

Notes on Esther

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Dr. Thomas L. Constable

Introduction

TITLE

The title of this book comes from its principal character, Esther. In this it is similar to many other Old Testament books (e.g., Joshua, Ruth, Samuel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Job, et al.).

WRITER AND DATE

The writer did not identify himself in the text. References in the book show that he was familiar with Persian culture and literature (2:23; 10:2). The writer also wrote as though he was an eyewitness of the events he recorded. He was pro-Jewish and was probably a Jew. It is possible, though not certain, that Mordecai wrote the book.¹ Yet the writer seemingly distinguished himself from Mordecai in 9:20 and 23. The idea that the writer was Esther has not found support, mainly because female writers were uncommon in ancient patriarchal societies such as Israel. This book would have been a source of encouragement to the Jews who had returned to the Promised Land after the Exile. Consequently, many scholars believe a Jew may have written it for this purpose. Perhaps he was a Jew who had returned to the land from Susa, the site of the events recorded in the book.

The writer could have written it any time after 473 B.C., the year the Jews defended themselves and instituted the Feast of Purim, the last historical events in the book (9:27-28). If a contemporary of these events composed it, he probably did so within a generation or two of this date. The first extra-biblical reference to the book is in 2 Maccabees 15:36, which dates

¹Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 11:6:1.

from late in the second century B.C., so we know it was written before then.

CANONICITY

"In the English Bible Esther appears adjacent to Ezra-Nehemiah with the historical books, but in the Hebrew Bible it is one of five short books (the so-called Megillot) that appear toward the end of the biblical writings. The canonicity of the book was questioned by some in ancient Judaism and early Christianity. It is one of five OT books that were at one time regarded as *antilegomena* (i.e., books 'spoken against'). The problem with Esther was the absence of any direct mention of God. Some questioned whether a book that did not mention God could be considered sacred scripture. Attempts to resolve this by discovering the tetragrammaton (YHWH) encoded in the Hebrew text (e.g., in the initial letters of four consecutive words in the Hebrew text of Esth 5:4) are unconvincing, although they do illustrate how keenly the problem was felt by some. Although no copy of Esther was found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, this does not necessarily mean that the Qumran community did not regard it as canonical. More recently, Martin Luther questioned the canonicity of this book. Although the book does not directly mention God it would be difficult to read it without sensing the providence of God working in powerful, though at times subtle, ways to rescue his people from danger and possible extermination."¹

"Luther could never reconcile himself to this book, because he felt that the saving truths of Scripture were absent from it."²

No other Old or New Testament book refers to Esther.

¹The NET Bible note on 1:1. See also David M. Howard Jr., *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*, pp. 315-16.

²C. F. Keil, *The Books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, p. 315.

GENRE

"From the literary point of view, the book ranks high as an outstanding example of narrative art."¹

"The genre of the Book of Esther is historical narrative. As such, biblical narrative is characterized by the cooperation of three components: ideology (socioreligious perspective), historiography (use of historical persons and events in a narrative), and aesthetic appeal (its influence and persuasion of the reader).² Each of these three elements can be readily seen in Esther. The ideology is the orthodox faith of ancient Israel. The book is theological in that its primary purpose is to teach about God and his continuing relationship with his people. It is historiographical in that it is an account of historical persons and historical events as they occurred. It is aesthetic because it is full of drama and suspense and draws its readers to anticipate happenings and events that often are the reverse of what the reader expects."³

According to Joyce Baldwin and David Clines, most biblical scholars today regard the Book of Esther as a historical novel: fiction.⁴ However, most scholars are not conservative in their view of Scripture. Most conservative scholars regard it as historical non-fiction.

"I believe it would be true to say that a study of literary themes has done more to promote an understanding of the book than

¹Robert Gordis, "Studies in the Esther Narrative," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95:1 (March 1976):44. For a very interesting article that points out many artistic literary features of the book as well as showing how the literary structure illuminates the theology revealed in it, see Francis C. Rossow, "Literary Artistry in the Book of Esther and Its Theological Significance," *Concordia Journal* 13:3 (July 1987):219-33.

²M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 41-57.

³Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 287. See also Forrest S. Weiland, "Historicity, Genre, and Narrative Design in the Book of Esther," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159:634 (April-June 2002):151-65; and idem, "Literary Conventions in the Book of Esther," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159:636 (October-December 2002):425-35.

⁴Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther*, pp. 33-34; David J. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 256. E.g., Robert H. Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times*, p. 61; Adele Berlin, *Esther*, pp. xvi-xxii; et al.

all the discussion about historicity, which so occupied scholars earlier this century."¹

"The relationship between biblical narrative and history is probably one of the most important issues in evangelical hermeneutics today [in 1999]."²

While Esther is primarily theological history, at least one writer observed similarities with wisdom literature.³ This should not be surprising since Esther is one of the Writings in the Hebrew Bible: the section that contains poetic and wisdom literature.

SCOPE

The events of the Book of Esther took place during the Persian period of ancient Near Eastern history (539-331 B.C.) and during the reign of King Ahasuerus in particular (486-465 B.C.).⁴

CHRONOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER	
483	Ahasuerus' military planning session in Susa
482	The deposition of Vashti
481	The beginning of Ahasuerus' unsuccessful expedition against Greece
480	Esther's arrival in Susa
479	Ahasuerus' return to Susa and Esther's coronation
478	

¹Ibid., p. 29.

²Karen H. Jobes, *Esther*, p. 37.

³S. Talmon, "'Wisdom' in the Book of Esther," *Vetus Testamentum* 13 (1963):419-55.

⁴See Berlin, pp. xxxii-xxxiv, for a brief overview of the Persian period, and Tremper Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 215-17, for discussion of the problem of extrabiblical dating.

477	
476	
475	
474	The issuing of Ahasuerus' decrees affecting the Jews
473	The Jews' defense of themselves and the establishment of the Feast of Purim

The first historical event to which the writer alluded seems to be Ahasuerus' military planning session at which he plotted the strategy for his ill-fated campaign against Greece (1:3-21).¹ The king held this planning session in the winter of 483-482 B.C. The last recorded event in Esther is the institution of the Feast of Purim that took place in 473 B.C. Therefore the events recorded in the book span a period of about nine or 10 years. Leon Wood wrote that the book "covers the third to the twelfth years of Zerxes' [Ahasuerus'] rule (483-471; Esther 1:3; 3:7)."²

By the time Esther opens, many Jews had returned from the Exile to Palestine to reestablish the institutions of Judaism (Ezra 1—6). The first wave of repatriates numbered about 50,000. Most of the Jews in exile did not return, even though their law (Deut. 28) and their prophets (Isa. 48:20; Jer. 50:8; 51:6) encouraged them to do so. They preferred the comfort and convenience of life, as they had come to know it outside the Promised Land, to the discomfort and privation involved in obeying God. Esther and Mordecai were among those who chose not to return. In 1893 the Babylonian expedition of the University of Pennsylvania discovered some extra-biblical documents that show how wealthy and influential some of the Jews who remained in Babylon were.³ The events of Esther fit chronologically between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra.

¹See Jack Finegan, *Light from the Ancient Past*, pp. 237-38.

²Cf. Leon J. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History*, p. 406; J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 2:259. See Steven Horine, "Esther's Organizing Metaphor: The Feasting Motif," a paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Nov. 15, 2000, Nashville, TN.

³See Siegfried H. Horn, "Mordecai, A Historical Problem," *Biblical Research* 9 (1964):22-25.

story in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, Martin Noth in his *History of Israel* makes no mention of it, and Geo Widengren dismisses it in thirteen lines. 'It is without much historical value.'¹ John Bright mentions the book by name but that is all.² Whatever others say, in practice historians ignore the book of Esther. Whatever the reason for this neglect of the book may be, we are justified in assuming that present-day historians do not take seriously the threat it records to the very existence of the Jewish race."³

Conservative scholars usually give the book more consideration. A third purpose may be to warn readers against anti-Semitism (cf. Gen. 12:1-3). Much that is in the book deals with the relationship of Jews and Gentiles.

"Esther says to the Christian that anti-Jewish hostility is intolerable to God."⁴

"It is easy to see why the book is valued by Jews, who have suffered so much through the ages and have clung to the assurance implied by Purim that, however severe the threat upon their race, they have a future."⁵

LITERARY CHARACTERISTICS

Esther demonstrates quite a bit of irony, satire, and recurring motifs. These motifs include drinking and banqueting, fasting, items of apparel, law and legality, and conflicts.

"More than just a structuring device, the banquet is the setting at which all the major events occur ..."⁶

The writer delighted in setting things forth in pairs. Esther twice concealed her identity. There are three groups of banquets: two given by Xerxes, two by Esther, and two celebrations of Purim. There are two lists of the king's

¹J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, eds., *Israelite and Judean History*, p. 493.

²John A. Bright, *A History of Israel*, pp. 417, 420, n. 16.

³Baldwin, p. 24.

⁴Breneman, p. 297.

⁵Baldwin, p. 37.

⁶Berlin, p. xxv.

servants, two gatherings of women, two houses for the women, two fasts, two consultations by Haman with his wife and friends, and two unscheduled appearances by Esther before the king. There are also two investitures of Mordecai, two times Haman's face was covered, two references to Haman's sons, and two appearances of Harbona. Twice the king's anger subsided, twice the writer said the Persian laws were irrevocable, the Jews took revenge on their enemies on two days, and two letters announced the commemoration of Purim.¹

INTERPRETATION

One of the biggest problems connected with the Book of Esther is its proper interpretation. Four major schools of interpretation are common among Christians.

The allegorical interpretation denies the historical realities of the events. For example, the idea that Vashti was not a real woman, but that she represents the spirit of man that failed to submit to God's revelation and fell. Esther was not a real person either, according to this view. She represents the new spirit God gives man at regeneration.

The typical interpretation accepts the historical reality of the persons and events recorded; they really existed. But the interpreters in this school stress the typical significance of what these characters and events represent, according to the interpreter.²

The prophetic interpretation views the characters and events as real, but its advocates believe they are prophetic previews of God's dealings with the Jews in the eschatological future: the Tribulation and Millennium.

The historical interpretation views the characters and events as real, and its advocates stress the timeless lessons the original readers would have learned from the book (e.g., the providence of God). I believe that this is the proper approach the reader should take to this book, as well as the other biblical historical books.

¹Longman and Dillard, pp. 219-20.

²Arno C. Gaebelin concluded his exposition of each chapter, except 10, with a section on its typical application in *The Annotated Bible*.

"The major theological point of Esther is that throughout history God fulfills his covenant promises through his providence. The contemporary significance of this for application today is that God's will for an individual's life is unfolded through divine providence day by day."¹

OUTLINE

- I. God's preparations 1:1—2:20
 - A. Vashti deposed ch. 1
 - 1. The king's feast 1:1-9
 - 2. The queen's dismissal 1:10-22
 - B. Esther elevated 2:1-20
 - 1. The plan to replace Vashti 2:1-4
 - 2. Esther's selection 2:5-11
 - 3. The choice of Esther as queen 2:12-20
- II. Haman's plot 2:21—4:3
 - A. Background considerations 2:21—3:6
 - 1. Mordecai's loyalty 2:21-23
 - 2. Haman's promotion 3:1-6
 - B. Haman's proposal 3:7-15
 - 1. The casting of lots 3:7
 - 2. Haman's request 3:8-9
 - 3. The king's permission 3:10-15
 - C. Mordecai and the Jews' reaction 4:1-3
- III. Esther's intervention 4:4—9:19
 - A. Mordecai's instruction and Esther's decision 4:4-17

¹Jobes, p. 38.

