mentioned above) could indicate that the book was well-known in the 2nd century B.C. However, an argument based on this reference alone is inconclusive because it assumes, rather than proves, that the book precedes the institution of the festival. As Talmon notes, many scholars consider Purim to be a variation of a heathen festival that pre-dates the time of Esther.[18] If this is the case, then it would be possible that the festival mentioned in 2 Maccabees was held without the use of the book of Esther. Regardless, it is still a useful data point that most likely shows that the book was being used at that time. Besides this, the inclusion of the book of Esther in the Septuagint is clear evidence that the book was widely used by Jews in the time before Christ. However, its inclusion in the Septuagint does not prove whether or not the Jews considered it to be Scripture, since the Septuagint includes both canonical and non-canonical books.

Perhaps more notable is Esther’s conspicuous absence from a few key places. Esther is not listed in the book of Sirach (circa 180 B.C.), which recounts major storylines from nearly every other book of the Old Testament.[19] Additionally, it is the only Old Testament book that was not found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and there is no reference to the book in the whole New Testament.[20] Esther’s absence from these places is significant, and it may indicate that the book did not enjoy the same prominence or popularity as some of the other books of the Old Testament. However, its absence from these places does not conclusively prove that early Jews did not consider it canonical. As secular scholar Larue admits, “arguments from silence are never very convincing.”[21] Furthermore, Esther’s absence from each of these places can be explained in a way that does not threaten its canonicity. For example, the book of Sirach introduces the list of Old Testament storylines by calling it a list of “famous men” and “fathers in their generation.”[22] Since the main character of Esther was a woman, she would not strictly fall into these categories.

Josephus and the Hebrew Canon

One of the most important early witnesses to the Hebrew canon is the 1st century Jewish historian Josephus. In his work, *Against Apion*, Josephus refers to a collection of 22 books that he considers authoritative.[23] Since Josephus doesn’t explicitly name all the books in his collection and since the number differs from the 24 books of the final Hebrew canon,

some have suggested that Josephus counted some of the books together, while others have suggested that Josephus's canon was missing Ecclesiastes and Esther.[24]

However, evaluation of Josephus's writings suggests that he did consider Esther to be authoritative. First, Josephus claims that the 22 books were written from the time of Moses until the time of Artaxerxes, and that while there were historical books written after that point, they are not considered authoritative in the same way.[25] This mention of the reign of Artaxerxes is significant because the only other mention of this Persian king is in the introduction to Josephus's version of the book of Esther, where he dates the events of the book to Artaxerxes' reign.[26] So it is likely that by mentioning the reign of Artaxerxes in describing the canon, Josephus is claiming that Esther was the last authoritative book to be written.

Likewise, the final 24-book Hebrew canon, which is identical in content to the Old Testament in Protestant Bibles, included the book of Esther. While it is debatable exactly when this canon was officially recognized, the first unambiguous reference to the 24 books is in the apocryphal book 2 Esdras.[27] The most likely date of composition for 2 Esdras is in the late first century A.D., around the same time of Josephus's works.[28]

Therefore, after evaluating the available evidence, it seems best to conclude that the commonly agreed-upon canon of Scripture among the Jews in the first century A.D. included the book of Esther. This is significant for Christians because the New Testament, while never referencing Esther directly, frequently affirms the Hebrew Scriptures as divinely inspired.[29] If it is true that Esther was included in the first-century definition of the term, "Scriptures," then it can be said that the New Testament affirms Esther's canonical status.

The Witness of the Holy Spirit

From the perspective of a Christian, there is another witness to the Biblical Canon that cannot be overlooked. This is the witness of the Holy Spirit – that is, God Himself in the third person of the Trinity dwelling in the hearts of his people. Christians do not approach questions such as canonicity from a purely materialistic scientific methodology, because from a Christian perspective God has chosen to reveal Himself through his Word. Therefore, while it is sometimes helpful to hear the perspectives of non-believing scholars and historians of different time periods, more weight should be placed on the perspectives of Christ followers who have been guided by the Holy Spirit. Without a doubt, the vast majority of Spirit-indwelt believers throughout the history of the Church have recognized the book of Esther as divinely inspired.

Of course, there are movements and individuals that have claimed to be "Christian" who have held deviant views on the book of Esther. However, movements that hold positions other than the one defended in this paper tend to also teach doctrine that deviates from the Biblical gospel (with the notable exception of Martin Luther, as discussed above). For these movements, then, it is best to assume that the Holy Spirit did not bear witness to them that Esther is canonical because they never became true believers by faith in the

gospel. For example, the Roman Catholic Church, which claims that the Additions to Esther are divinely inspired, also teaches that salvation comes by both faith and works.[30] This teaching contradicts the clear teaching of the New Testament that salvation is “not a result of works” (Ephesians 2:9, ESV). Other movements, such as modern-day liberal Protestants, deny the divine inspiration and inerrancy of all of Scripture. Again, these movements also tend to either deny or de-emphasize the gospel, which means the members of the movement are not likely to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion: The Value of Esther in the Christian’s Bible

In conclusion, it seems that there is no compelling reason from archaeology, history or scholarship to doubt the historical truthfulness and divine inspiration of the Hebrew Book of Esther (without the Greek Additions). On the contrary, the evidence its composition in the Persian period support its historical truthfulness, and the evidence from Josephus and 2 Esdras support the notion that it was considered canonical by first century Jews (including Jesus and the writers of the New Testament). And finally, the witness of the Holy Spirit in believers throughout the ages has affirmed again and again the canonicity of Esther.

But what value does Esther give to the Christian today? What do twenty-first century Christians gain by keeping it in their Bibles? In Esther, Christians can see a unique story of how God worked in amazing ways to save his covenant people from destruction. And this was necessary to bring about salvation through Jesus, who was descended from them. Esther shows that God works in amazing ways even when his name isn’t mentioned at all.

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[2] 2 Maccabees 15:36, NRSV

[3] MacArthur, John. Esther 1:1. MacArthur Study Bible with ESV For The Bible Study App. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010. Olive Tree (The Bible Study App) Edition.

[4] Friedberg, Albert D. “A New Clue in the Dating of the Composition of the Book of Esther.” *Vetus Testamentum* 50, no. 4 (2000): 561-65. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1585495>.

[5] Gordis, Robert. “Studies in the Esther Narrative.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95, no. 1 (1976): 44. doi:10.2307/3265472.

[6] Ibid., 43.

[7] Gordis, Robert. “Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther: A New Solution to an Ancient Crux.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100, no. 3 (1981): 368. doi:10.2307/3265960.

[8] Larue, Gerald A. “Old Testament Life and Literature” Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1997, p. 363.

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[10] Ibid., 383.

[11] “Session 4, Concerning the Canonical Scriptures, First Decree.” The Council of Trent, accessed August 20, 2018. <http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch4.htm>.

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- [21] Larue, Gerald A. "Old Testament Life and Literature" Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1997, p. 363.
- [22] Sirach 44:1 (RSV).
- [23] Josephus. "Against Apion I, Chapter 8" University of Chicago, accessed September 5, 2018. <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/josephus/apion-1.html>.
- [24] Zeitlin, Solomon. "An Historical Study of the Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures." *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 3 (1931): 130. doi:10.2307/3622189.
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- [27] 2 Esdras 14:45.
- [28] "ESDRAS, BOOKS OF – JewishEncyclopedia.Com." Accessed September 8, 2018. <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/5852-esdras-books-of#anchor10>.
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- [30] "Are Good Works Necessary for Salvation? | Catholic Answers." Accessed September 8, 2018. <https://www.catholic.com/index.php/magazine/online-edition/are-good-works-necessary-for-salvation>.

Appendix I:

Will Relief and Deliverance Arise for the Jews from Another Place

John M. Wiebe | Catholic Biblical Quarterly | Vol. 53, No. 3, July 1991

THE PERICOPE OF ESTH 4:13-14 has been recognized by many as one of the major focal points in the Book of Esther. A. Meinhold has argued that these verses occur structurally in the center of the story and as such express one of the author's main theological themes.¹ When Mordecai appears to affirm to Esther that relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and that perhaps it was for the purpose of saving her people that Esther had attained royal status, the reader detects a veiled reference to God's providence working behind the scenes. And since direct references to God are completely lacking in this book, this tantalizing pericope becomes all the more conspicuous.² In addition to this, S. B. Berg has pointed out that it is

¹ A. Meinhold, "Zu Aufbau und Mitte des Estherbuches," *VT* 33 (1983) 435-45.

² On this point see L. B. Paton, *The Book of Esther* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908) 222-23; C. C. Torrey, "The Older Book of Esther," *HTR* 37 (1944) 10; S. Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," *VT* 13 (1963) 428-29; D. Harvey, "Esther," *IDB*, 150; G. Gerleman, *Studien zu Esther. Stoff-Struktur-Stil-Sinn* (Biblische Studien 48; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener V., 1966) 1-48; P. R. Ackroyd, "Two Hebrew Notes," *ASTI* 5 (1967) 82-86; J. L. Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon Historical Literature," *JBL* 88 (1969) 141; R. B. Bjornard, "Esther," *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (12 vols.; Nashville: Broadman, 1971) 4. 4; C. A. Moore, *Esther* (AB 7B; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) 52-53; W. W. Grasham, "The Theology of the Book of Esther," *ResQ* 16 (1973) 107; J. A. Loader, "Esther as a Novel with Different Levels of Meaning," *ZAW* 90 (1978) 419-20; S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (SBLDS 44; Missoula: Scholars, 1979) 176-78; idem, "After the Exile: God and History in the Books of Chronicles and Esther," *The Divine Helmsman* (Lou

here in Esther that the plot takes a decisive turn. Prior to this scene Esther has a passive role in the story and really takes no initiative. However, after Mordecai convinces her to take action with his speech of Esth 4:13-14, she assumes the role of the heroine and turns Haman's plot against him.³ Thus, in light of the above observations, it behooves the interpreter of the Book of Esther to fully understand what this text is really saying, or else he/she may miss what the plot and the story line are doing.