- B. The plot exposed chs. 5—7
 - 1. Esther's preparations ch. 5
 - 2. Mordecai's exaltation ch. 6
 - 3. Haman's fall ch. 7
- C. The Jews' deliverance 8:1—9:19
 - 1. The rewarding of Esther and Mordecai 8:1-2
 - 2. Esther's request for her people 8:3-8
 - 3. The royal decree 8:9-14
 - 4. The joy of the Jews 8:15-17
 - 5. The Jews' self-defense 9:1-19
- IV. The Jews' rejoicing 9:20-32
 - A. Mordecai's letter 9:20-28
 - B. Esther's letter 9:29-32
- V. Mordecai's greatness ch. 10

MESSAGE

The events of this book took place between those recorded in Ezra 6 and 7. They have nothing to do with the people who returned from exile in Babylon. They deal with those who remained behind in what became the Persian Empire. The dates of the three returns from Babylon were 536, 458, and 444 B.C. The events in Esther took place about 482-473 B.C., between the first and second returns.

Esther's Jewish name was "Hadasseh," which means "myrtle." The myrtle tree was native to Babylonia, and the returning exiles took myrtle trees with them to Palestine. There this tree became a symbol of the nation of Israel: transplanted from Babylon in Palestine. Zechariah used the myrtle tree as a symbol of Israel in Zechariah 1:7-11. Esther's parents may have named her for this beautiful tree. Most of the students of this book have recognized her as a symbol of the Jewish people living among Gentiles.

Esther's Persian name was "Esther," derived from the Persian word *stara*: "star." Another view is that she was named after Ishtar, a pagan Babylonian

goddess.¹ It was common for the Jews who lived in captivity to give their children two names: one Jewish name and one name that connected them to their present place of residence. The myrtle tree bears a beautiful star-like flower. Esther may have received her Persian name because she was the flower of the myrtle tree, full of beauty and grace. In life, she became just that: the flower of Israel, its loveliest production. She was not just physically beautiful, but she became a great blessing to her people and a great blessing to the Gentiles as well. She became what God intended Israel to be.

This book is unique in the Old Testament in several respects. The writer did not mention God's name once in its pages. E. J. Young wrote, "Since these Jews were no longer in the theocratic line, so to speak, the name of the covenant God is not associated with them."² Matthew Henry wrote, "But, though the name be not in it, the finger of God is, directing many minute events for the bringing about of his people's deliverance."³ There are also no references to the Law of Moses, the temple, or Jewish worship. There is one reference to a fast and one to a feast, which are very general, and show only that the Jews in exile maintained some religious habits. There is also no reference to Jerusalem, except the one in 2:6 that says Mordecai's great-grandfather went into exile from Jerusalem. Yet even without these familiar references, it is impossible to read this book without being conscious of God. The great value of this book is its revelation of God acting in providence for His people's well-being and protection.

"The book of Esther is the most true-to-life biblical example of God's providence precisely because God seems absent."⁴

There are several other unique features of Esther. No New Testament writer quoted or referred to it. No church father wrote a commentary on it, as far as we know. It never mentions prayer. It mentions nothing explicitly supernatural. Martin Luther wrote that he wished it had never been written.⁵ It is the only Old Testament historical book that records a history of the Jews outside their land during the times of the Gentiles. The "times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24) began with Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of

¹See Berlin, p. 26.

²Edward J. Young, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, p. 378.

³Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 505. See also Clines, p. 269.

⁴Jobes, p. 43.

⁵Cited by Longman and Dillard, p. 213.

Jerusalem and will continue until Christ's second coming. It is the time when Israel's fortunes and fate are in the hands of Gentiles.

Like Ruth, the Book of Esther is an illustration. It records a slice of life out of the exilic period that illustrates a great revelation. Ruth illustrates redemption. Esther illustrates providence. In both books a female is the main character. God has used women at some of the most crucial moments in history (e.g., Deborah, Jael, Huldah, Priscilla, et al.).

"Providence" is a term that many Christians have abused and misunderstood. Providence means foresight. The English word comes from Latin (*pro video*) and refers to seeing the affairs of life before they happen. The acquired meaning of providence, what it has come to mean through usage, is activity resulting from foresight. People can never exercise providence as God can. We have very limited powers of foresight. We do not know what a day may bring forth (Prov. 27:1). God, on the other hand, foresees all things and can act because of that foreknowledge.

The theological doctrine of providence is that God both possesses and exercises absolute power over all the works of His hands. Psalm 11 sets forth this revelation beautifully. The Book of Esther illustrates God's providence. The writer did not speak of God directly, but His acting as a result of His foresight is obvious in what he wrote. God hid Himself but was at work in Esther.

"Providence means that the hand of God is in the glove of human events. When God is not at the steering wheel, He is the backseat driver. He is the coach who calls the signals from the bench. Providence is the unseen rudder on the ship of state. God is the pilot at the wheel during the night watch. As someone has said, 'He makes great doors swing on little hinges.'"¹

"The crisis about which the book is written is providentially anticipated and then providentially overruled just at the crucial moment. No miraculous intervention is resorted to. All the happenings recorded are the outworking of circumstances in their natural sequence. Yet while there is no miracle recorded, the whole thing, in its ultimate meaning, is a mighty miracle—

¹J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 2:546.

the mighty miracle whereby a sovereign Deity so manipulates all non-miraculous events as to bring about a predetermined outcome; and this miracle is all the more miraculous just because it achieves the predetermined outcome without the *need* for using miracles!"¹

Esther reveals three things about divine providence.

First, it reveals the *method* of providence. It shows that even though people do not acknowledge God's presence, He is always at work. His control becomes especially clear at the end of the book (10:3). Events turned around completely from the way they were at the beginning of the book. Instead of being in peril, the Jews were now at peace. God not only rules over the major issues in life, but He also uses the apparent trivialities of life to accomplish His purposes. Some of these "trivialities" were: the king's decision to summon Vashti after he got drunk, Vashti's refusal, Haman's hatred for Mordecai, the king's insomnia, and the record his servant read to him. God's providence is all-inclusive. That is part of its method. No person or detail of life escapes God's control (Rom. 8:28): all individuals and all events.

Second, Esther reveals the *principles* of providence.

God proceeds on the basis of *perfect knowledge*: intimate, accurate, absolute knowledge (cf. Ps. 11:4).

Another principle of His providence is His *undeviating righteousness*. God's providence works in harmony with man's freedom. It never coerces people. The king made his own decisions; God did not compel him to act as he did. Haman plotted his own intrigues, made his own arrangements, and built his own gallows. The same was true of Mordecai and Esther. Yet the sphere in which they made their decisions was God's sovereignty (cf. Acts 17:28a). Haman built his gallows for Mordecai, but God hanged *Haman* on it.

A third principle of God's providence is that of *absolute power*. God is great enough to give people genuine freedom and yet cause things to turn out the way He wants them to. God causes human freedom to contribute to His divine purpose. We cannot comprehend this truth completely. We cannot contain revelation within reason. That is why it is impossible to bring all of revelation into a comprehensive philosophy. Philosophy is what is

¹Baxter, 2:260.

reasonable, but revelation goes beyond reason. Not that it is irrational; it simply transcends reason. Trying to contain all of reality within reason is like trying to pour the Pacific Ocean into a one-gallon jug. There is much that is known only by God (Deut. 29:29).

Third, Esther reveals the *results* of providence. On the human level, there are two results. To those who recognize divine providence comes great confidence and courage. However, to those who do not, come panic and punishment. We can see this most clearly in the characters of Esther and Mordecai, and in Haman. On the divine level, the result of providence is that God progresses toward His ultimate goal. Throughout all of Scriptural history we see this identical, mighty, behind-the-scenes movement.

The message of this book is that God *is*, and that God acts through history to accomplish His purposes—regardless of whether humans acknowledge Him or not.

There are many arguments for the existence of God. The argument from providence is one of these, though apologists do not usually give it as much emphasis as some other arguments. The fact that human events are harmonizing with God's ultimate purposes, as He has revealed these in Scripture, testifies to God's existence. When people forget God, He still molds history and governs life in harmony with His purposes. We cannot escape God's hand; we only change our destiny. We become His friends or His foes by our attitude toward Him (cf. Dan. 5:22-23).

The great application of the message of this book is: take God into account. This is the essence of biblical wisdom, by the way. Trust Him and cooperate with Him or you will suffer destruction. God's providence may seem very impersonal and austere. However, William Cowper has reminded us that, "Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face."¹ Romans 8:28 is perhaps the most concise word on the providence of God that the Scriptures contain. God will complete His plans. We determine our own destiny as we cooperate with His will or oppose it. Our choices affect our destiny, but they do not frustrate His plan. Consequently, it is very important that we know God's plans and make them known to others. He has revealed His plans in His promises in Scripture. Therefore we should pay very careful attention to the promises of God. The biblical covenants are His big, comprehensive, formal promises. Even though many people in the

¹William Cowper, *Olney Hymns*, 35 in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, p. 161.

world today ignore God, what He plans will become reality eventually. This fact should make us confident and optimistic in the present.¹

¹Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 1:1:267-82.

Exposition

I. GOD'S PREPARATIONS 1:1—2:20

Joyce Baldwin believed that the writer composed the book in a chiasmic structure that focuses on the providence of God in the king's sleepless night.¹

- A Opening and background (ch. 1)
 - B The king's first decree (chs. 2—3)
 - C The clash between Haman and Mordecai (chs. 4—5)
 - D "On the night the king could not sleep" (6:1)
 - C' Mordecai's triumph over Haman (chs. 6—7)
 - B' The king's second decree (chs. 8—9)
 - A' Epilogue (ch. 10)

This first major part of the book explains how God placed a simple Jewish young woman in position to deliver her people from possible extinction.

A. VASHTI DEPOSED CH. 1

This chapter records the providential circumstances whereby Esther was able to rise to her influential position with the Persian king. It was through the demise of the present queen.

"Though no mention is made of God's providence, it nevertheless plays a prominent part, and may even give the book its *raison d'être*."²

¹Baldwin, p. 30.

²Ibid., p. 13. See Forrest S. Weiland, "Literary Clues to God's Providence in the Book of Esther," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160:637 (January-March 2003):34-47.

1. The king's feast 1:1-9

Ahasuerus is the Hebrew name of the Persian king, Khshayarsha, whom we know better in ancient history by his Greek name, Xerxes.¹ Some have felt that "Ahasuerus" was not his name but his title, since it means "high father" or "venerable king."² He reigned over the Persian Empire from 486 to 465 B.C. and was the son of Darius I (521-486 B.C.).

"Near the end of 465, Xerxes was assassinated in his bedchamber. At the head of the conspirators was Artabanus [the commander of his guard], aided by the eunuch chamberlain Aspamitres, and by Megabyzus, son of Zopyrus, the king's son-in-law, who resented the refusal of Xerxes to take action on his charge that his wife Amytis was an adulteress. Xerxes was buried in a rock-cut tomb he had excavated in the cliff to the east of his father's; though without inscription, the execution is even finer."³

Xerxes is famous in secular history for two things: his defeat at the hands of the Greeks, and his building of the royal Persian palace at Persepolis.⁴ In 481 B.C. he took about 200,000 soldiers and hundreds of ships to Greece to avenge his father Darius' loss at the battle of Marathon (490 B.C.). However, he too suffered defeat, in a two-fold manner. His soldiers won at the battle of Thermopylae with the Spartans (480 B.C.), but the Greeks destroyed his navy in the battle of Salamis (480 B.C.), and his army also lost at the battles of Plataea and Mycale (479 B.C.).

"This is the king who ordered a bridge to be built over the Hellespont, and who, on learning that the bridge had been destroyed by a tempest, just after its completion, was so blindly enraged that he commanded three hundred strokes of the scourge to be inflicted on the sea, and a pair of fetters to be thrown into it at the Hellespont, and then had the unhappy builders of the bridge beheaded. This is the king who, on being offered a sum equivalent to five and a half millions sterling by Pythius, the Lydian, towards the expenses of a military

¹Lewis B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, p. 54. Cf. Ezra 4:5-7; Dan. 11:2.

²E.g., McGee, 2:547.

³Olmstead, p. 289. See also p. 267.

⁴See Finegan, pp. 241-42.

expedition, was so enraptured at such loyalty that he returned the money, accompanied by a handsome present; and then, on being requested by this same Pythius, shortly afterwards, to spare him just one of his sons—the eldest—from the expedition, as the sole support of his declining years, furiously ordered the son to be cut into two pieces, and the army to march between them. This is the king who dishonoured the remains of the heroic Spartan, Leonidas. This is the king who drowned the humiliation of his inglorious defeat in such a plunge of sensuality that he publicly offered a prize for the invention of some new indulgence. This is the king who cut a canal through the Isthmus of Athos for his fleet—a prodigious undertaking. This is the king whose vast resources, and gigantic notions and imperious temper made the name of Persia to awe the ancient world. Herodotus tells us that among the myriads gathered for the expedition against Greece, Ahasuerus was the fairest in personal beauty and stately bearing. But morally he was a mixture of passionate extremes. He is just the despot to dethrone queen Vashti for refusing to expose herself before his tipsy guests. He is just the one to consign a people like the Jews to be massacred, and then to swing over to the opposite extreme of sanctioning Jewish vengeance on thousands of his other subjects."¹

"Xerxes (486-465) is in tradition the weakling monarch, dominated by his eunuchs and remembered chiefly for his insane attack on European Greece. Oriental sources picture a very different character. At his accession Xerxes was in the prime of life, about thirty-five years of age, and had been trained as successor to the throne by a dozen years of strenuous administration as viceroy of Babylon. In consequence, his reign stands out for the significance of the administrative changes; if Darius began the new Achaemenid regime through his law, Xerxes marks an even greater break with the past.

"Against his one military failure in Europe, not so spectacular to his subjects as it appeared to later generations, must be placed a whole series of victories, including the previous

¹Baxter, 2:262-63.

recovery of the two wealthiest and as yet most civilized peoples of his vast empire and his retention of control over the majority of the Greeks themselves. In the field of culture the picture is the same. If the architects of this father laid out the grandiose plan of the terrace structures at the new capital [Persepolis] of Parsa [Persia], it was Xerxes who brought the main buildings to completion and initiated most of the others."¹

The writer mentioned the vast area Xerxes controlled (cf. Esth. 8:9; 10:1). Perhaps he did this to avoid confusion with another Ahasuerus (Dan. 9:1) whose son, Darius the Mede (Gobryas), governed the Babylonian provinces under Cyrus the Great from 539 to about 525 B.C. (cf. Dan. 6:2). "India" refers to the territory that is now western Pakistan. "Cush" was the upper (southern) Nile region including southern Egypt, the Sudan, Eritrea, and northern Ethiopia, land west of the Red Sea. The 127 "provinces" (Heb. *medina*) may have been governmental units of the empire. These would have been political subdivisions of the satrapies (cf. 3:12; 8:9; Dan. 6:1).² More probably the 127 provinces were geographical regions.³

"Susa" (v. 2) is the Greek name for the Hebrew "Shushan." This city was located on the Karkheh River in southwest Persia, about 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf, almost directly east of Babylon. It was a winter capital and had formerly been a capital of the kingdom of Elam.⁴

"... for nine months of the year the heat is almost intolerable."⁵

"... those who dare stay until June report temperatures far above the hundred mark."⁶

"The French excavations at Susa between 1880-1890 disclosed the great palace of Xerxes (Ahasuerus, 486-465 B.C.), the place where Queen Esther would have lived. The building covered two and one-half acres, and included a

¹A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, p. 230.

²F. B. Huey Jr., "Esther," in *1 Kings-Job*, vol. 4 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 798.

³Keil, p. 321.

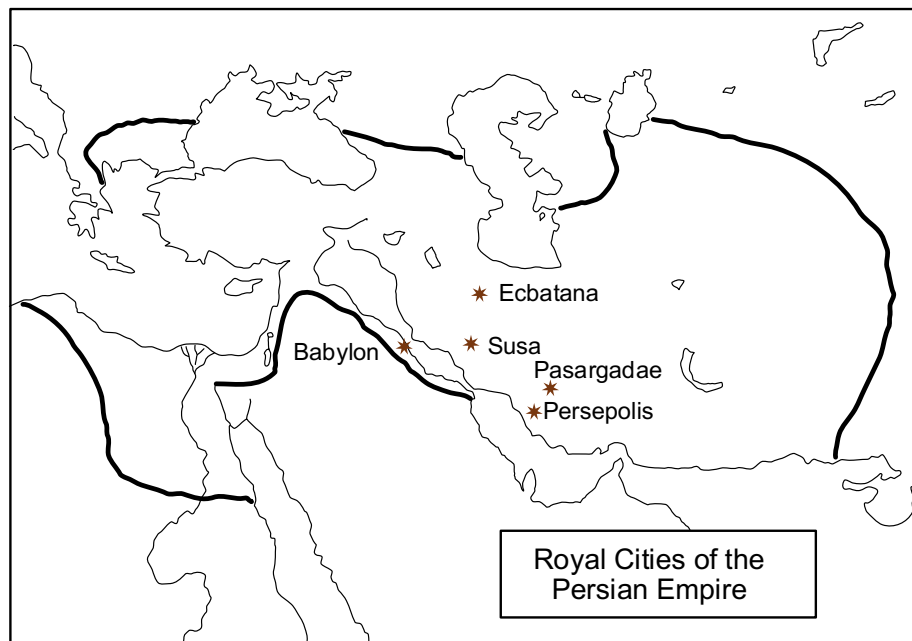
⁴Olmstead, p. 31.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁶*Ibid.*

beautiful throne-room which was decorated with thirty-six fluted columns, each being some sixty-seven feet high and supporting a ceiling of Lebanon cedar. The capitals of the pillars were formed of the heads and shoulders of oxen, placed back to back. The cornice and friezes on the interior of the room had decorations of colored glazed bricks which were arranged in the form of rosettes, lions, men, and other attractive patterns ..."¹

Susa was the name of both the capital city and the royal fortress that occupied a separate part of the city.² Susa had been the capital city of the Elamites. Other Persian capitals were Ecbatana (the former capital of Media, 200 miles north of Susa, modern Hamadan, Ezra 6:2), Babylon (the former capital of Neo-Babylonia, 200 miles west, Ezra 6:1), Pasargadae (the original "camp of the Persians," or Parsa, as the Persians called themselves), and Persepolis (which Darius I established but Ahasuerus developed, both 300 miles southeast).³ Persepolis was Xerxes' main residence and his crowning construction project.⁴



¹Joseph P. Free, *Archaeology and Bible History*, pp. 244-45.

²Huey, p. 798.

³See Edwin M. Yamauchi, "The Achaemenid Capitals," *Near East Archaeology Society Bulletin*, NS8 (1976):5-81; Olmstead, p. 60; and Finegan, pp. 241-44.

⁴Breneman, p. 304.

The Hebrew word translated "capital" (NASB) or "citadel" (NIV; *habirah*) refers to an acropolis or fortified area that stood 72 feet above the rest of the city. A wall two and one-half miles long surrounded it.¹

The third year of Ahasuerus' (Xerxes') reign (v. 3) was evidently 483 or 482 B.C. He would have been in his mid-thirties. Forty years after the events the writer described in the Book of Esther, Nehemiah served as cupbearer to Artaxerxes, Ahasuerus' son (cf. Neh. 1:1—2:1). Daniel was undoubtedly dead by this time, since he probably died about 530 B.C. or a few years later. The traditional tomb of Daniel is in Susa.

"The Persians and Medes are always named together as the two kindred races of the ruling nation."²

For 180 days (six months) Ahasuerus entertained his guests (v. 4). This was evidently at least part of the military planning session that Ahasuerus conducted to prepare for his campaign against the Greeks. The Greek historian Herodotus referred to this meeting and said it took Ahasuerus four years (484-481 B.C.) to prepare for his Greek campaign.³ Part of the reason for this prolonged banquet may have been to win the support of his princes and rulers for his forthcoming military campaign.⁴ Ahasuerus' Persian army suffered defeat at the hands of the Greeks at Salamis, Plataea, and Mycale in 480-479 B.C.

"While labourers received barely enough to live on, even though they were producing works of art that are still unsurpassed, life at court was extravagant beyond imagining. The more lavish the king's hospitality, the greater his claim to supremacy."⁵

White and violet (blue, v. 6) were the royal colors of Persia.⁶

"The fashion, in the houses of the great, on festive occasions, was to decorate the chambers from the middle of the wall

¹Ibid.

²Keil, p. 322.

³Herodotus, *The Histories*, 7.8, 20.

⁴McGee, 2:548.

⁵Baldwin, p. 55.

⁶Keil, pp. 325-26; John C. Whitcomb, *Esther: Triumph of God's Sovereignty*, p. 37.

downward with damask or velvet hangings of variegated colors suspended on hooks, or taken down at pleasure."¹

This palace burned to the ground about 435 B.C., toward the end of Artaxerxes' reign.²

Banquets are a prominent feature of this story. At least nine receive mention (1:1-4, 5-8, 9; 2:18; 3:15; 5:4, 8; 8:17; 9:17-19).

"The monarch *ordered* that guests could drink as much or as little as they pleased. This differed from the usual Persian custom by which people at a banquet were required to drink each time the king raised his cup."³

"Great variety in drinking vessels pertained to the luxury of Persians; comp. Xenoph. *Cyrop.* viii. 8, 18."⁴

2. The queen's dismissal 1:10-22

The Persian kings castrated many of the men who served the king and his family (v. 10) so they could not have sexual relations with the female members of the royal court and start dynasties of their own.

"The seven chamberlains were eunuchs who held important offices. Mehuman was the chief officer; Biztha, according to the meaning of his name, the treasurer; Harbona, the chief of the bodyguard; Bigath ["Bigtha"], who had charge over the female apartments; Abagtha, the chief baker; Zethar, the chief butler, and Carcas ["Carkas"], the chief commander of the castle."⁵

"Vashti" ("Best," "The Beloved," or "The Desired One," v. 11) may have been the Persian name of the queen whom Herodotus referred to as

¹Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, p. 355.

²Olmstead, p. 352.

³*The Nelson Study Bible*, pp. 812-13. See also Berlin, p. 10.

⁴Keil, p. 326.

⁵Gaebelein, 2:1:85.