The Hebrew of v 13 as well as of v 14b is straightforward enough, but I question whether v 14a has been interpreted correctly by exegetes. The traditional way of reading the Hebrew text of v 14a is to render it as a conditional statement, with one protasis and two apodoses. It begins with the construction *kî ʾim*, which introduces the protasis, and then continues on with *hahāreš tahārīšī bāʿēt hazzōʾt* ("for if you certainly keep silent at this time . . ."). Then the first apodosis follows by simple juxtaposition to the protasis with the phrase, *rewah wēhaššālā yaʿāmōd layyēhūdīm mimmaqōm ʾahēr*. This is interpreted by every work cited in this study as a simple statement, "(then) relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place."⁴ The second apodosis completes the thought, but this time it is introduced by a conjunction, *wəʾatt ūbēt ʾābik tōʾbēdū* ("and [then] you and the house of your father will be destroyed"). Taken in this way, this text seems to affirm that if Esther does not take action to help save the Jews, they would still be delivered by some other unnamed agent. Moreover, her reluctance to act would result in the elimination not only of herself, but of her entire family as well.

If one reads this text in this manner, it seems to me that two problems present themselves which are difficult to explain. First of all, if Esther does nothing to help save her people, from where will the relief and deliverance

H. Silberman Festschrift; ed. J. L. Crenshaw and S. Sandmel; New York: Ktav, 1980) 107-27, esp. pp. 117-18; P. Haupt, "Critical Notes on Esther," *Studies in the Book of Esther* (Library of Biblical Studies; ed. C. A. Moore; New York: Ktav, 1982) 136; H. Bardtke, "Neuere Arbeiten zum Estherbuch," *Studies in the Book of Esther*, 547; D. J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll* (JSOTSup 30; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984) 152-53; idem, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 255-56; M. Margalit, "From Another Place—Esther 4:14," *Beth Mikra* 31 (1985/86) 6-9 [Hebrew]; F. B. Huey, "Esther," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (12 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 4. 780, 785.

³ Berg, *Esther*, 110, 118; idem, "After the Exile," 118.

⁴ For example see the following: Paton, *Esther*, 222; H. Striedl, "Untersuchungen zur Syntax und Stilistik des hebräischen Buches Esther," *ZAW* 55 (1937) 91-92; Torrey, "The Older Book of Esther," 10; B. W. Anderson and A. C. Lichtenberger, "The Book of Esther," *IB* 3. 854; Moore, *Esther*, 46; Bardtke, "Neuere Arbeiten," 547; Haupt, "Critical Notes," 136; Meinhold, "Zu Aufbau," 444; Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 35-36; *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, 302; Margalit, "From Another Place," 6-9; and S. P. Re'emi, *Nahum, Obadiah, Esther* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 125.

which Mordecai mentions actually come? Several answers have been suggested. Many have seen in the word *māqôm*, "place," in v 14ab some sort of indirect reference to God. The Lucianic recension of the LXX, both Targums of Esther, and Josephus all interpreted this word as such.⁵ Ackroyd notes that the word *māqôm* was in fact often used in later Jewish literature as a "surrogate" for the name of God.⁶ Talmon feels that it is plausible in this context that the phrase "another place" is actually "a substitute for the divine name."⁷ Moore suggests that *māqôm* is employed in this verse in the same way as mercy, *eleos*, is employed in 1 Macc 16:3, as "a veiled allusion to God."⁸ Therefore, if this line of thinking is correct, what Mordecai is really saying is that if Esther keeps silent, God will intervene in some way on behalf of his people.⁹

However attractive this explanation may seem to be, it has its problems. Ackroyd has pointed out that the wording used here also includes the adjective *ʾahēr*, "another," which modifies *māqôm*. He argues that if *māqôm* is a surrogate for God, then with this accompanying adjective one would be left with the bizarre rendering "another god," which he feels is "not admissible."¹⁰ In addition, as was mentioned above, the author throughout this book seems to want to keep God out of the picture, subtly hidden behind the events of the story. For Mordecai to make such an allusion to God here, no matter how indirect, would be out of line with what the author is trying to establish.¹¹ Therefore, with Ackroyd, it is probably best to see "another place" as referring to some other source which would bring about deliverance for the Jews.¹²

Several suggestions have been put forward in an attempt to identify this other source. Clines has posited that Mordecai may be hoping that support would come from other Jews holding high offices in the realm, or perhaps

⁵ The Lucianic LXX of 4:14a reads: *ean hyperidēs to ethnos sou tou mē boēthēsai autois all' ho theos estai autois boēthos kai sōtēria* ("If you disregard your nation so that you do not help them, nevertheless, God will become help and salvation to them"). See also Josephus, *Ant.* 11.227, 279-82; Midr. *Leqah ʿIbb* 4:14; and the discussions in Anderson and Lichtenberger, "The Book of Esther," 854; Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," 429 n. 1; Moore, *Esther*, 50; Grasham, "The Theology of the Book of Esther," 107-8.

⁶ Ackroyd, "Two Hebrew Notes," 82. See also A. Spanier, "Die Gottesbezeichnungen *hmqwm* und *hqdwš bryk hw* in der frühalmudischen Literatur," *MGWJ* 66 (1922) 309-14.

⁷ Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," 429 n. 1.

⁸ Moore, *Esther*, 50.

⁹ For this line of reasoning see Harvey, "Esther," 150; Margalit, "From Another Place," 6-9; Re'emi, *Nahum, Obadiah, Esther*, 125; Huey, "Esther," 793.

¹⁰ So Ackroyd, "Two Hebrew Notes," 82-84. See Berg, *Esther*, 76; Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 35-36.

¹¹ See the arguments of H. Bardtke, *Das Buch Esther* (KAT 17/5; Gütersloh: Mohn, 1963) 333; Berg, *Esther*, 76.

¹² Ackroyd, "Two Hebrew Notes," 83-84; Berg, *Esther*, 76; Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 35-36.

that the Jews themselves would rise up in revolt, or even that Persians who were sympathetic to the plight of the Jews would somehow intervene.¹³ Several others suggest that perhaps a political power from abroad is the source of Mordecai's hope. They point out that Maccabbean Jews had asked Rome for such assistance (1 Macc 8:17; 12:1).¹⁴ However logical these solutions seem to be, still they are nothing more than educated guesses. The story of Esther nowhere even hints at the source of such a hope. Thus, the identity of the relief that would arise from another place remains an enigma in this account.

A second problem concerning the traditional rendering of this verse can be detected in the second apodosis. Here it states that even though relief would come for the Jews, Esther and the house of her father would still be destroyed. This must mean that Esther and her family would not be delivered by this mysterious second agent. But why would this be? Two solutions to this question have been proposed. Clines argues that if Esther would not stand up for her people, then God himself would intervene and punish her. Deliverance, ultimately from God, would come for the Jews but Esther would incur God's wrath.¹⁵ Others see this threat as an allusion to an act of retribution on the part of Jews who would look upon Esther as a traitor for not acting on their behalf.¹⁶

Both of these explanations seem plausible but fail to take into account that this threat is directed not only at Esther but at her father's house as well. The "house of her father" means none other than the house of Mordecai.¹⁷ Esther, as we know from the story, was an orphan who was taken in by Mordecai, her elder cousin, and raised in his home as a daughter (Esth 2:7,15,20; 8:1). Moreover, S. M. Paul has argued that Esther was actually legally adopted by Mordecai in view of the phraseology used in Esth 2:7 and 2:15. He points out that the idiom which occurs in both these texts, *lêqāhāh lô lēbat*, "to take to oneself for a daughter," is strikingly similar to a standard adoption formula employed in Mesopotamia, *ana mārūti leqū*, "to take into the status of sonship."¹⁸

¹³ Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, 302; *Esther Scroll*, 42-43.

¹⁴ See Paton, *Esther*, 223; Anderson and Lichtenberger, "The Book of Esther," 854; Huey, "Esther," 793; Moore, *Esther*, 50.

¹⁵ See Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 35-36, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, 302; Anderson and Lichtenberger, "The Book of Esther," 854; Moore, *Esther*, 50.

¹⁶ L. H. Brockington, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther* (NCB; London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1969) 235; Moore, *Esther*, 53; Berg, *Esther*, 76, 90 n. 71.

¹⁷ Clines has also made this observation (*Esther Scroll*, 36; *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, 302).

¹⁸ Note also the equivalent Sumerian phrase of adoption, NAM.DUMU.NI.ŠÊ ŠU.BA. AN.TI.ĒŠ, "to take into sonship." See S. M. Paul, "Adoption Formulae: A Study of Cuneiform and Biblical Legal Clauses," *Maarav* 2 (1980) 173-85, esp. pp. 181-82.

If the above is correct, if Mordecai is Esther's stepfather, why then would the author affirm that God's judgment or Jewish retribution would befall him and his house? Certainly he would not be guilty of cowardice as Esther might be. The story portrays him as a real hero doing all he could to avert the coming disaster. The reasons given for explaining why the rest of the Jews would be saved while Esther and Mordecai's entire family would be destroyed simply do not make sense. Therefore, this problem, as well as the other discussed above, still remains *if* we render this text as is normally done.

However, I would suggest that there is another way to render this conditional statement in Esth 4:14a that would make sense out of this pericope. It has to do with the interpretation of the first apodosis, "relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place." One could take this as an *interrogative apodosis*, asking in effect a rhetorical question expecting a negative answer. By doing this the author would be expressing a negation by an affirmative question. The text of Esth 4:14a would then read: "For if you certainly keep silent at this time, *will* relief and deliverance arise for the Jews from another place? Then you and the house of your father will be destroyed." With this rendering Mordecai is implying that Esther is the only possible source for relief and deliverance for the Jews. He has no reason to expect it from any other place. He is attempting to motivate her to act, not on the basis of a threat of divine judgment or Jewish retribution, but on the basis of her basic loyalty to her people and her family. If this is correct, then there is no mysterious deliverer to which the author alludes. In addition, we could then see why Esther and her father's house would both be destroyed. If she would not act, then Haman's plot to kill all Jews would succeed, thus eliminating all of Mordecai's family, including Esther. Therefore, by rendering the first apodosis of Esth 4:14a as an interrogative clause, the problems discussed above with this text vanish. But the question then arises, can one legitimately render Esth 4:14a as having an interrogative apodosis?

Most often the style of classical Biblical Hebrew in construing such a clause is to introduce it with an interrogative particle, pronoun, adverb, or conjunction, such as *h* interrogative, *mā*, *mī*, *maddûa*^c, *lammā*, or even simply *gam* or *waw*.¹⁹ Note the following examples:

¹⁹ Interrogative *h* is used to introduce an interrogative apodosis of a conditional clause in Gen 4:7; 18:24,28; Lev 10:19; Num 12:14; Ruth 1:12 (2x); 2 Kgs 5:13; 7:2,19; Job 14:14; Ps 44:21; Eccl 6:6; Jer 3:1 (2x); Hag 2:12,13. The pronoun *mā* is used in Exod 3:13; Lev 25:20; 1 Sam 9:7; Job 7:20; 16:6; 31:13-14; 35:6 (2x), 7 (2x). The pronoun *mī* is employed in 1 Sam 2:25; 20:10; Job 9:19,24; 11:10; 24:25. The particle *lammā* is found in Gen 25:22; 27:46; Judg 6:13; *maddûa*^c in 2 Sam 18:11; and *gam* in Zech 8:6. The conjunction *wē* is found in Exod 8:22; 1 Sam 20:9,12; 24:20; Job 11:11; Jer 49:12. Note the discussions in GKC, 493-99 (§159); A. B. Davidson,

Using *h*: *ʔūlay yēš ḥāmiššīm šaddīqīm bētōk ḥāʔir ḥaʔap tispēh* ("If there were fifty righteous (people) in the midst of the city, then would you really destroy it?" [Gen 18:24])

Using *mā*: *ʔim ʔemʔas mišpaʔ ʔabdi waʔāmāti . . . ūmā ʔeʔseh ki yāqūm ʔēl* ("If I reject the justice due to my male servant or my female servant . . . then what will I do when God arises?" [Job 31:13-14])

Using *mī*: *wēʔim lyhwh yehētāʔ ʔš mī yitpallel lô* ("But if a man sins against Yahweh, then who can intercede for him?" [1 Sam 2:25])

Using *wē*: *wēki yimšāʔ ʔš ʔet ʔōyēbō wēšillēhō bēderek ʔōbā* ("And if a man finds his enemy, then will he safely send him away?" [1 Sam 24:20])

The problem in seeing the first apodosis in Esth 4:14a in this way is that it is not introduced by any such word or particle. Still, this observation should not deter us from the proposed hypothesis, for in Biblical Hebrew interrogative clauses need not be introduced by any particle at all.²⁰ Theoretically, one can take any clause and construe it as an interrogative if the context allows for it. Moreover, in late Hebrew there seems to have been a tendency to omit such an introductory particle on an interrogative apodosis of a conditional statement. Note these examples from late biblical texts:

ʔim ʔawel pāʔaltī lōʔ ʔōsīp ("If I have done wrong, (then) will I not do (it) again?" [Job 34:32])

wēki taggišūn ʔiwwēr lizbōaḥ ʔēn rāʔ wēki taggišū pissēaḥ wēḥōleh ʔēn rāʔ ("And if you bring a blind animal to sacrifice, [then] is that not evil? And if you bring one that is crippled or sick, [then] is that not evil?" [Mal 1:8])

One could also cite various examples of this phenomenon from the later literary dialect of Mishnaic Hebrew:

ʔim heʔlū ḥaḥūllīn . . . ʔet ḥaṭṭēhōrā taʔāleh tērūma . . . ʔet ḥaṭṭēmēʔā ("If non-holy produce may raise . . . what is clean, [then] should the priest's due raise . . . what is unclean?" [Ter. 5:4])²¹

Introductory Hebrew Grammar (3 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1894) 3. 175-82 (#129); P. Joüon, *Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1947) 513 (§167.3); R. J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1967) 85 (#513), 86 (#517); T. O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1971) 278 (#196); and W. S. LaSor, *Handbook of Biblical Hebrew* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 2. 209-10 (#38.641-43); 207 (#38.6121).

²⁰ See GKC, 473 (§150); Williams, *Syntax*, 91 (#542); Davidson, *Grammar*, 3. 166 (#121); The same phenomenon occurs in Mishnaic Hebrew. See M. H. Segal, *A Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980) 219-20 (§460).

²¹ So Segal, *Grammar*, 219-20 (§460). For text and translation see Phillip Blackman, *Misnayoth* (6 vols.; London: Mishna, 1951) 1. 314; and Eberhard Güting, *Die Mischna: Terumot* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1969) 114-15.

ʿim ʿāmartā bappēsāḥ . . . tōʿmar bizbāḥīm ("If you pronounce [this] regarding the Passover offering . . . [then] would you pronounce [this] regarding the peace offering?" (*Pesah.* 6:5))²²

ʿillū hāyītā ʿōmēd . . . hāyītā maḥāzîr lô ("If you had been standing . . . [then] would you have returned [a greeting] to him?" [*b. Ber.* 32])²³

Now the Hebrew literary dialect of the Book of Esther is quite late, and so one would expect its style to conform more closely to that of late Hebrew or even of Mishnaic Hebrew than to that of classical Biblical Hebrew. Thus, although in earlier Hebrew texts an interrogative apodosis is almost always introduced with some kind of particle, such need not necessarily be the case with respect to a late Hebrew work such as Esther. If the context calls for it, such a clause *could* be rendered as a question. I would submit that taking the first apodosis of Esth 4:14a as an interrogative clause does indeed fit the overall context of the Book of Esther much better than the traditional rendering.

²² Segal, *Grammar*, 220 (§460). For this text see Blackman, *Mishnayoth* 2. 194 and Georg Beer, *Die Mischna: Pesachim* (Giessen: Töpelmann, 1912) 156-57.

²³ See Segal, *Grammar*, 220 (§460), 230 (§490). See also Maurice Simon, *Berakoth* (London: Soncino, 1948) 203.

Appendix J:

Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther

Michael V. Fox, Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991, chs. 9 & 10.

CHAPTER IX MORDECAI

One opinion:
"Mordecai proves to be a worthy successor to Haman. He
is another version of Haman" ("Haman mit umgekehrtem
Vorzeichen").

(S. Ben-Chorin, 1938:9)

Mordecai is an ideal figure, a repository of virtues, a shining example of how a Jew of the diaspora should behave. Yet he is not entirely a bore.

Mordecai is the dominant figure in the book. He is introduced first (2:5) and praised last (10:2-3), and his glorification lies at the book's turning point and presages the Jews' victory. His initiative begins the rescue effort, his edict is the mechanism of deliverance, and his epistle guides the people in the establishment of the new holiday. His unalloyed success, personal and public, for himself and for his people, shows that his behavior is to be taken as exemplary.

1. Mordecai as an Ideal Figure

For Esther's author—though not for all readers—Mordecai is unblemished. He is consistently wise and knowing. His actions save his people and later promote their welfare, all the while benefitting the king and advancing his own career.

The difficulty in discussing an exemplary figure is in getting behind the obvious. But the obvious is a good place to begin, because an exemplum is supposed to be an unequivocal paradigm for use in equivocal circumstances. The exemplum must be (or at least become) an unwavering, unambiguous, even unnuanced standard of right behavior. What, then, are the components of the ideal which Mordecai embodies?

A. JEWISHNESS. While Jewishness is not in itself a virtue, a good quality to be emulated, it is a necessary constituent of this ideal. Mordecai is identified as a Jew in 2:5 and 3:4 and six times there-

after called "Mordecai the Jew." Epithets in the Bible are not incidental identifiers, but clues to the development of the story and integral to it.¹ In this case, the reader does not really need to be informed repeatedly that Mordecai is a Jew, and Esther, who is no less Jewish, is never identified as "the Jewess" (her epithet is "the Queen," for that is closer to her specific function). Mordecai's epithet, then, is a pointer to his special role in the story's development and message: He acts not as an individual but as *the Jew*—the representative and then the leader of the Jewish people. He is introduced as (literally) "a Jewish man" (2:5)—with no comments on other qualities, such as piety, wisdom, courage, or obedience to Torah (contrast the introduction of Ezra in Ezr 7:6, 10). Jewishness, then, is Mordecai's main identifying feature. Later it is not simply Mordecai who enrages Haman, but "Mordecai the Jew" (5:13), just as it is "Mordecai the Jew" who will receive honors from the Agagite (6:10). It is in his capacity as "the Jew" that Mordecai receives the right to compose a royal edict (8:7), confirms the holiday of Purim (9:29, 31), and serves as viceregent (10:3). The ideal typified by Mordecai, then, is of the representative Jew, a man identified first and foremost and finally by his Jewishness.

B. WISDOM. Mordecai knows just what is happening and—except for one moment—knows exactly what must be done. His wisdom includes foresight, the preparation for dangers before they arise. He has the political savvy to compose a decree that will avert the disaster, and the social sagacity to direct the people in the establishment of a new ritual. He also knows how to play up to the king's ego and encourage a favorable attitude toward the Jews (see the Commentary on 9:24–25).