Amestris (her Greek name).¹ Her name is similar to a Persian word that means "a beautiful woman."² However, Olmstead recorded that Amestris was very active as the queen-mother during the reign of Xerxes' son and successor Artaxerxes.³

Her "crown" would have been "a high turban terminating in a point."⁴ It is not possible to determine why Vashti refused to obey the king's summons (v. 12).

"Perhaps the sight of the queen in her royal glory was intended to inspire patriotism and loyalty, as public appearances of the British queen do today."⁵

"The Rabbis added midrashic embellishments to the story of Vashti, holding that her refusal was the king's order that she appear naked before his guests. ... According to the Talmud the queen refused to come because Gabriel had smitten her with leprosy."⁶

Josephus wrote: "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 ..."⁷

"... according to Persian customs, the queen, even more than the wives of other men, was secluded from the public gaze."⁸

Another less probable guess follows: "The queen refused to appear at the king's command as delivered by the eunuchs,

¹Herodotus, 9.109-10, 112, 114; Olmstead, p. 285; J. Stafford Wright, "The Historicity of Esther," in *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, p. 40-42. See also Jobes, pp. 66-67.

²Keil, p. 327.

³Olmstead, pp. 312-13.

⁴Keil, p. 328.

⁵Jobes, p. 67.

⁶Edwin M. Yamauchi, "The Archaeological Background of Esther," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137:546 (April-June 1980):105.

⁷Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 11:6:1.

⁸Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, p. 355.

because she did not choose to stake her dignity as a queen and a wife before his inebriated guests."¹

The important point for the writer was that she did not appear, not why she did not. However, it is safe to assume that for whatever reason, Ahasuerus thought that her appearance would contribute to his glory.

"It is scarcely possible for us to imagine the astonishment produced by such a refusal in a country and a court where the will of the sovereign was absolute. The assembled grandees were petrified with horror at the daring affront."²

"In the Persian court the king holds tremendous power and uses it ostentatiously to reinforce his own glory with little or no thought for the consequences to others. The reader begins to see a glimpse of what life under the Persian king was like. Mordecai, and especially Esther, are up against tremendous odds as they seek to survive in the Persian court. They not only survive; they gain power, which is even more remarkable."³

The counsel of seven (vv. 13-14) continued in existence for at least 25 years after this event (cf. Ezra 7:14). These men were cabinet-level officials in the government. The king's advisers feared that Vashti's rebellion would lead to a popular women's liberation movement and to a revolution among the aristocratic wives particularly (vv. 17-18). They counseled him to divorce Vashti.⁴

There is extra-biblical evidence that no one could revoke Persian laws once they were official (v. 19; cf. 8:8; Dan. 6:8).⁵

There is a large emphasis on "honor" (Heb. *yekar*) in this book (v. 20; et al.). Ahasuerus displayed it (v. 4), Haman wanted it, and Mordecai got it. It was a primary motive for much of the action that took place in this story.

¹Keil, p. 328.

²Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, p. 355.

³Jobes, p. 75.

⁴Keil, p. 319.

⁵See Wright, pp. 39-40.

Herodotus (ca. 484-426 B.C.) traveled in western Persia shortly after Ahasuerus' reign. He wrote the following concerning the Persian postal service (the original Pony Express), to which the writer of Esther alluded several times (v. 22; cf. 8:10).

"There is nothing that travels faster, and yet is mortal, than these couriers; the Persians invented this system, which works as follows. It is said that there are as many horses and men posted at intervals as there are days required for the entire journey, so that one horse and one man are assigned to each day. And neither snow nor rain nor heat nor dark of night keeps them from completing their appointed course as swiftly as possible. The first courier passes on the instructions to the second, the second to the third, and from there they are transmitted from one to another all the way through, just as the torchbearing relay is celebrated by the Hellenes in honor of Hephaistos. The Persians call this horse-posting system the *angareion*."¹

The king took his advisers' advice and divorced Vashti (v. 21). Whereas Vashti's fate is not humorous, the way that the king and his advisors conducted the business of state is dark humor.

"The author teaches us to make fun of the very forces that once threatened—and will again threaten—our existence, and thereby makes us recognize their triviality as well as their power."²

"The author of Esther is revealing the workings of worldly power and mocking its ultimate inability to determine the destiny of God's people."³

"The well-ordered machine of the Persian empire, structured ostensibly on 'law and justice,' is shown here to be actually driven by the megalomaniac needs of the king for glory and the insecurity of the most powerful men in the empire."⁴

¹Herodotus, 8.98.

²Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, p. 253.

³Jobes, p. 83.

⁴Ibid., p. 86.

The last phrase of verse 22 evidently means that the husband's authority in the home was evident by the fact that his family spoke only his native language.¹ The Persian Empire encompassed many different language groups, but the universal language of the empire was Aramaic.²

"When a marriage took place between people of different ethnic backgrounds, the mother's language would normally prevail in the home and tend to become the language of the children [cf. Neh. 13:23-24]."³

The first chapter, even the whole book, is highly satirical of the Persian nobility and empire.

"It is indeed a derisive eye that our narrator has cast upon the royal court he describes: A king who rules the whole known world spends his time giving lavish banquets! ...

"From the satirical depiction of the grandiose and lavishly excessive lifestyle of the Persian court, our narrator turns to undisguised farce: the king who rules the whole world cannot bend his own wife to his will! ...

"But its [the first chapter's] mockery has also a sinister side. It reveals a society fraught with danger, for it is ruled by the pride and pomposity of buffoons whose tender egos can marshal the state's legislative and administrative machinery for the furtherance of selfish and childish causes. Indeed, in such a setting, it will not seem incongruous to find this same machinery of state mobilized to effect the slaughter of one of its own minorities, or to find that this is an end that the king can both blissfully contemplate and cavalierly condone."⁴

"The Bible doesn't tell us what happened to Vashti. Many biblical scholars believe she was Amestris, the mother of Artaxerxes who ruled from 464 to 425 B.C. It's likely that

¹Keil, p. 332.

²Olmstead, p. 463.

³Gordis, p. 53.

⁴Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, pp. 354, 355. Cf. Prov. 12:16; 14:17.

Esther was either out of favor or dead; for Amestris exercised great influence as the queen mother during her son's reign.

"Artaxerxes was born in 483, the year of the great banquet described in Esther 1. It's possible that Vashti was pregnant with her son at the time and therefore unwilling to appear before the men."¹

"This scene in 1:13-22 is an inside look at just what makes the world go round. Law and justice may be the public ideal of every great government, but people in power, compelled by their own fears and anxieties, all too often abuse the power with which they have been entrusted. Absolute power held by flawed leaders is a terrifying scenario."²

B. ESTHER ELEVATED 2:1-20

The fact that God placed Esther in a position so she could deliver her people—even before they were in danger—shows His far-reaching providence at work for His chosen people. This revelation would have been a great encouragement to the Jews of the postexilic period, as it has been to all believers since then.

1. The plan to replace Vashti 2:1-4

"Nearly four years have passed since Vashti was deposed. During that time, Ahasuerus directed his ill-fated Greek campaign and came home in humiliation instead of honor."³

"Xerxes was more interested in completing the magnificent structures begun by his father on the Persepolis terrace than he was in testing by further adventure the formidable military machine that his father had built up, but the fates did not permit. ... At last Xerxes reluctantly prepared to follow his father's policy of expansion on the northwestern frontier."⁴

¹Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary/History*, p. 710.

²Jobes, p. 86.

³Wiersbe, p. 711.

⁴Olmstead, p. 248.

Ahasuerus had second thoughts about having deposed Vashti (v. 1), but he concluded that the action he had taken against her needed to stand. The attendants' plan doubtless appealed to the king's ego (vv. 2-4). The writer called these men "attendants" rather than "princes" (1:14). They were evidently not the same individuals who had recommended Vashti's dismissal. The "virgins" that they recommended to Ahasuerus were simply young women of marriageable age (Heb. *betulah*).

"Now, the point is not that Ahasuerus simply needed a woman. If he were like other ancient monarchs, he had a harem full of women. Besides that, he had the power to have any woman in the kingdom. With a snap of his finger, she'd be in his presence, right there in his bedchamber. But he's not looking for a one-night encounter. He wants a wife, someone to be near him through it all, someone who would be his companion, someone who really cares, long-term."¹

Olmstead provided some insight into the harems of the Persian kings when he wrote the following of Artaxerxes II (Mnemon or Memnon, 404-359 B.C.):

"From the three hundred and sixty concubines assigned him (one for each day of the civil year), there were born to Artaxerxes a hundred and fifteen sons. Only three, however—Darius, Ariarathes or Ariaspes, and Ochus [Artaxerxes III]—were children of Queen Stateira."²

2. Esther's selection 2:5-11

Apparently it was Kish, Mordecai's great-grandfather, who went into captivity with Jehoiachin (vv. 5-6).³ This means Mordecai and Esther were probably descendants of the leading citizens of Jerusalem who went into exile in 597 B.C., perhaps nobility (cf. 2 Kings 24:12), like Daniel (Dan. 1:1-6). Another view is that this Kish was the father of King Saul (1 Sam. 9:1-2).

¹Charles R. Swindoll, *Esther: A Woman of Strength and Dignity*, p. 34.

²Olmstead, p. 424.

³Wright, p. 38.

"By linking Mordecai obliquely with Saul, through the tribe of Benjamin and the name of Kish, the story prepares us for the linking of Haman with Agag (3:1), the arch enemy of Saul. In this way, Mordecai and Haman become latter-day embodiments of an old ethnic feud, which has its origin in the battle between King Saul and Agag, the Amalekite king (1 Samuel 15). This is only one facet of a subtle intertextual play between the Book of Esther and 1 Samuel 15 (see the Commentary to 9:10)."¹

Mordecai's name is Persian, as is Esther's, and it has connections with the god Marduk.² All the same, it was common for the Jews in captivity to receive and to use pagan names (cf. Dan. 1:7; Ezra 1:8).³ This does not necessarily indicate that they were apostate Jews (cf. Dan. 1:7). The Marduk tablet, an extra-biblical cuneiform document, may contain a reference to Mordecai.⁴ The writer mentioned Mordecai 58 times in this book, and seven times identified him as a Jew (2:5; 5:13; 6:10; 8:7; 9:29, 31; 10:3). Obviously, this is a story in which ethnicity is important.

Jewish people who lived far from the Promised Land often had two names: one, their secular name that was understandable in their pagan culture, and the other, their sacred name given in Hebrew.⁵ "Hadasseh" (v. 7) is a Jewish name that means myrtle, a beautiful fragrant tree. The Jews still sometimes carry myrtle branches, which signify peace and thanksgiving, in procession during the Feast of Tabernacles.⁶ The name "Esther" is Persian and means "star." It derives from the same root as "Ishtar," the Babylonian goddess of love. The "star" in view was Venus, which was considered to be a symbol of beauty and good fortune.⁷

"... Esther, was the most beautiful of all the rest."⁸

¹Berlin, p. 25.

²Horn, p. 16.

³Berlin, p. 24.

⁴See Whitcomb, pp. 47-48; and Horn, pp. 20-22.

⁵*The Nelson ...*, p. 814.

⁶Baldwin, p. 66.

⁷Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, p. 356.

⁸Josephus, 11:6:2.

"Her wisdom and virtue were her greatest beauty, but it is an advantage to a diamond to be well set [referring to her beauty "of form and face"]."¹

"... by mentioning both her Hebrew and Babylonian name, the author is highlighting Esther as a woman with two identities, an issue that will be brought into sharp conflict later in the story."²

Esther was Mordecai's cousin, and Mordecai had taken on responsibility for her as her foster-father (v. 7).