C. PRIDE. The author is wholly in sympathy with Mordecai's pride, in particular, his national pride, even though it sparks a dangerous

1. The definitive discussion of biblical epithets is Sternberg 1985:328–341. He says that "all formal epithets, in contrast [to redundant epithets that specify character in the interest of realism], enter into tight relations with the patterns that surround them, fulfilling at least one role beyond direct characterization. . . . All these epithets are implicitly proleptic within the dynamics of action" (p. 331). Such epithets "are charged with kinetic power straining for release" (p. 332). They are bound to carry "actional as well as descriptive implications."

2. In 4:8, Esther will take a better approach than the one Mordecai recommends; see the Commentary on Act V (5:1–8).

series of events. Mordecai's is the pride of self-esteem rather than the pride of arrogance.

D. COURAGE. He never varies his course to protect himself.

E. LOYALTY TO THE KING. He is the king's man, and only through him does he serve the kingdom.

F. LEADERSHIP. He uses his influence among the Jews and with the king to instruct the people in establishing and developing their religious institutions.

Mordecai represents a leader of a new sort: the diaspora leader. What does it mean to lead the Jews when you are neither king nor prince, prophet nor priest? The answer is, of course, dependent on the nature of the community to be led, and that issue will await our discussion of the Jewish people (chap. XI §2c-d). The main feature of this personage is that he earns his position by his own deeds; it is not an institutionalized post (Mordecai's viziership is a tool in leadership, not its basis). He is not elected or even acclaimed (no social framework is available for such choices) but simply acts as he sees fit, and his deeds are confirmed by communal accord.

Mordecai is to the diaspora what Ezra was to the Judean community. Both the book of Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah try to define a new sort of leader. According to T. Eskenazi's analysis, "Ezra's chosen method involves persuasion, example, and appeal, rather than coercion. The enormity of the powers in his possession heightens the magnitude of Ezra's restraint, stressing thereby his abnegation of such means. . . . At the core of Ezra's activities is the transfer of power and knowledge from himself to the community as a whole" (1988: 138). The book of Esther proposes a very similar model of leadership for a similar reason. Ezra was facing a community in dissolution, lacking authorities or rulers with powers rooted in the people's laws and traditions (Joshua and Zerubbabel having proved dead-ends). Rather than exercise his official authority, which derived from the gentile realm, to impose his will on the community, Ezra sought to harness the communal will and energy in the fulfillment of Torah. Mordecai does much the same. Of both it can be said, in Eskenazi's words, that they exercise "the power of influence rather than coercion, relying on example, embodying the difference between genuine power and force" (p. 140). Ezra is counterbalanced by quite a different model, that of the overbearing

and coercive Nehemiah, whom the book of Ezra-Nehemiah treats with a certain ambivalence. But, as Eskenazi shows, it is finally Ezra who embodies the ideal to be emulated (pp. 144–54).

G. LOYALTY TO THE JEWISH PEOPLE. Mordecai's loyalty to his people is his chief virtue. He acts on their behalf, pulling whatever strings he can, wielding whatever power he holds in the cause. In his later career, he speaks up on their behalf and sees to their welfare (*šalom*, 10:3).

H. LACK OF PERSONAL AMBITION. Mordecai does nothing to further his own career. Many commentators assume that as a palace official who reaped success, Mordecai must have been an opportunist. Paton thinks that Mordecai was willing to sacrifice his cousin to his political ambition (p. 173).³ Bickerman believes that Mordecai refused to bow because Haman had received a promotion that Mordecai considered his due for having saved the king's life.⁴ We would indeed expect a palace official to be ambitious; it is all the more significant, then, that Mordecai never strives for personal advancement. Any personal benefit he might have derived from his cousin's position he gives up by insisting on keeping their kinship secret. He certainly could not expect to advance his career by disobeying the king and slighting the vizier, his boss. He claims no reward for informing on the eunuchs. The laurels he does receive fall into his lap without affecting him much. He rises in rank and power without evident effort toward those goals; they accrue to him as incidental rewards for his devotion to his king and his people.

I. DIRECTNESS. Manipulativeness is another quality that many commentators assume must belong to a figure like Mordecai; but it is not there. Mordecai always acts in an entirely forthright manner. He is wise but not cunning, and certainly not devious. He does not, after all, even attempt to get on the vizier's good side; quite the contrary, he is dangerously blunt. He does not manipulate or "run" Esther but gives her direct instructions, as befits his parental

3. He had no choice, of course, in the induction of his cousin into the harem. Surely the king did not see himself obligated to obtain parental consent. In any case, Mordecai does not seem to consider Esther unfortunate for having reached royal station (4:14).

4. Bickerman 1967:179. This is part of a hypothetical "Mordecai Story" that Bickerman reconstructs and believes to have been woven into the present book of Esther. Whatever the validity of this theory, the strife between Mordecai and Haman is present in the canonical book as well.

status. When facing the gravest of crises, he sends Esther to the king not to deceive him or finagle her wish out of him, but straightforwardly "to implore and beseech him on behalf of her people" (4:8). In this instance, Esther turns out to be shrewder than Mordecai and chooses a less direct approach, which the situation certainly required.

J. FAITH AND PIETY? One virtue is surprisingly absent in the portrayal of Mordecai. Piety, either as an attribute of spirit or as obedience to Mosaic Law, is not displayed among Mordecai's virtues. Piety is the foremost quality of other ideal figures in Second Temple Jewish literature—the Jews in Daniel, for example, or the heroes of the books of Maccabees—and it is always in plain view. Ideal figures pray, preach, and demonstrate their trust in God and their zeal for the Law and are rewarded accordingly. Mordecai, in contrast, nowhere prays, and when he states his faith, it is not expressly in God. Nor does he show any concern about his ward's marriage to a gentile and the inevitable impingement on her religious duties, though he does worry generally about her welfare (2:11). Given the blatancy of Mordecai's other virtues, the non-mention of this one must be deemed deliberate, not merely a neglect of the obvious. This is not to say that Mordecai was not pious; traditional readers, at least, invariably saw him as such, and there is no suggestion that he deliberately lacks or avoids devotion to God. But the author does not make piety a component of the *ideal*, one of the virtues to be conveyed by Mordecai's example.

Mordecai does have faith—in Jewish survival. He is confident that "relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another source" (4:14a). This is a peculiar faith; it seems autonomous, not derivative from any system of belief. It is at its core irrational, for it is not reasoned out from premises, religious or natural.

I will explore Mordecai's faith and the book's religious stance (and it does have one) in chapter XII §3. For now, I observe only that Mordecai's faith is all the more courageous for eschewing rationalization, for assuming its own adequacy. Furthermore, if we respect the book's silences rather than filling them with presuppositions about what an ideal figure must be, we must conclude that the author conceived of a valid Jewish life without the primacy of piety or Law. (He does not say that religion is secondary; he just does not choose to make it primary.) This is not unthinkable. Jews have never all defined their Jewishness in the same way, certainly

not in Second Temple times, in spite of the later rabbis' stereotyping of the men they considered their predecessors (picturing Mordecai as the first president of the Sanhedrin). Qohelet (Ecclesiastes), roughly contemporary with the author of Esther, is very concerned with God's role in human life yet holds very unorthodox views of divine providence and says nothing about Torah. Torah itself did not invariably have the primacy for all sectors of Jewish religious life that it later acquired. As Nickelsburg and Collins say of the ideal figures studied in their anthology, *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism*,

The variety of religious expression evidenced in the different types of ideal figures serves, moreover, as a *caveat* for systematic treatments of Jewish religion and theology. . . . While the authority of the Mosaic Torah may in no case be denied, implicitly or explicitly, it is evident that the mentality of the apocalypticist or the visionary or the charismatic allows for, indeed, asserts the value and authority of other complementary and supplementary sources of revelation. . . . In short, while "systematic" studies of ancient Judaism are valid and helpful, they must be carried on in tension with a sensitivity to the unique characteristics of the individual phenomena. Only then do we historians stand a chance of glimpsing the variegated and many-sided edifice of this ancient religion. (1980: 10–11)

The virtues that Mordecai displays are quite different from those of other ideal figures of the diaspora. Daniel and his friends exemplify loyalty to God and maintain their piety even in extremes. But they do nothing for the direct benefit of other Jews—besides themselves epitomizing piety. They do not speak up on behalf of their co-religionists; they do not seek the nullification of decrees that force Jews into idolatry and place them in mortal danger. Their virtues are purely individual and spiritual. The first six chapters of Daniel have no sense of community. The Scroll tries to inculcate such a sense and so makes its ideal figures—especially Mordecai but also Esther—communal leaders. We can also contrast Ezra and Nehemiah, whose solicitude for Jews (insofar as this is recorded) is directed only toward those in Palestine. Joseph, who is sometimes thought the model for Mordecai, takes care of his family, but this is quite different from national loyalty; it is motivated more by personal sentiments.

The most important lessons of the book of Esther are not subtle. They are put into the form of a schematic, exciting story, easily

understood and remembered, and they are conveyed by clearly etched type-figures. Mordecai is the type of the Jewish courtier in the diaspora, the ideal court Jew: a man of power and courage, favored by the king and beloved of his kin, concerned above all for the welfare of his people. Mordecai's power and position are the best guarantor of security for his people.

2. Mordecai's Reserve

Mordecai is complete at the beginning of the book. He has never wavered and never will. He is exemplary to start with. But he is saved from being a Sunday-school figure by one intriguing trait: he keeps his own counsel, and the author respects his reserve. This reserve—and the author's—saves Mordecai from the flat predictability of perfection.

At certain key points, Mordecai does things that are hard to explain; indeed, one danger-fraught act, the refusal to bow, seems almost irrational. The author's belief in Mordecai's wisdom induces the reader to look for an explanation, but we are never granted entry into Mordecai's psyche. Whereas the author violates Haman's privacy, he respects Mordecai's, even when Mordecai's motivations, reasoning, and responses call for explanation. This evokes curiosity and gives the reader an impression of character-depth: much is going on in Mordecai's mind that we can only guess at. But the author wants us to guess, and so gives us enough clues to make some guesses better than others. Indeed, a discussion of Mordecai's character can proceed by attempting to fill in the silences.

We are not told why Mordecai instructs Esther to conceal her national identity. He is almost certainly preparing Esther as an inside agent in the event of danger to the Jews (see the Commentary on 2:10). Years before the danger materializes, Mordecai is alert and planning for the contingency. He is looking out for his people's interests, taking upon himself the responsibilities of leadership even before the need to do so is evident. The LXX fills the gap by giving Mordecai a dream foretelling the crisis and how it would be met, thereby making him more understandable and less mysterious. The MT-author chooses not to satisfy our curiosity in some such way.

The biggest puzzle is Mordecai's refusal to bow to the new vizier. He was obviously endangering himself. But didn't he realize that he would endanger his people too by publicly defying the

haughty vizier—an ancient tribal enemy—while flaunting his own Jewishness? The author must have in mind some reason for such persistent, dangerous, and apparently useless behavior; it cannot be due to a whim, certainly not in a stable, thoughtful character like Mordecai. In the Commentary on 3:2–3 I weigh the various explanations that have been offered and argue that the most likely reason for the refusal is that Haman is an Amalekite, the ancient tribal enemy of Israel. This motive is, however, kept well in the background. The author does not rationalize the act that will endanger the Jews, perhaps because Jewish motives are not relevant to anti-semitic malevolence.

Whatever the reason for Mordecai's defiance, it is behavior that the author affirms and admires, for Mordecai's wisdom and heroism are unalloyed and unquestioned. The author never suggests that Mordecai bore any responsibility for Haman's scheme. Unlike some commentators (Paton and Ben-Chorin [1938:8], among others), the author does not blame the hatred on its victim.⁵

Mordecai has already proved his fealty to the king. Only in this regard does he insist on disobeying the king's orders, though the consequences are potentially disastrous. If Mordecai's stubbornness is, as argued, rooted in tribal loyalties, a concession would betray his people (thus Meinhold). Mordecai's first loyalty is to the ancient demands of his people's history. In the diaspora, the Jews, subjugated to the laws and the will of a foreign people, dare not compromise their national honor, even when this stubbornness might imperil their existence. Though beaten in their homeland, they must remain unbowed in exile. Mordecai shows this even in his posture.

Yet I find that I cannot affirm Mordecai's behavior in the way the author does. The only explanation of Mordecai's defiance that saves him from mere arrogance or instability—namely, that his act was due to tribal hostility—does the author no credit. He (like other biblical authors) believes that ancient tribal antagonisms are transmitted from age to age and that Jews in later generations are obliged to express them. Mordecai's flaw is not his pride but his (which is to say the author's) concept of genetic culpability. Nothing suggests that at the time Haman appears on the scene the vizier already bore personal guilt or had otherwise shown himself deserv-

5. This is the "Hitler's tailor" theory of antisemitism, the notion that Hitler hated the Jews because he was once cheated by a Jewish tailor.

ing of hostility. He will prove to deserve it, but Mordecai is not a prophet, and even so, no one is responsible for future crimes. The author believes that the dichotomy between good and evil can be encoded in a national-genetic one.⁶ To be sure, prostration signals subordination, and Mordecai would not want to imply Israel's subordination to Amalek, but the gesture is individual not tribal, and, after all, Mordecai was in fact Haman's subordinate. If Mordecai found the gesture intolerable, he should not have accepted the reality, but should have quit his job when Haman took office.

Mordecai's silence is again noticeable in 6:11, when Haman leads him about the city in honor and pomp. We may contrast the way this episode is handled in the original AT, in which Mordecai is not imperturbable. When Haman emerges with orders to bestow the honors and tells Mordecai to change his garments,

Mordecai was disturbed, like one about to die, and he removed the sackcloth in distress, and he put on the garments of honor. And Mordecai thought he saw an omen, and his heart was toward the Lord, and he was beside himself in speechlessness. (AT vii 16–17)

The Midrash, too, pictures Mordecai as fearful at this point (Est. Rab. X 4 = b. Meg. 16a). It is hard, however, to imagine the Mordecai of the MT seized by agitation and fear on his own behalf, or even being struck dumb with amazement. The MT version avoids ascribing such frailties to the hero, but it does not substitute other feelings for them, such as exultation or gratitude to God. The elision of Mordecai's thoughts suggests that he is not overwhelmed by either fear or delight but simply accepts the honors in silence. Afterwards he returns to the gate with no further ado and waits, his composure highlighted by Haman's agitation (6:12).

When Mordecai appears again, after Haman is overthrown, he still maintains silence, while it is Esther who begs the king to rescind Haman's decree (8:1–6).

We are given clear signals to Mordecai's thoughts and feelings only in 4:1, where he goes into public mourning. And even in this limited exposure there is reserve, for we do not know to what extent his behavior is tactical. The closest the author comes to revealing Mordecai's thoughts directly is in reporting that he "found out"

6. This schema is overcome in the Talmud, which says that Haman's descendants converted to Judaism and became Torah scholars in the academy of Bney Beraq (b. Gittin 57b).

what had happened (4:1) and that he sought to "learn about" Esther's welfare (2:11) (in both cases the verb *yada'*, usually translated "know," is used). Both these insights are virtually external data that someone on the scene could have observed (in the latter case Mordecai would have to ask questions about Esther), and they expose little of the depths of Mordecai's mind. It is significant that these slight incursions into Mordecai's mind use the verb *yada'*. "And Mordecai knew" is an excellent encapsulation of an important facet of his character.

Mordecai speaks very little in the whole book. He is most talkative when persuading Esther to undertake the mission, but even there he is communicating through messengers and is quoted indirectly. (Strictly speaking, we only hear him quoted in 4:13b-14, thirty-one words in all; another sixty-six are phrased as indirect discourse.)⁷

Mordecai retains a hard nub of inscrutability. Esther I feel I can understand. My reading may, of course, be wrong or incomplete, but the point is not the adequacy of my reading but rather my sense (which is to say, illusion) as a reader that I can know all that there is to know about her. Xerxes has no silences. There is nothing there to be silent about; we know this from the exposure of his shallowness in chapter 1. Mordecai, however, I cannot quite decipher. The author has carefully left a few dark spots that invite scrutiny but do not satisfy it. That the author preserves obscurity in such a schematic ideal figure shows a certain delight in developing character for its own sake rather than only for its exemplary value; and thus keeps Mordecai realistic and human in a way that Daniel, for example, is not. Mordecai's portrayal preserves respect for a character who is a creation of ideology by excluding certain areas from the ideology. This technique makes Mordecai always deeper than the reader. And that, in turn, makes him a more effective exemplum.

Nevertheless, an exemplum is what Mordecai remains. Haman is vivid in his evil; Xerxes is predictably unstable; Esther is changeable and human and multifaceted. Mordecai is flat—always presenting one surface to the reader—and unchanging. This is a quality, not a fault: Mordecai is meant to be flat—level, we might say, or

7. The forty-four words of the counter-decree (9:21-22) are an indirect quote of something Mordecai composed, but they are formally the king's words and they are meant to be taken that way.

solid—a brick.⁸ His perfect wisdom, stability, and loyalty make him reliable. He continues unchanged, powerful, energetic, benevolent, issuing public epistles, and exercising authority through his station as vizier and leader. He will never surprise us. We know we can rely on a leader like that and comfortably adapt our will to his—such is the picture of Jewish leadership that the book projects. But we cannot *approach* him. His completeness, together with his taciturnity, makes him a leader at a distance. We can try to follow his example but cannot easily identify with him. It is otherwise with Esther.

8. Responding to E. M. Forster's recognition and definition of "flat" characters, E. Muir says: "In the novel of character, they [flat characters] are to be met in thousands, and it is more reasonable to believe that there is method in their flatness than that they are mistakes which all the great character novelists have had the misfortune to commit. Why, indeed, should not a character be flat? The only real answer to this is that the present taste in criticism prefers round characters" (1929: 25). Muir proceeds to elucidate the function of flatness. Many Bible scholars, however, use "flatness" as a reproach to the author of Esther, as if a book populated with variegated, shifting, multifaceted, unpredictable characters would do a better job in achieving the goals of the book of Esther than this one does.

CHAPTER X

ESTHER

One opinion:

"Esther, for the chance of winning wealth and power, takes her place in the herd of maidens who become concubines of the King. She wins her victories not by skill or by character, but by her beauty."

(L. B. Paton, p. 96)

Of the two heroes in the book of Esther, Mordecai is the dominant actor and the more sterling paragon; yet it is appropriate that the Scroll bears Esther's name, for she too is central.¹ There is no need to determine for every book a single most important character. A book can have two central characters, equally important but significant in different ways. In the Scroll, it is Esther who stands at the center of the book's artistic interest. She emerges as the most distinct and memorable character in the book, the one with whom the reader most naturally identifies. Mordecai's character forms a solid frame around the smaller and more finely executed depiction of Esther.

The distinctive feature in the portrayal of Esther is change. Esther alone undergoes growth and surprises the reader by unpredictable developments.² She is, in E. M. Forster's influential terminology, "round," having more than a single dominant character trait and capable of surprising the reader. Her dynamism stands out in relief against the static nature of the other characters (including Xerxes, who is erratic but is consistent in his instability). She develops in three stages, from passivity to activity to authority.

1. The rabbis called the book simply *hamegillah*, "The Scroll." The earliest use of the title "Esther" that I can find is the heading given the book in the ancient codices of the Septuagint—the Vaticanus and the Sinaiticus (both fourth century C.E.) and the Alexandrinus (fifth century).
2. Several scholars have recognized Esther's development, among them Jones (1977:176), Clines (p. 145), Craghan (1986), Meinhold (p. 105), S. White (1989:170), and Talmon (1963:449—notwithstanding his statement on p. 440 that the *dramatis personae* remain static).