"In the despotic countries of the East the custom obtains that when an order is sent to a family for a young damsel to repair to the royal palace, the parents, however unwilling, dare not refuse the honor for their daughter; and although they know that when she is once in the royal harem, they will never see her again, they are obliged to yield a silent and passive compliance."³

As will become clear, Esther cooperated in practices contrary to the Mosaic Law. These included having sex with a man not her husband (Exod. 20:14), marrying a pagan (Deut. 7:1-4; cf. Ezra 9:12; 10:10-15), and eating unclean food (Lev. 11:46-47). This sets Esther in contrast to Daniel, who purposed not to defile himself—even with unclean food (Dan. 1:5, 8). God used Esther as Israel's deliverer, even though she disregarded His will, at least partially (cf. Samson).

"The only way we can use Esther as a positive example of a virtuous woman today is by assuming, as most interpreters have done through the centuries, that her life in the harem was not a violation of God's dietary and moral laws. 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

¹Henry, p. 506.

²Jobes, p. 98.

³Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, p. 355.

when he refused the sexual advances of Potiphar's wife and spent harsh years in an Egyptian prison as a result."¹

Mordecai encouraged Esther to cooperate with the king (vv. 10-11).²

"I must say that at this particular juncture I do not have much respect for this man. Before the story is over, I am going to change my mind, and I will eat my words, but right now I despise him for what he is doing. To begin with, he is disobeying God. God had told His people not to intermarry with the heathen. He is definitely breaking the Mosaic Law by entering this girl in the beauty contest on the chance that she might become the next queen. The girls who did not win the contest would automatically enter the harem of the king. If Esther lost, she would be forced to become a concubine. She would be exposed to an awful life, but Mordecai is willing to take that risk."³

It is impossible to determine if Esther was forced to participate in the king's "beauty contest," or if she did so willingly. In view of Ahasuerus' great power, I tend to think she probably had no choice.

"The Persian name would enable Esther to keep secret her foreign identity."⁴

"... if Mordecai and Esther were passing themselves off as Persians, they certainly weren't keeping a kosher home and obeying the laws of Moses. Had they been following even the dietary laws, let alone the rules for separation and worship, their true nationality would have quickly been discovered. Had Esther practiced her Jewish faith during her year of preparation (2:12), or during the four years she had been queen (2:16 with 3:7), the disguise would have come off."⁵

"When you consider the backslidden state of the Jewish nation at that time, the disobedience of the Jewish remnant in the

¹Jobes, p. 113.

²See Ironside, pp. 24-27.

³McGee, 2:553.

⁴Baldwin, p. 21.

⁵Wiersbe, p. 712.

Persian Empire, and the unspiritual lifestyle of Mordecai and Esther, is it any wonder that the name of God is absent from this book?"¹

The “unspiritual lifestyle” of Esther and Mordecai has bothered many readers. Many writers have identified the problem of Esther and Mordecai's disobedience to the Mosaic Law. We must always evaluate the character and conduct of individuals, biblical characters and all others, in terms of their conformity with the revealed will of God, not in terms of their reputations. The book teaches us that God will take care of His people in spite of their unfaithfulness (2 Tim. 2:13).

Esther charmed Hegai, who was in charge of the king's women, and he proceeded to grant her favor (v. 9; cf. Dan. 1:9). Her ability to keep information confidential and her submissiveness to Mordecai (v. 10) mark her as a wise woman (cf. Prov. 13:1, 3).

There are several parallels between the story of Esther and the story of the Exodus. These have led a few scholars to conclude that the writer patterned this story after the story of Moses and the Exodus.² Similarities include the plot and central theme, the adopted child with the concealed identity, reluctance to appeal to the king at first, the execution of many enemies, the Amalekite foe, and others.³ Though some similarities do exist, most scholars have not agreed that the writer deliberately constructed the Book of Esther after Exodus 1—12.⁴

Similarly, there are several parallels with the story of Joseph in Genesis.⁵

3. The choice of Esther as queen 2:12-20

The king evidently had sexual relations with a different virgin every night whenever he pleased. The harem officials watched these girls closely to

¹Ibid., p. 713.

²Gillis Gerleman, *Esther*, has been the main advocate of this view, and others have followed.

³Forrest S. Weiland, "Plot Structure in the Book of Esther," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159:635 (July-September 2002):277-87.

⁴See Carey A. Moore, "Eight Questions Most Frequently Asked About the Book of Esther," *Bible Review* 3:1 (Spring 1987):30-31.

⁵See S. B. Berg, "The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure," *Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series* 44, pp. 123-42.

make sure they did not have some disease that they would pass on to him. The women in the harem used their time to become as attractive as possible.

"Like the semi-nomadic Arab women of the eastern Sudan in the last century, women like Esther long, long ago fumigated themselves, saturating their hair, skin, and pores with fumes from cosmetic burners."¹

"Think of it: no job, no responsibility, no cooking, no clean-up, no washing, no ironing, no errands, no budget-watching, no holding back in any area. Imagine! Pampered and indulged, in this self-centered harem of Persia, all of the emphasis rests upon her becoming a woman of greater physical beauty. Jewelry, clothing, perfumes, cosmetics, whatever she wishes, from coiffure to pedicure, are hers. The only thing on everyone's mind is to win this contest—to please the king and gain his favor."²

After their night with the king, these young women resided in a facility with other concubines where they might live for the rest of their lives. The king might call for them again or he might not. Historians have documented Ahasuerus' amorous affairs in Persia, Greece, and elsewhere.³ Esther had such natural beauty and charm that she required no special adornments to make her more attractive (v. 15; cf. 1 Kings 1:2-3). She obeyed the authority over her (Mordecai, vv. 10, 20). She may also have trusted God to work out His will for her (cf. Joseph), though the text does not say so.

"Both Josephus and the Jewish Rabbis exaggerated the beauty of Esther and elaborated on her virtues and piety. The Rabbis held that Esther was one of the four most beautiful women in history along with Sarah, Rahab, and Abigail (*Megillah* 15a). Josephus maintained that Esther 'surpassed all women in beauty' in the entire habitable world."⁴

¹Idem, "Archaeology and the Book of Esther," *Biblical Archaeologist* 38:3-4 (September, December 1975):78.

²Swindoll, p. 48.

³See Whitcomb, pp. 56-59; and Berlin, pp. 21-22.

⁴Yamauchi, "The Archaeological ...," p. 106.

Esther became queen in the winter of 479-478 B.C., four years after Vashti's deposition (v. 16). During that four-year period, the Greeks defeated Ahasuerus in the battles of Salamis, Plataea, and Mycale.

"His humiliating defeat depleted the treasuries of the Persian empire and discredited him in the eyes of his subjects."¹

"Mycale and not Plataea was in truth the decisive battle. Two of six Persian armies had been completely destroyed. A third must abandon Europe to guard disaffected western Asia. Truly the Allies [the Greek enemies of the Persians] might say that the gods had fought for them; the war had been lost by the Persians through repeated military and diplomatic blunders and not won by timid, incompetent, or disloyal allied commanders. 'You know,' the great historian Thucydides reminded his contemporaries of the next generation, 'that it was chiefly his own fault that the Barbarian [Ahasuerus] failed.' (Thuc. i. 69. 5) But, however won, victory it was, and a new phase of Perso-Greek relations was initiated."²

The crown of the Persian queen (v. 17) "consisted only of a purple ribbon, streaked with white, bound round the forehead."³ Ahasuerus' father, Darius, took his wives from the noble families of Persia, but other Persian kings sometimes married, contrary to law, other women, as Ahasuerus did.⁴

The Hebrew word translated "banquet" (v. 18, *hanaha*) means "a coming to rest." This could mean that Ahasuerus released his subjects from some tax burdens, or from military service, or both, temporarily. On the other hand, he may have only given them a feast.

"Perhaps it is relevant that when the False Smerdis ascended the throne [of Persia in 522 B.C.], he granted his subjects freedom from taxation *and* military service for a period of three years (Herodotus III, 67)."⁵

¹Jobes, p. 94.

²Olmstead, pp. 260-61.

³Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, p. 356.

⁴Jobes, p. 94.

⁵Moore, *Esther*, p. 25.

Evidently the reassembling of the virgins (v. 19) was part of a procession the king designed to show off Esther's beauty compared with the other contestants in his beauty contest.¹ The context suggests that this was a part of the gala that celebrated the king's wedding to Esther.

Mordecai had evidently received an appointment to a governmental position as a magistrate or judge earlier, or because of Esther's influence (v. 19). The "king's gate" was where people settled legal matters in the capital. Whereas the phrase "was sitting at the king's gate" could mean that Mordecai was simply present at this location, later references to his being at the king's gate (v. 21; 3:2-3; 4:2 [twice], 6; 5:9, 13; 6:10, 12) suggest that he occupied an official position that required his presence there. The king's gate was not just a passageway into and out of the city, but it was a place of commerce and legislation, like a modern county courthouse. There was even a "city square in front of the king's gate" (4:6). Mordecai's position probably enabled him to overhear the plot to assassinate the king (vv. 21-23).

"... the impression remains that Esther's Jewishness was more a fact of birth than of religious conviction."²

"This, no doubt, would be considered good policy on Mordecai's part, and lovely obedience in Esther, but it was real unfaithfulness to God, often duplicated in our own times. What a contrast with Ruth, the converted Moabitess!"³

Nevertheless, Esther's obedient submissiveness to Mordecai, even after she became queen, is remarkable, admirable, and praiseworthy.

II. HAMAN'S PLOT 2:21—4:3

The writer next described a plot that one of the leading men of Persia devised to do away with the Jews.

¹Gordis, p. 47.

²Moore, *Esther*, p. liv. Cf. v. 20.

³Ironside, p. 30.

A. BACKGROUND CONSIDERATIONS 2:21—3:6

At this point in the narrative the writer introduced us to the villain, and we learn that he hated the Jews.

1. Mordecai's loyalty 2:21-23

We know no details concerning the identities of the assassins who tried to kill Ahasuerus or what motivated them. Extra-biblical sources have not yet clarified these matters, though the commentators love to speculate. We do know that 14 years later Ahasuerus did die at the hand of an assassin.¹ Mordecai's position in the government (he was "sitting at the king's gate") is another evidence of God's providential preparation to deliver His people. His position enabled him to become aware of the plot. "Gallows" (v. 23; cf. 5:14; 7:10) is literally "tree."

"Impalement was not the method of execution, but the disgracing of the person, through the public display of his body after death or execution. (See Gen. 40:19; Deut. 21:22; Josh. 8:29; 10:26[; Ezra 6:11].) This practice has a long history in the ancient Near East. The hanging of enemy corpses, or their heads, on poles around the city is documented in the Assyrian annals and depicted on monuments. Compare the impalement of Saul's headless body in I Sam. 31:10."²

"Darius, Xerxes' [Ahasuerus'] father, was known to have once impaled 3,000 men."³

Today, there is a debate over whether or not capital punishment deters crime, but in ancient times, almost everyone believed that it did.

Ahasuerus was careful to record the name, father, and town of anyone who demonstrated particular loyalty to his throne and to reward him quickly and generously.⁴

¹Olmstead, p. 289.

²Berlin, p. 32.

³John A. Martin, "Esther," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, pp. 704-5.

⁴Herodotus, 8.90.