1. Passivity

Esther's early years—until the first month of the twelfth year—are distinguished by passivity and pliancy. She is introduced incidentally to the identification of Mordecai, as an object of his action: he "had been raising" her, having "taken her to himself as a daughter" (2:7). She was, of course, strictly obedient to him (as we are told retrospectively in 2:20b). The mother would normally be the primary authority, tutor, and model for a girl, but as an orphan raised by her cousin, Esther is from the outset entirely dependent upon and governed by males.

Esther is "taken" (a key word in chap. 2), along with the other beautiful virgins, to the scraglio (2:8), put into the control of a eunuch, processed through a twelve-month beauty treatment, then "taken" for one night to the king, who tries her out in bed. Esther has been criticized for compliance and even opportunism in going along with all this, but of course she had no choice. Contrary to a common notion, there was no beauty contest to choose a new queen. All comely virgins were gathered; there was no further selection before they were taken to the king. In any case, the Persians have already proved themselves intolerant of female freedom of choice. (Nor does the royal decision to have the maidens "gathered" leave scope for consulting her guardian's will.) But while Esther's induction into the harem was beyond her and Mordecai's decision (and thus not a matter for censure), the way the induction is described suggests docility of the deepest sort. If she had been dragged off weeping, she would at least have been expressing indignation at having her sexuality—indeed, her whole life—expropriated by the royal authority. Or if she had gone off pleased at her prospects for personal promotion, she would at least have been lending her will to the bargain. But unlike the men at the banquet (1:8b), Esther is not consulted; her will is of no interest. The author does not even hint at how Esther felt about what was happening to her, because her feelings are irrelevant. But this ostensive indifference to Esther's soul is not because the author is indifferent to her as an individual; the contrary will be proved in the course of the book, as in 4:10–16, where her hesitation, fear, and resolution are crucial to the progress of the story. Rather, the author seeks to convey the insignificance of her will and mind at this stage. Esther is putty—not because of any personality flaw, but because of age and situation. Nothing has ever challenged her to be anything more.

ESTHER

In the seraglio, Esther spends a year being worked over by cosmeticians. Natural charms apparently do not suffice in this glut of pulchritude; the women must be smeared with odoriferous unguents for a year, then sent to the king's bed bedecked and bedizenized like the rest of his possessions. Esther accepts whatever happens to her. So devoid is she of individual will that she does not ask for further aids on her big night—a request that might at least show active participation in the process. Her disinclination to ask for supplemental aids shows only self-effacing receptivity and passivity. Nor does she refuse anything, an action that might show a spark of self-assertion—evidence of confidence in her own beauty, perhaps, or indifference to the outcome, or principled repudiation of artificial luxuries. In consequence of these qualities, everyone likes her. It is no surprise when the king “loves” her as well; she has Vashti's good looks without her willfulness. The king—we may assume—also found Esther's sexual talents to his liking, and so he makes her queen.

So far Esther has been nothing more than sweet and pretty, hardly a person you would expect to shoulder her people's fate and engineer its salvation. Her personality seems hardly changed when we next see her, a little more than three years later, just after the publication of Haman's edict. When she learns that Mordecai is in mourning, she responds by sending him fresh clothes, as if to solve a problem—whatever it might be—by improving appearances. Perhaps she is afraid he is making waves; she has, after all, lived in secretiveness for several years. Her focus on superficials is to be expected of a young woman whose daily routine places overwhelming importance on her appearance, and whose excellence in that regard has brought her to what everyone around her views as the ultimate in feminine success.

The exchange with Mordecai is related from Esther's, not Mordecai's, point of view, with the movement of the maids and messengers described from her standpoint. For the first time, we start to identify with her as a person and to see events through her eyes.

At this stage, just before the moment of transformation, Esther does three things that foreshadow her role as national leader: she sends, she commands, she inquires. The sending back and forth of messages and messengers both represents and accomplishes the transition from the centrality of Mordecai to that of Esther, who must now adopt the primary role in moving the plot toward reso-

ACTIVITY

lution.³ Her three commands to Hatach (the word “commanded” rather than “sent” is used) hint at her potential authority. And her inquiry about the causes of Mordecai’s behavior is her first step in becoming an initiator and planner: she looks behind appearances to causes and asks about the meaning of what is happening around her. In the cumbrous process of communicating with Mordecai she is starting to behave like a leader.

When Mordecai first instructs her to go to the king to plead for the life of the Jews (4:8b), her immediate thought is for her own safety (4:11). This reaction, natural but self-centered, shows that she does not yet fully identify her fate with her people’s. This, too, is hardly surprising, for she has lived apart from them for over four years, during which time she has carefully concealed her identity.

In Mordecai’s next message (4:13–14) he does not merely command Esther; he argues with her, gives her evidence, and seeks to persuade her. He is beginning to treat her not merely as a former ward but as a partner, an adult and equal who must be persuaded rather than commanded. Not only can he no longer enforce obedience (though Esther, according to 2:20, was still obeying him), but it is also true that mere obedience would not suffice, because once Mordecai sets Esther going, she must think and act on her own. At the very least, she must find the right words and tactics to sway the king. She must be fully and personally involved in the effort; indeed, she must direct it.

2. Activity

The turning point in Esther’s development comes at the end of the scene, in 4:15–16. It is abrupt and surprising. She resolves to do her duty, and a change immediately comes upon her. She *commands* Mordecai—in the imperative, with no polite circumlocutions—to assemble the Jews in Susa for a public fast: “Go, gather all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night and day, and I too, with my maids, will fast in

3. These observations draw upon Clines (pp. 33–35). He describes well the subtle art of this scene but attaches too much weight to the significance of the specific objects sent, seeing the copy of the edict as a counterpart of the clothes. In my view, it is not the objects but the content of the messages sent, as well as the back-and-forth communication in and of itself, that moves the scene toward transfer of responsibility.

this way" (4:16). In convening such an assembly and issuing directives to the community, Esther is assuming the role of a religious and national leader, and doing so prior to Mordecai's own assumption of that role. She has taken control, giving Mordecai instructions, enjoining a fast on the Jews, and deciding to act contrary to law. Her resolute behavior marks a woman determined to work her way through a crisis, not one cowed into obedience.

She takes her fate in her hands with a courageous declaration: "And in this condition I will go to the king, contrary to law, and if I perish, I perish" (4:16b). This is the courage of one who must do her duty without certainty of success, without a simple faith that a higher being will protect her.

In the two banquet scenes, she unwinds her strategy patiently, with great control. I trace that strategy step-by-step in the Commentary to chapters 5, 7, and 8. Two points are to be emphasized.

First, the plan Esther executes is of her own devising. Mordecai had merely told her to go to the king and entreat him on behalf of her people (4:8). Of course she has acceded to his demand in essence and has taken his cause to herself. But, with no further consultation, she has chosen to approach the task in a way quite different from what Mordecai and (judging from the commentaries) the reader would expect. After all, it would be natural and acceptable for a pretty young lady to plead with her husband to give her her way. Esther chooses a more circuitous approach, one that involves near-disobedience to the king: even though he virtually orders her in 5:3 to declare her wish, she does not comply until the next day. Strict compliance is no longer Esther's prime virtue.

Second, Esther executes her strategy with skill, control, rhetorical precision, and eloquence. She does not—contrary to a common notion—simply exploit her beauty and erotic charm. To do so in such a fateful cause would be quite justified and would not impinge on her dignity. But these qualities would not be sufficient to the task. Her beauty did help secure her the queenship and the audience with the king, and she does employ meekness and play upon her husband's affection, especially by emphasizing the threat to her person. To some extent Esther does exploit feminine wiles and attractions by displaying meekness and playing up to her husband's ego. When she says, "If I have found favor in your eyes" (7:3), rather than simply "if the idea pleases you," she is playing on the king's affection, as if to say, "if you really love me. . . ." She also gives prominence to her need for personal protection, stressing

that she herself is threatened. But these tactics are subordinate to her eloquence and cunning.

Esther cannot simply exploit lust as Judith does. After all, Xerxes, as Esther's husband and king, has free access to her sexuality as it is. Mostly, Esther must draw upon hitherto untested and unexpected intellectual powers.

Esther's undoubted need for cunning and circumspection justifies the interpretation of her speeches and actions as being formulated with careful thought and control, rather than as indecisive and haphazard. As I argue in the Commentary, the best explanation for Esther's delaying her request until the second banquet is that she is unfolding a premeditated strategy; and once we grant this, we are justified in scrutinizing her words for further signs of this plan. Such a scrutiny shows her building up to the accusation with great care: piquing the king's suspense, eliciting a near-promise to fulfill her wish, withholding information that could put the king on the defensive (by making him face his own culpability), delaying other information (the identity of the offender) until she has given full momentum to the king's anger, softening her speech with deferential courtesies and demurrals that play to his ego, cracking out her accusation like a whip, then allowing matters to take their course once she has set Haman careening toward destruction.

In chapters 5 and 7—most notably in 7:4—Esther is indirect, self-effacing, and manipulative. Some commentators find these qualities morally unappealing or offensive as an image of the feminine (see the Excursus below). Such reproaches might appear completely extraneous and anachronistic, except that the author himself seems almost to anticipate them by building rebuttals into the story. The Vashti episode is prefixed to the story to demonstrate that humility and indirection were necessary to Esther's success. Vashti's fate showed that the king may react badly to strong-willed women who do not temper their strength with subtlety. What would a direct and bold demand have achieved, besides giving Esther a self-satisfied feeling of moral virtue as *she* was deposed in turn? Even a straightforward request could founder as the king contemplated the deposition of his favorite official or, perhaps, realized that he could simply protect his wife from the mob without sacrificing his vizier or butting up against the earlier decree. Moreover, the successes of the Persian nobility, including Haman's, in playing on Xerxes' nervous ego show that Esther's tactics are exactly those of everyone else in the Persian court—gaining one's way by manipu-

lating the man in power. These preemptive rebuttals suggest that the author is salving Jewish sensitivities by showing that indirection, cunning, and at least some show of subservience are necessary stratagems in such circumstances and should not offend Jewish pride. That such pride was indeed a factor is demonstrated by Mordecai's refusal to kowtow to Haman. The author respects that pride, certainly, and no way reproaches its manifestation. Yet he recognizes that this is not what is needed to resolve the crisis. We cannot afford an entire nation of Mordecais; Mordecai himself must call upon another type of person for help. Moreover, in the end Mordecai, too, will be forced to act with some indirection, writing a clever counter-edict rather than simply annulling the first one.⁴

At the conclusion of Esther's plea, Haman is exposed and shaking in terror—not only before the obvious power holder, the king, but also before the queen (7:6). She is now a force to be reckoned with in her own right. Haman falls on her bed to plead for his life. Esther's silence gives her a stony, imperious air, but Haman deserves nothing else. He has no claim on pity, and sparing him would leave him around to fight countermeasures and try again.

3. Authority

That very day, Xerxes gives Esther Haman's property, which she transfers to Mordecai's control (8:1–2). This little episode restructures relationships and raises Esther's status. She now is a source and agent of wealth and empowerment for Mordecai.

It seems somewhat incongruous when, immediately thereafter (8:3), she falls weeping at the king's feet, imploring him to annul Haman's decree. This is the approach Mordecai had expected her to use at the start, but she exploits it only subsequent to her initial success and her increase of personal power. As the king's hesitant response shows, this request is a difficult one and thus calls for a greater effort and display of emotion on her part. But even that does not work. The matter is out of the king's hands—as he will betoken by transferring the ring to the two Jews. The result of this temporary setback is an increase in power for the two protagonists, a fact reflected in Xerxes' address to both "Mordecai the Jew" and "Esther the queen" and in his bestowal of power upon them jointly.

4. As he does in the AT (viii 16), where his (not Esther's) request for the annulment of Haman's edict solves the problem.

a recognition of their partnership in the handling of the crisis. The Midrash captures this relationship in the emblem of a coin with Mordecai on one side and Esther on the other (Est. Rab. X 12).

On the 13th of Adar, when the Jews have overpowered their enemies and slaughtered masses of them, the king, apparently put into an expansive mood by the body-count in Susa, tells Esther to make another request. With little preamble, she asks that the Jews in Susa be allowed another day of fighting and that the bodies of Haman's sons be impaled (9:13). At this point—and not earlier—Esther seems vindictive. The Jews are in no present danger, for they have massacred their enemies, who in any case would not be allowed to continue fighting beyond the 13th. Even if Esther's request is for a precautionary massacre, it is, literally, overkill.

In this exchange, Esther seems less anxious to get her way than her husband is to give it to her. She does not take the initiative to seek another boon, but simply accepts his offer. She makes her request bluntly, no longer trying to convince him that her request is right and necessary. What is disturbing in this speech is not only her vindictiveness, which is humanly understandable, but also the neglect of persuasion. Her earlier petitions (especially in 8:6) appealed not only to personal affection but also to an ethical value: Do this for me to spare me the pain of seeing, and thus suffering, a great injustice. Here she says merely, "should it so please the king." Now that her main request has been granted, her interest in the process seems somewhat diffuse. She no longer tries to justify her requests, though they involve the death and suffering (however deserved) of many people. It seems enough that she *wants* the opportunity to kill more enemies and to abuse the corpses of her foe's sons.

Esther's personality has evolved into the near-opposite of what it was at the start. Once sweet and compliant, she is now steely and unbending, even harsh. I am not sure the MT-author intended this effect. According to my theory of the book's development (see chap. XIV §3a), all of Esther 9 is an expansion of a few sentences in an earlier version of the Esther story. Literary values are here less important than liturgical purposes. Esther's request for a second day of fighting results more from the need to explain an existing practice than from any literary conception of her personality. Yet whatever the author's intentions, the effect of 9:13 is to introduce a note of harshness and even bellicosity into the picture.

Later in the aftermath, Esther issues an epistle confirming the

decision to celebrate two days of Purim (9:29–32). Our understanding of her action depends on whether we accept the MT or read an emended version, a problem discussed in the Commentary on this passage. According to the MT,⁵ Esther joins Mordecai in confirming the decision (9:29–31), then issues a further validation (9:32). According to the emended reading (which I prefer), Esther adds her own confirmatory epistle to Mordecai's.⁶ In either case, it is finally and unequivocally the proclamation of Queen Esther that validates all the previous layers of confirmation, and her statement is inscribed in a document as a witness to the future (9:32). Her decree or statement is called a *ma'amar*, the term used of Xerxes' command to Vashti in 1:15 and Mordecai's command to Esther in 2:20. She is, after all, queen of Persia as well as an ad hoc leader of the Jews. This is an appropriate penultimate conclusion to the book. The docile young beauty has risen to truly royal stature. She stands before her people, and not only before the king, as her cousin's partner. Still, her role is to reinforce and support Mordecai's plans, albeit with some independence in their execution. The validation of Mordecai's initiative is Esther's final action. Her authority is additive not essential, but it is her own, independent of her cousin's.

4. Esther as an Ideal

Mordecai is more of an ideal figure than Esther. He is a bundle of constant virtues; she is imperfect—certainly in her beginnings and (though the author would not agree) in her behavior on 13 Adar. For that very reason, she is the more lively, human character,

5. "(29) And Queen Esther, daughter of Abihayil, and Mordecai the Jew conveyed in writing all the authority necessary to confirm this second Purim epistle. (30) And he sent letters to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of Xerxes' kingdom—words of greeting and faithfulness—(31) to confirm the observance of these days of Purim in their set times, just as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther had confirmed upon them, in the way that they confirm upon themselves and their descendants matters of fasting and the accompanying laments. (32) And the declaration of Esther confirmed these matters concerning Purim, and it was written in a document."

6. "(29) And Queen Esther, daughter of Abihayil, conveyed in writing all the authority necessary to confirm this Purim epistle. (30) And letters were sent to all the Jews in the one hundred twenty-seven provinces of Xerxes' kingdom—words of peace and faithfulness—(31) to confirm the observance of these days of Purim in their set times, just as Mordecai the Jew had confirmed upon them. . . ."

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one with whom we can feel intimacy and identification. Her very ordinariness suggests that ordinary people too can rise to the moment and take on unexpected strengths. Mordecai may be the more unqualified exemplum, but she is the more effective one.

The book of Esther links the issue of national salvation to human character. It raises the question of whether a person of dubious character strength and (initially) unclear self-definition can carry the burden of national salvation. Esther becomes a sort of judge (of the type we see in the book of Judges) without benefit of the Spirit of the Lord.⁷ She is a leader whose charisma comes not in a sudden divine imposition of spirit but as the result of a difficult process of inner development and self-realization. The Scroll is exploring and affirming the potential of human character to rise to the needs of the hour by whatever means and devices the situation demands. The Scroll offers an alternative to the book of Daniel as a model for Jewish life in the diaspora. In Daniel, pious constancy is the only defense against danger, and it is an adequate one, for it ensures God's intervention. In Esther, not miracles, but inner resources—intellectual as well as spiritual—even of people not naturally leaders, are to be relied upon in crisis.

EXCURSUS: The Image of Woman in the Book of Esther

The author of Esther has shared the fate of many biblical authors in coming under opprobrium for his attitudes toward women. Such judgments often seem to me to impose extraneous standards and to reproach an ancient Oriental society for not meeting some very recent, very Western, ideals. But in the case of the book of Esther the feminist critique seems more apropos, for the book itself addresses the issues of the status and abilities of women and the relation between the sexes.

The most pungent criticism of the image of woman in the book of Esther has been put forward by Esther Fuchs (1982), whose radical feminist critiques of biblical literature are, in my view, often more to the mark elsewhere than here. Her view of the book of Esther is shared by A. L. Laffey (1988) and many other feminists.⁷

Fuchs believes that the Esther story undergirds the assumptions of patriarchal ideology by showing that a woman should be

7. See, for example, the personal Jewish response of M. Gendler (1976) to the characters of Esther and Vashti.

obedient and submissive, by teaching that women can become national heroines only by fulfilling their assigned roles as wives and mothers, and by showing that women get their way through deceptive and circuitous means.⁸ The character of the female protagonist is wanting in personal and religious strengths. Esther is totally unaware of Yahweh and not inspired by religious faith. Omission of any direct dialogue with Yahweh is, Fuchs claims, "congruous with a more comprehensive biblical policy which allows women characters to hold direct discourse with God (or his agent) only in a 'procreative' context" (p. 153). Woman's independence is repudiated through the example of Vashti, a repudiation Esther fails to oppose. In Laffey's words, "Rather than defend Vashti's decision and protest the injustice of her banishment, Esther uses Vashti's rejection for her own benefit" (1988:216; cf. Fuchs, p. 156). The literary prominence given to Esther at the expense of the self-assertive, dignified Vashti embodies the biblical stance on sexual politics. The author fails even to credit Esther with any particular zeal in her desire to save her people. Her trepidation at violating court etiquette and entering the inner court is blatantly contrasted with Mordecai's temerity vis-à-vis Haman. She is pretty, obedient, silver-tongued and somewhat manipulative, using placatory language and ingratiating formulas. She waits patiently and obediently until the king gives permission for an audience and only then speaks. Though the king invites her to make her request, she procrastinates. Her example teaches that aesthetic grace paves the way for woman's success, whereas man's power comes from ethical fiber. It is true that she outwits two rather stupid males, and victory is due to Haman's falling into the trap, but the pivotal moment occurs in

8. Speaking of the Bible generally, Fuchs says: "Celebrated or denigrated, the characters of deceptive women, which constitute the majority of female characters in the Bible, serve as an effective ideological tool that perpetuates the suspicion and distrust of women, and that validates women's subordination through discriminatory literary techniques" (1985:143). We might note, however, that all three patriarchs, especially Jacob, employ deception or deviousness at times, as do many other men, such as Joub, David, and Adonijah. Deception is a constant of human behavior, women's not excepted. And even God can deceive (1 Kings 22:20-23; Jer 20:7; Ezek 14:9).