"Xerxes [Ahasuerus] is consumed with power yet powerless as sovereign events unfold."¹

The plot against Ahasuerus' life, and Mordecai's discovery of it, were additional "coincidences" that God providentially arranged beforehand to ultimately deliver His chosen people from extinction—in addition to Vashti's decision (1:12), Esther's selection (2:17), and Mordecai's advancement (2:19).

2. Haman's promotion 3:1-6

Several students of this book have concluded that Haman was an Amalekite, but this is probably not correct. Agag was the name of an area in Media that had become part of the Persian Empire.² However, Agag was also the title of the anti-Semitic Amalekite king whom Saul failed to execute (1 Sam. 15:8; cf. Exod. 17:8-16; Num. 24:7). By mentioning both Kish, (a Kish was Saul's father, 2:5), and Agag, the Amalekite king, the writer was probably indicating that both men were heirs to a long-standing tradition of anti-Semitism.³ The writer referred to Kish and Agag apparently for literary rather than genealogical reasons: to aid the reader in connecting the anti-Semitism of the Amalekites with the anti-Semitism of Haman. King Saul, a Benjamite, failed to destroy Agag,; but Mordecai, also a Benjamite (2:5), destroyed Haman.

He [Ahasuerus] "raised him [Haman] to the rank of vizier, or prime confidential minister, whose pre-eminence in office and power appeared in the elevated state chair appropriated to that supreme functionary. Such a distinction in seats was counted of vast importance in the formal court of Persia."⁴

There are at least four explanations for Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman (v. 2). One is that he did it because of ancient ethnic Jewish antagonism toward the Amalekites (cf. Exod. 17:8-16; Num. 24:7; Deut. 25:17-19; 1 Chron. 4:42-43).⁵ In other words, Mordecai despised Haman

¹Breneman, p. 323.

²Gleason L. Archer Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 421.

³Bush, p. 384. Cf. Josephus, 11:6:5; Baldwin, pp. 71-72; Ironside, p. 33; and Longman and Dillard, pp. 221-22.

⁴Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, p. 356.

⁵Bush, p. 385; Wiersbe, p. 718.

because Haman was an Amalekite. But Haman was probably of Median, not Amalekite, descent, Agag being the name of an area in Media.

Second, Mordecai's refusal sprang from his Jewish desire to honor God by not bowing down to any person but God. However, there are several examples of Jews bowing down before high government officials, including kings, in the Old Testament (cf. Gen. 23:7; 43:28; Exod. 18:7; 2 Sam. 14:4; 18:28; 1 Kings 1:16, 23). Mordecai did not have to worship Haman (cf. Dan. 3:17-18). Not even the Persian kings demanded worship of their people.¹ Nevertheless, Ahasuerus had commanded the residents of Susa to honor Haman (v. 3), so this may have been an act of civil disobedience on Mordecai's part.

"While the fact that he was a Jew (4) would not preclude his bowing down, the faith of the exiles tended to encourage an independence of judgment and action which embarrassed their captors (Dn. 3; 6)."²

A third view is that Mordecai was repulsed by Haman's arrogance. The Persian kings did not demand worship as deity, but they demanded excessive adoration, and Haman did as well. Even the Greeks considered this extreme civil respect degrading to express.³ Mordecai refused to give Haman this undeserved adoration. However, this explanation does not explain why the writer wrote that Mordecai had told people that he was a Jew (v. 4). Additionally, Jews at other times bowed down before very proud people.

The fourth explanation is that Mordecai refused to bow down because Haman was a known enemy of the Jews.⁴ Some advocates of this view say that Mordecai told people that he was a Jew when they asked him why he was not bowing down to Haman, implying that his Jewishness was the reason he refused to bow down. The fact that Haman wanted to destroy *all* the Jews, and not just Mordecai (v. 6), may indicate that he believed that *no* Jew would bow down to him. If Haman's desire for revenge extended only to Mordecai personally, he probably would not have wanted to wipe out the whole Jewish race. So his antagonism seems rooted in

¹Paton, p. 196.

²Baldwin, pp. 72-73.

³Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, p. 356.

⁴E.g., McGee, 2:557.

Mordecai's religion and ethnicity.¹ Evidently Haman was anti-Semitic even before Mordecai offended him, and he used this offense as an excuse to exterminate the Jews.

This situation is comparable to a German Jew not standing up to honor Adolph Hitler after it became known that Hitler was anti-Semitic.

Haman might have been successful in getting Mordecai executed. However, when he decided to wipe out the race God chose to bless (v. 6), he embarked on a course of action that would inevitably fail (cf. Gen. 12:3).

"This is a chapter in the life of the Jew that has been duplicated many, many times. When you read this chapter, you can almost substitute the name of Pharaoh instead of Haman, or you can substitute the name of Hitler or Nasser—in fact, there are many names that would fit in here. There never has been a time since Israel became a nation down in the land of Egypt to the present moment that there has not been a movement somewhere to exterminate them."²

This story pictures Haman as having all seven of the characteristics that the writer of Proverbs 6:16-19 said the Lord hates: a proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren.³ Nevertheless, Ahasuerus advanced Haman to the highest government position in the empire—under the king.

B. _____ HAMAN'S PROPOSAL 3:7-15

His pride having been wounded, Haman set about to take revenge, not only on Mordecai, but on all of Mordecai's relatives.

1. _____ The casting of lots 3:7

In Ahasuerus' twelfth year (474 B.C.), Haman cast "the lot"—*pur* is the Persian word for "lot"—to determine the day most favorable to wipe out

¹E.g., Keil, pp. 343-44; Berlin, p. 37.

²McGee, 2:557.

³Wiersbe, pp. 716-17.

the Jews.¹ In the pagan ancient Near East, it was unthinkable to make plans of this magnitude without astrological guidance.² The lot supposedly revealed the day most propitious for this act.³ The official casting of lots happened during the first month of each year to determine the most opportune days for important events.⁴ This probably explains why Haman cast lots in the first month. However, God controlled the lot-casting (Prov. 16:33) and gave the Jews almost a year to prepare for conflict with their enemies. As a result, they had time to prepare to defend themselves and did not suffer as great a loss of life. Evidently the Jews named their feast "Purim" in honor of the *lots* that Haman cast, but which the Lord controlled, as a tribute to God's sovereign protection. Archaeologists have found quadrangular prism type dice at Susa, and perhaps it was this kind of device that Haman used to make his decision on this occasion.⁵

This is another indication of God's providence at work, behind the scene.

2. Haman's request 3:8-9

Perhaps Haman did not mention the Jews by name since Ahasuerus' predecessors, Cyrus and Darius I, had issued proclamations favorable to them (Ezra 1:1-4; 6:3-5, 8-12). In any case, his failure to mention them by name set him up for Esther's revelation that it was her people whom Haman planned to destroy (7:4). The Jews did indeed live a separated life, as Haman said (cf. Num. 23:9), but they were not a dangerous, rebellious element within the empire, which he claimed (cf. Jer. 29:7). This was another notorious instance of unjustified "ethnic cleansing."

"What Haman is really saying, then, is that the Jews do not to [*sic*] acknowledge the sovereignty of the king; and this constitutes treason."⁶

The 10,000 talents of silver Haman said his plan would contribute to the king's treasury amounted to about two-thirds of the entire empire's

¹The NIV translation of this verse is much clearer than the NASB.

²Keil, pp. 307, 344.

³*The New Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Magic and Sorcery," by Kenneth A. Kitchen, pp. 766-71.

⁴W. W. Hallo, "The First Purim," *Biblical Archaeologist* 46:1 (1983):19-27.

⁵Wood, p. 409, n. 98.

⁶Berlin, p. 40.

income.¹ Bush considered this figure satiric hyperbole. He believed Haman wanted the king to understand that the benefit that would come to him by executing the Jews would be extremely large.² This sum could not have come out of Haman's pocket; it was too large. He must have meant that the plunder taken from the Jews would be huge. Clines considered this money to be a bribe.³

"The planned massacre, gruesome though it was, was not without precedents. In 522 BC, at the time of King Cambyses' death, Smerdis the Magus usurped the throne. When he was put to death in a conspiracy every Persian in the capital took up his weapons and killed every Magus he could find.⁴ If darkness had not put an end to the slaughter, the whole caste would have been exterminated."⁵

3. The king's permission 3:10-15

The imprint of an official's signet ring (v. 10) was the equivalent of his signature in ancient times (cf. Gen. 41:42; Esth. 8:2, 8, 10). Ahasuerus gave permission to Haman to confiscate the Jews' wealth and to put them to death (v. 11). "The silver is yours, and the people also" probably means: "I put you in charge of this project"—not that all the money taken would go to Haman. Keil believed that Ahasuerus allowed Haman to keep this vast wealth so that it would not appear that the king had given the order simply to obtain money.⁶ Merrill suggested that Ahasuerus viewed the Jews as a scapegoat to blame for his humiliating losses to the Greeks.⁷ This was a precipitous, ill-informed decision (cf. Prov. 18:13).

"Though determined by lot, the day chosen seems maliciously ironical. The number 13 was considered unlucky by the Persians and the Babylonians, while the thirteenth day of the first month, the day on which the edict decreeing the Jews' destruction was dispatched (v 12), is the day preceding

¹Herodotus, 3.95.

²Bush, p. 387.

³Clines, p. 296.

⁴Herodotus, 3.79.

⁵Baldwin, p. 74.

⁶Keil, p. 346.

⁷Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, p. 502.

Passover, the commemoration of the deliverance from slavery in Egypt."¹

The words "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate" (v. 13) probably translate the legal formula used in the decree that would have been as specific as possible.

"There is a skillful use of contrast in the last sentence of the chapter. While the collaborators celebrate, the city of Susa is aghast. The author is sensitive to popular reactions and notes that the ordinary citizen asked himself what lay behind such a drastic scene."²

"... the motive seems to have been, as Clericus and others have already conjectured, to cause many Jews to leave their property and escape to other lands, for the sake of preserving their lives."³

In contrast to what is typical in modern times, the objects of this purge had several months to prepare to defend themselves. This is an evidence of God's grace toward the Jews.

"... there is no possible escape from the Persian empire, which is effectively coterminous with the known world, and the delay of execution only prolongs the agony of the Jews."⁴

Swindoll drew three lessons from this section of the book:

"First, from Mordecai we learn: Never forget there will always be someone who will resent your devotion to the Lord. ... Second, from Haman we learn: Never underestimate the diabolical nature of revenge. ... Third, from Ahasuerus: Never overestimate the value of your own importance."⁵

¹Bush, p. 386.

²Baldwin, p. 76.

³Keil, p. 348.

⁴Clines, p. 298.

⁵Swindoll, p. 70. Italics omitted.

"When all is said and done, God uses even injustice to fulfill his promises to us [cf. Gen. 50:20; Acts 3:17; 4:27-29]."¹

C. MORDECAI AND THE JEWS' REACTION 4:1-3

We can understand why Mordecai reacted to Haman's decree so strongly (v. 1). Undoubtedly he felt personally responsible for this decree, since his refusal to bow before Haman had precipitated it (cf. 3:2-5). However, we should not interpret Mordecai's actions in verse 1 as a sign of great faith in God necessarily (cf. Mark 5:38; 1 Thess. 4:13). They were common expressions of personal grief (cf. Ezra 8:21, 23; Neh. 9:1; Lam. 3:40-66).