D. N. Fewell (1987:80 f.) criticizes Fuch's treatment of the deception motif for suppressing elements that run contrary to her thesis and failing to observe that deception is a response to powerlessness and that others besides females must use deception in a patriarchal society. In fact, however, it is not only the powerless who deceive, nor is deceptiveness in and of itself stigmatized in the biblical narratives.

a *bedroom scene* (Fuchs 1982:150–156). She acts not as Yahweh's agent but as her uncle's [sic], with whom she shares authority when she gets power (pp. 153–54). Since Esther is obviously meant to be exemplary, her flaws are to be blamed on the author's image of woman.

This frank attack warrants a response. We must first of all observe that some of these assessments require overlooking some significant, and rather obvious, facts. Whatever Esther's religious flaws—if that is what they are—they are shared fully by Mordecai and thus do not constitute a denigration of woman's spirituality; but clearly the author does not see lack of dialogue with God as a failing, since he chooses to leave it out of the book altogether. Also, this feminist critique must ignore Esther's growth to a woman of influence and power. It isolates her adolescent pliancy and some of her tactics as her essential features and assumes that the author elevates these all to objects of emulation.

Other conclusions confuse presuppositions with purposes. To describe a woman living a restrictive life in an Oriental court in which she gains her goals through stratagems, rhetoric, manipulation, and ostensive pliancy is not to imply an ideology affirming this as the ideal female situation. That would be the case only if the author identified fully with the attitudes of all the males in the book and considered their society as exemplary. Given Esther's situation, she does what she must, and she does it well. Likewise, the author in no way denigrates Vashti's attitude but only shows that in the strange and silly world that she and Esther must inhabit, Vashti's approach simply does not work. (We could as well say that the author condemns Mordecai's dignity by showing its consequences.) Esther is indeed, at least at the start, a "stereotypical woman in a man's world" (Laffey 1988:216); but that does not mean that the book *teaches* (as Laffey would have it) "full compliance with patriarchy." Rather, it teaches that *even* a stereotypical woman in a world of laughably stereotypical males is capable of facing the ultimate national crisis and diverting the royal power to her own ends.

Other aspects of this critique scold the book for not being an entirely different work with entirely different concerns. One wonders what the alternative, more worthy, stories implied by the critique would be like. Could Esther have refused to accompany the officials who were sent to gather the maidens? She would have been dragged off or at best ignored, in which case there would have been no book of Esther. And what if she had approached the throne

without waiting for the king to extend his scepter? She, like any man who tried the same, would have been cut down by the guards (4:11).⁹ Who, then, would have defeated Haman's plot?

The critique also evaluates the characters by irrelevant, even distorted, standards. Esther is of course obedient to Mordecai; since he stands *in loco parentis*, her early docility is an expression of filial respect rather than sexual status. She does indeed share her power with her cousin, and if a willingness to share power is a flaw, she may be faulted for it. Although she presumably obeys the king and pays him homage in most circumstances, she does not subordinate her will to his. She is, of course, indirect and manipulative—she has to be, like everyone else in the palace. But she is never actively deceptive (an accusation leveled by several non-feminist commentators as well)—unless honesty demands that she come to Haman's defense and set the king straight. (How would events have unfolded if she had done *that*?). One may reproach the author for not holding his heroes to a standard of absolute openness and directness (an impossible and quixotic standard, in my view). But this fault, if that is what it is, has nothing to do with his image of woman. Most of the men he shows are far more devious in far less worthy causes. (In fact, none of the biblical authors repudiates indirection or even deception in pursuit of worthy goals.) In my view, Esther behaves with dignity, courage, and good sense. There is nothing demeaning in approaching a king as a supplicant or in using stratagems and personal influence in achieving a valid goal.

One thing that troubles me about the critique—apart from its injustice to the author—is that it is indifferent to the severity of the crisis that stands at the story's heart: the mortal danger to the Jewish people. In effect it blames the author for not dealing with other, supposedly more important issues, such as the dignity and independence of women in the Persian court. The author, like perhaps all readers before modern times, sees Esther's sole moral duty to be the salvation of her people from destruction, and he shows her conforming to the expectations of her environment in accomplishing this. A far less dignified approach than the one Esther takes would have been entirely warranted. On the other hand, it would not have

9. Josephus accurately envisions the implication of Esther's words when he adds that guards with axes surrounded the king's throne ready to cut down whoever approached unsummoned.

been justified for her to assert her ego at the expense of her people's existence. A story such as Fuchs and Laffey would consider worthy of respect—in which, perhaps, Esther would stomp into the inner court and issue a series of bold, non-negotiable demands, starting with the restoration of Vashti—would have been a bitter satire on the feminine ego. The book we actually have comes closer to being a satire on the *masculine* ego.

In truth, the author of Esther is something of a protofeminist. This book is the only one in the Bible with a conscious and sustained interest in sexual politics. The concept of sexual politics can be applied precisely and without anachronism to Memuchan's advice and the ensuing decree in 1:16–22. The book certainly does not align itself with the men's side in the conflict. Perhaps alone in the Bible, this author is aware of female subservience and is cynical about the masculine qualities that require it. He sees the reaction of Xerxes and his noblemen to Vashti's refusal as ludicrous and self-defeating. He does not, of course, call for an overthrow of "patriarchy" (which is probably not the best label for the social situation portrayed), but neither does he regard male dominance as part of the inherent moral order of the world. On the contrary, he perceives the cracks in the façade of male dominance. In a true patriarchal society, custom would be the strongest enforcer of the patriarch's will. The author of Esther is very much aware that males, at least in the quirky gentile world, must use political power to enforce their position—and even so they do not really succeed.¹⁰ The harem is the most successful locus of male dominance—and its order is enforced by eunuchs. Surely the description of the harem induction shows an awareness that women were being treated as sex objects (an often misused term that is precisely applicable in this case). The author does not rail against the arrangements as a heavy-handed ideologue, but the awareness itself is noteworthy.

The satire is not, however, directed at male dominance in and of itself, but at male dominance as manifested in the Persian court and, by extension, throughout the gentile realm. The book's irony

10. Fewell (1987:83–84) puts it in a nutshell: "The action (or perhaps I should say non-action) of one woman threatens to collapse the entire structure of patriarchy in the entire Persian empire. So much for indomitable patriarchy. So what do the men do? They persuade the king to pass a law that 'every man be lord in his own house.' If the king's laws are not more effective than his commands, I dare say that patriarchy is in big trouble."

is from a Jewish—not a feminist or even a specifically female—perspective, but it does recognize the silliness, if not the deep perniciousness, of one extreme form of sexual politics.

More important than the satire of gentile behavior is the way the author shapes his woman hero. He respects Esther as a woman of courage and intelligence who does not abandon her dignity even when facing an enemy and struggling to influence the erratic will of a despotic husband. Moreover, the author depicts a successful relationship of power-sharing between male and female, in which both attain prestige and influence in the community. In the pivotal scene in chapter 4, man and woman give each other mutual obedience. What is more, the book takes as its hero a woman whose importance to the Jewish people does not lie in childbearing; there are only a handful of such cases in the Bible.¹¹

Sidnie Ann White, in addition to making several of the above points, argues that the author affirms the feminine as a model for the Jewish people in the diaspora:

The Jews in the Diaspora are also in the position of the weak, as a subordinate population under the dominant Persian government. They must adjust to their lack of immediate political and economic power, and learn to work within the system to gain what power they can. In the book of Esther, their role model for this adjustment is Esther. . . . With no native power of her own owing to her sex or position in society, Esther must learn to make her way among the powerful and to cooperate with others in order to make herself secure. (1989: 173)

The author does not, to be sure, draw the analogy between Esther and the diaspora Jew or turn Esther into a token. She does not “stand for” the diaspora Jew. But as a Jew who succeeds in the most severe of crises, she (like Daniel and his friends) is a natural model for Jews who find themselves in similar situations. Of course, just because the story takes place in the diaspora does not mean that it is intended to be relevant to the diaspora alone. In any royal court—David’s being an excellent example—in fact, in any situation where power is concentrated in one individual, people must pursue their goals by circuitous, if not devious, means. But because the gentile state is essentially indifferent to Jewish existence, and because Jews have no other defense in their dispersion, such expe-

11. Noted by Meinhold, p. 105–6.

dients may be more important to Jewish national concerns in the diaspora than in the homeland.¹²

The appreciation of the book of Esther from a feminist standpoint¹³ has impeccable credentials in the reading offered by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the prominent nineteenth-century woman's rights advocate, writing in *The Woman's Bible*:

Vashti had exercised heroic courage in asserting womanly dignity and the inherent human right never recognized by kingship, to choose whether to please and to obey the king. Esther, so as to save her people from destruction, risked her life. . . . Women as queenly, as noble and as self-sacrificing as was Esther, as self-respecting and as brave as was Vashti, are hampered in their creative office by the unjust statutes of men . . . (1895:92).

These judgments, I have argued, are quite in accord with the author's intentions. There are few books from the ancient Near East that can stand up so well to an assessment by feminist standards.

12. For a theological appreciation of the person of Esther see Craghan, 1982 and 1986. It is probably excessive, however, to call her, as Craghan does, a "fully liberated woman." The author is not even aware of the possibility of liberation.

13. See also Fewell 1987: 83.

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