The absence of any reference to prayer in verse 3 may be significant. Prayer normally accompanied the other practices mentioned (cf. 2 Kings 19:1-4; Joel 1:14). Perhaps many of these exiled Jews had gotten so far away from God that they did not even pray in this crisis hour. However, the basis of this argument is silence, and arguments based on silence are never strong. Fasting *does* connote a strong but veiled appeal to God for help (cf. v. 16; 9:31). Probably the absence of reference to prayer was designed to help the reader view the events taking place on the horizontal (earthly) plane alone and thereby appreciate God's providence at work.

III. ESTHER'S INTERVENTION 4:4—9:19

Haman's plan to exterminate the Jews created a crisis, and now Esther's intervention with Ahasuerus provided the solution.

A. MORDECAI'S INSTRUCTION AND ESTHER'S DECISION 4:4-17

4:4-6 Mordecai's mourning may have been the only thing that disturbed Esther. She may have known nothing about the decree. The NIV translation interpreted "what this was" as "what was troubling Mordecai." On the other hand, she may have known of both Mordecai's grief and the decree, and concluded that since the king did not know that she was a Jewess, she would be safe (v. 13). However, Hathach knew

¹Jobes, p. 128.

she was a Jewess (v. 13, cf. v. 9), and probably others in the royal household did as well.

4:7-9 Mordecai informed Hathach of the situation and told him to "order" Esther to go before the king and plead with Ahasuerus for her people.

4:10-12 Esther sent back word to Mordecai through Hathach reminding him of the danger that she faced if she appeared before Ahasuerus uninvited.

Herodotus wrote that from earliest times, Median kings had refused entrance to their throne rooms to unannounced persons, in order to enhance their dignity, and to protect themselves.¹ But anyone who desired an audience with the king might ask to be announced.² Evidently the Persians continued this custom.

"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."³

"This made the royal palace little better than a royal prison, and the kings themselves could not but become morose. It was bad for their subjects; for what good had they of a king that they might never have liberty to apply to for the redress of grievances. It is not thus in the court of the King of kings; to the footstool of his throne of grace we may at any time *come boldly*, and may be sure of an answer of peace to the prayer of faith."⁴

4:13-14 Mordecai sent word back to Esther warning her that, if she did not speak up, she would die along with the other Jews in the

¹Herodotus, 1.99.

²See, for example, *ibid.*, 3.140.

³Josephus, 11:6:3.

⁴Henry, p. 508.

empire, even though she was in the royal palace. Mordecai was confident that God would spare the Jews—somehow—but Esther's family would die. He urged Esther to take advantage of her opportunity and to speak to the king. He viewed her position as a unique privilege, though he stopped short of acknowledging God's hand in Esther's elevation.

"Without explicitly spelling out in detail how he came to his convictions, Mordecai reveals that he believes in God, in God's guidance of individual lives, and in God's ordering of the world's political events, irrespective of whether those who seem to have the power acknowledge him or not."¹

Another view is that Mordecai was simply posing the possibility of deliverance in order to motivate Esther to act:

"Mordecai is not postulating that deliverance will arise for the Jews from some mysterious, unexpressed source. Rather, by affirming that Esther is the only possible source of deliverance for the Jews, he is attempting to motivate her to act."²

"Though God chooses to use people, He is by no means dependent on them. Many believers act as though they are indispensable to the Lord's purposes, and if they refuse to do His bidding God's work will grind to a halt. Mordecai's challenge to Esther must be heard and heeded. Our sovereign God will accomplish all His objectives with or without us. He calls us not out of His need for us but for our need to find fulfillment in serving Him."³

"We should every one of us consider for what end God has put us in the place where we are, and, when any particular opportunity of serving God

¹Baldwin, p. 80.

²Bush, p. 397.

³Merrill, in *The Old ...*, p. 370.

and our generation offers itself, we must take care that we do not let it slip."¹

Several students of Esther have pointed out that Mordecai does not come across in this book as a very "spiritual" person.² In verse 14, for example, he made no direct reference to God that would certainly have been natural (cf. Nehemiah's frequent prayers, Joseph's and Daniel's comments to their rulers). Nevertheless, he apparently believed that God would preserve His people and punish their enemies (Gen. 12:3). He also concluded that if Esther remained silent she would die. Mordecai evidently saw God's hand behind the human agent of her threatened destruction, who was the king.

Mordecai's question in verse 14 is the main basis for the view that the doctrine of providence is the key to understanding the Book of Esther.

"The book implies that even when God's people are far from him and disobedient, they are still the object of his concern and love, and that he is working out his purposes through them ..."³

Mordecai perceived Esther's moment of destiny, though he made no mention of God's providence, as Joseph had done (Gen. 50:20).

"The promises of God, the justice of God, and the providence of God shine brilliantly through the entire crisis, so that the mere omission of His name obscures nothing of His identity, attributes, and purposes for His chosen people and for the entire world of mankind."⁴

4:15-17 Evidently there was a fairly large population of Jews in Susa (v. 16; cf. 9:15). Again, there is no mention of prayer, though

¹Henry, p. 508.

²E.g., Martin, p. 707.

³Huey, p. 794.

⁴Whitcomb, p. 79. Cf. Keil, p. 353.

some of the Jews may have prayed because they faced serious danger.¹

"Like all human beings, Esther was not without flaw; but certainly our heroine should be judged more by the brave act she performs than by the natural fears she had to fight against. The rash man acts without fear; the brave man, in spite of it."²

Esther's words, "If I perish, I perish," (v. 16) seem more like words of courageous determination³ than an expression of resignation to the inevitable (cf. Gen. 43:14).⁴

"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 safety to concern for her people's survival. She has reached her own personal hour of decision and has not been found wanting."⁵

"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

¹Baldwin, pp. 81-85, gave a helpful discussion of fasting.

²Moore, *Esther*, p. 53.

³Clines, p. 303; Bush, p. 400.

⁴Paton, p. 226.

⁵Swindoll, pp. 85-86.

venture of speaking for and identifying with God's people."¹

"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."²

Another writer, like the one cited immediately above, suggested that if the Jews did indeed fast for three days, as Esther requested, beginning on the day Passover began, they would not have been able to celebrate the Passover, which their Law commanded (Exod. 12).³ These observations assume that the dialog recorded in these verses (vv. 4-17) took place on the very day that Ahasuerus issued his decree (3:12), which may or may not have been the case.

B. THE PLOT EXPOSED CHS. 5—7

Chapters 5—7 carry us to the climax of our story. They show how God providentially preserved and protected His people.

1. Esther's preparations ch. 5

It appears that Esther showed great wisdom in how she prepared to expose Haman as the enemy of the Jews and the Persian Empire. Or perhaps she was just afraid to expose Haman during the first banquet and so delayed.

The first banquet 5:1-8

Here we have another remarkable example of how God controls the hearts of kings (v. 2; Prov. 21:1; cf. Gen. 39—41; Ezra 1:1-4; Neh. 2; Dan. 2; 3; 4; 5; Acts 2:23).

¹Eugene H. Peterson, *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, pp. 172-73.

²Michael G. Wechsler, "Shadow and Fulfillment in the Book of Esther," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154:615 (July-September 1997):281.

³David J. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, pp. 36-37.

"In the bas-reliefs of Persepolis, copied by Sir Robert Ker Porter, we see King Darius enthroned in the midst of his court, and walking abroad in equal state; in either case he carries in his right hand a slender rod or wand [v. 2], about equal in length to his own height, ornamented with a small knob at the summit."¹

"The spiritual application to the gospel message is remarkable. Because of our sin, we cannot enter the presence of an infinitely holy God. But this same God, in His incomparable love and grace, has provided a plan whereby even the worst of sinners may enter His presence and touch, as it were, His golden scepter."²

"May I say to you, our God holds out the scepter to mankind today."³

"To half of the kingdom" (v. 3) is hyperbole and means, "I will grant even a very large request" (cf. 5:6; 7:2; Mark 6:22-23).

Esther must have had a very good reason for postponing her request of the king (v. 8), since delaying it opened the door to any number of complications. For example, the king's mood might have changed, or Haman might have discovered the reason for the banquet.

Esther's "procedure is part of a shrewd and deliberate plan in which Esther is taking the initiative and determining the course of events, as a close reading of the narrative will clearly show."⁴

"Some commentators see in the word 'them'—that is, the inclusion of Haman, an attempt by Esther to make Ahasuerus jealous by equating him and Haman. I prefer to see it ... as a clever move on Esther's part to disarm Haman and make him think he was the center of attention. This plays to Haman's personal weakness and also to Esther's plan. It was crucial, after all, that Haman attend the next party, where he would

¹Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, p. 358.

²Whitcomb, pp. 82-83.

³McGee, 2:565.

⁴Bush, p. 407.

indeed be the center of attention; the party to come was, then, as much for Haman as for the king."¹

The narrator did not explain *why* Esther postponed asking Ahasuerus to spare her people at this first banquet, but God quite clearly led her. It was on the night between the first and second banquets, when the king could not sleep, that he learned of Mordecai's role in saving his life. This is evidence of divine providence.

"What Esther did ranks among the great deeds of faith in Scripture and could have been recorded in Hebrews 11."²

Some writers have claimed that, even though God's name does not appear in the Book of Esther, the letters YHWH, the Hebrew consonants for the name Yahweh, were hidden by the writer as an acronym in four verses (1:20 5:4, 13; 13:7), two of these spellings being in reverse order. In addition, advocates claim, the name I AM is hidden in one other verse (7:5). This view has been refuted, and I do not accept it.³

"Esther came to a proud imperious man; we come to the God of love and grace. She was not called; we are: the Spirit says, *Come*, and the bride says, *Come*. She had a law against her; we have a promise, many a promise, in favour of us: *Ask, and it shall be given you*. She had no friend to introduce her, or intercede for her, while on the contrary he that was then the king's favourite was her enemy; but we have an advocate with the Father, in whom he is well pleased."⁴

Haman's reaction 5:9-14

God had kept Haman from discovering Esther's relationship to Mordecai.

"It was an unusual honor to be invited to a banquet with the queen, for Persian officials were protective of their wives."⁵

¹Berlin, p. 54.

²Wiersbe, p. 728.

³See John M. Manguno Jr., "Accident or Acronymy: The Tetragrammaton in the Masoretic Text of Esther," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171:684 (October-December 2014):440-51.

⁴Henry, p. 509.

⁵Martin, p. 708.

Haman boasted of four things that proud men usually boast about: his wealth, his children, his position, and his greatness with the ladies.¹ The Persians placed great value on having many sons (v. 11).² A person of good character overlooks slights against himself or herself, but a man or woman of inferior character magnifies them (v. 13). The "gallows" (lit. "tree," or pole) by itself may have been made 75 feet high to let everybody see it (and the impaling), though that would have made it unusually tall. Understanding the pole itself to be 75 feet high has led some commentators to view this number (and other unusually large numbers in the book) as an exaggeration.³ However, Haman may have erected his gallows (or stake) on the top of a hill or building "at Haman's house" (7:9, possibly on his estate), resulting in an elevated height of 75 feet.

"This is a fascinating example of the deceived sinner, glorying in self and hating both the true God and His people."⁴

"Haman is a case study in that inordinate pride and arrogance that conceals a 'vast and tender ego' (Fox, [*Character and ...*], 179). ...

"Haman's plans are about to run head on into the providence of God."⁵

Swindoll drew four principles for dealing with difficult situations from chapter 5:

"First: When preparing for an unprecedented event, wait on the Lord before getting involved. ... Second: When dealing with an unpredictable person, count on the Lord to open doors and hearts. ... Third: When working through an unpleasant situation, trust the Lord for enduring patience. ... Fourth: When standing against an unprincipled enemy, ask the Lord for invincible courage."⁶

¹McGee, 2:567.

²Herodotus, 1.136.

³E.g., Berlin, p. 55.

⁴Whitcomb, p. 85.

⁵Bush, p. 418.

⁶Swindoll, pp. 107-8. Italics omitted.

2. Mordecai's exaltation ch. 6

Mordecai's exaltation was another event that prepared for the utter destruction of Haman. There are at least five indications of God's providence in the first five verses of this chapter: the king's insomnia (6:1a), his choice of entertainment (6:1b), the king's choice of books (6:1c), the king's delay in rewarding Mordecai (6:2-3), and the timely arrival of Haman (6:4-5).¹

Ahasuerus' insomnia 6:1-3

The reading of the equivalent of the *Congressional Record* would have put the king to sleep under normal circumstances, as it probably had done on many previous occasions (cf. Mal. 3:16).

"Here is a remarkable instance of the veiled providential control of God over circumstances of human history. Upon the king's insomnia, humanly speaking, were hinged the survival of the chosen nation, the fulfillment of prophecy, the coming of the Redeemer, and therefore the whole work of redemption. Yet the outcome was never in doubt; for God was in control, making the most trivial of events work together for Haman's defeat and Israel's preservation."²

"When Satan put it into the heart of Haman to contrive Mordecai's death, God put it into the heart of the king to contrive Mordecai's honour."³

Normally, this king quickly rewarded people who did him special services. Herodotus gave two examples of Xerxes doing this.⁴ Consequently, when he discovered that he had overlooked Mordecai's favor, the king moved speedily to rectify the oversight.

Haman's recommendation 6:4-10

"Here the early bird is gotten by the worm."⁵

¹Wiersbe, pp. 733-35.

²*The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 566.

³Henry, p. 09.

⁴Herodotus, 8.85, 9.107. See also 3.140 for an example of Darius doing this.

⁵Moore, *Esther*, p. 64.

Haman's pride preceded his fall (v. 6; cf. Prov. 16:18). He wanted, as much as possible, to appear like the king himself, in the honors he recommended for the person he thought would be himself (v. 8; cf. Gen. 41:39-45; 1 Sam. 18:4; 1 Kings 1:33). Wearing clothing that the king had worn, and riding on a horse that the king had ridden on, were "the highest mark of honour that could be shown to a subject" (cf. 1 Kings 1:32-49).¹

"This is a very serious request, tantamount to asking for the kingship."²

The crown was on the head of the horse, not its rider (v. 8; cf. v. 9).

It was evidently "a special arrangement of the horse's hair to form a topknot between the ears."³

Baldwin based this opinion on sculptured reliefs that archaeologists have discovered on a stairway at Persepolis.⁴

The king knew by now that Mordecai was a Jew (v. 10). However, the writer did not say Ahasuerus understood that Haman had aimed his pogrom against the Jews—until Esther revealed that fact (7:4). Of course he may have known it already. It seems incredible that Ahasuerus would issue such a decree without finding out whom it would eliminate. Perhaps he planned to make Mordecai an exception and spare his life.

Haman's humiliation 6:11-14

Haman covered his head (v. 12; cf. 4:1-2) as a sign of his grief (cf. 2 Sam. 15:30; 19:4; Jer. 14:3-4; Ezek. 24:17). His friends evidently realized that unseen forces were maintaining the blessing that they had observed following the Jews (cf. Num. 23:9, 21, 23; 24:9, 17, 19; Josh. 2:9-13). They could very well have been members of the class that studied signs to predict the future. Furthermore, Cyrus had previously granted the Jews favors (Ezra 1:1). They saw in Haman's humiliation before Mordecai, the powerful honored Jew, an omen of even worse defeat to come. The tide had turned, and Haman was now powerless before it.

¹Keil, p. 360.

²Berlin, p. 59.

³Baldwin, p. 90.

⁴*The Nelson ...*, p. 819.

"The revival of the Jewish people since the times of Cyrus was sufficient to induce, in the minds of heathen who were attentive to the signs of the times, the persuasion that this nation enjoyed divine protection."¹

Verse 14 means that Haman hastened to go to the banquet. He did not want to be late. It does not mean that he was reluctant to go and that the eunuchs needed to hurry him along. He evidently looked forward to the banquet as an opportunity to lift his spirits, little realizing that it would be the scene of his exposure and condemnation.

"Still as of old
Men by themselves are priced—
For thirty pieces Judas sold
Himself, not Christ."²

3. Haman's fall ch. 7

The plot of the story reaches a climax in this chapter "in which Haman comes to the end of his rope."³ The fate of Haman reversed when Esther identified him as the person responsible for the plan to destroy her and her people.

Esther's plea 7:1-6

This banquet probably took place in the late morning, since Haman had already led Mordecai around Susa on a horse that day, and since Haman died later that day.

"It was the practice for the most highly honored of the nobles to attend only the king's breakfast so that later they could entertain their own guests in the same manner."⁴

Esther was in a very dangerous position. Not only did she now identify herself with a minority group that Haman had represented to the king as subversive, but she also accused one of his closest confidential advisers of

¹Keil, p. 362.

²Hester H. Cholmondeley, "Betrayal," in *Baker's Pocket Treasure of Religious Verse*, p. 136; quoted in Swindoll, p. 121.

³Wiersbe, p. 737.

⁴Olmstead, p. 183.

committing an error in judgment. Nevertheless she appealed to the king to do what was in his best interests (v. 4; cf. Gen. 37:28, 36; 45:4).

"Her whole speech is designed to present her as one who, like Mordecai, has uncovered a plot against the king. She is pleading for the king to save her own life and the lives of her people because it is in his best interest to do so."¹

Ahasuerus saw at once that his enemy, whoever he was, was going to rob him of his queen and her people. When Esther finally named the culprit, Ahasuerus had already decided to punish him severely.

"*Thou art the man*, might Esther too truly have said."²

Ahasuerus' decision 7:7-10

The fact that his enemy sat in his presence at that very moment evidently made the king pause before issuing his obvious verdict. He wanted to think about it and walked out into his garden to do so. Upon returning, what he saw confirmed his decision. Haman found himself trapped between an angry king and an offended queen. Ironically, this enemy of the Jews ended up pleading for his life with a Jewess!³

"The man who without a twinge of remorse could devote a nation to destruction, is in dire distress at the thought of himself losing life or liberty."⁴

Haman fell at Esther's feet to beg as she reclined, but the king misunderstood his intentions when he reentered the banquet room unexpectedly (v. 8).

"... one must remember that in antiquity very strong feelings and strict regulations centered on the harem. ... Had Haman knelt as much as a foot away from the queen's couch, the king's reaction could still have been justified."⁵

¹Berlin, p. 67.

²Henry, p. 510.

³Breneman, p. 350.

⁴Ironside, p. 81.

⁵Moore, *Esther*, p. 72. See also Jobes, p. 165; Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, p. 262.

"... I raise the possibility that the king's misunderstanding is intentional. It gives the king a pretext to punish Haman, for Haman's real wrong, plotting to kill the Jews, had the king's full endorsement, so how could he fault Haman for something he earlier had approved? Persian kings never make mistakes."¹

"A Targum adds that the angel Gabriel pushed Haman as the king entered the room!"²

Esther's words had so predisposed Ahasuerus against Haman that the king viewed Haman's posture in the worst possible light.³ Covering the face of a condemned person was evidently customary in such cases (v. 8; cf. 6:12).⁴

"The import of this striking action is, that a criminal is unworthy any longer to look on the face of the king, and hence, when malefactors are consigned to their doom in Persia, the first thing is to cover the face with a veil or napkin."⁵

Harbonah's suggestion that they impale Haman on the stake he had built for Mordecai drove the final nail in Haman's coffin (v. 9). Certainly Ahasuerus had not known of Haman's plan to execute the king's savior. We do not know if Esther asked for mercy for Haman or not. In either case, the king carried out his execution (v. 10). Thus ended the life of one of the most hostile anti-Semitic Jew-haters that ever walked the stage of history (cf. Ps. 9:15-16).

"The nets of evil plotting and malicious enterprise swing far out in the tides of human life, but never far enough to enmesh God. He remains beyond them all, and gathering them in the hands of His power He makes them include the men who weave them to destroy others."⁶

¹Berlin, p. 70.

²Huey, p. 826.

³Cf. Josephus, 11:6:11.

⁴Gordis, p. 56; Baldwin, p. 93. For other examples of the effects of Ahasuerus' wrath, see Keil, pp. 306-7.

⁵Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, p. 359. See also Gaebelien, 2:1:113.

⁶G. Campbell Morgan, *An Exposition of the Whole Bible*, p. 199.

"Does the book of Esther have anything to say about suffering? ... God's preservation of his people and their deliverance from unjust suffering came because of the availability of a young Jewess, Esther. ... Her willingness to take a risk delivered many from suffering."¹

C. THE JEWS' DELIVERANCE 8:1—9:19

Even though Haman was now dead, the Jews were not yet safe. This section of the text records what Esther and Mordecai did to ensure the preservation of the Jews who then lived throughout the vast Persian Empire. The death of Haman is not the major climax of the book.

1. The rewarding of Esther and Mordecai 8:1-2

Haman's "house" (v. 1) was his estate, which must have been enormous. Persian law put the estate of a traitor in the custody of the king.² Esther received the estate, probably to compensate her for her suffering. The king gave Mordecai Haman's place as second in authority (cf. Joseph, Gen. 41:42; Nehemiah, Neh. 1:11—2:8; and Daniel, Dan. 5:7, 29; 6:3).

"If God can change the heart of an Ahasuerus, He can change *any* heart—*any heart!*"³

2. Esther's request for her people 8:3-8

Esther again had to argue her case, this time for clemency for the Jews. Her request involved expense to the king. Esther would not have been sure he would grant it. Ahasuerus could have spared the life of the queen and Mordecai and let the rest of their fellow Jews perish. Esther's commitment to her people, which jeopardized her own safety, was very selfless and accounts for the high honor the Jews have given her since these events transpired. Mordecai witnessed her plea (v. 7).

¹Stephen J. Bramer, "Suffering in the Historical Books," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and the Church*, p. 109.

²*The Nelson ...*, p. 820.

³Swindoll, p. 142.

"The *Book of Esther* is set in the reign of Xerxes, who was heavily committed to Zoroastrianism of an orthodox variety and who reversed the practice of religious tolerance of his predecessors. He destroyed the main idol of Bel Marduk, the temple of Marduk, Esagila, and many other Mardukian temples."¹

Zoroastrians, including Cyrus and Ahasuerus, worshiped Ahuramazda.² In view of the king's religious intolerance, it took great courage for Esther to request mercy for the Jews.

"It is very moving to see the extent to which this young girl, who has everything money can buy, identifies herself with her own kith and kin, and is prepared to risk everything in an attempt to prevent the disaster that threatens them [cf. Moses]."³

"At the beginning of this story, Esther and Mordecai were hardly exemplary in the way they practiced their religious faith; but now we get the impression that things have changed. Both of them have affirmed their Jewish nationality and both were the means of calling all the Jews in the empire to prayer and fasting. In one sense, they spearheaded a Jewish 'revival' and made being Jewish a more honorable thing in the empire."⁴

The king did not have authority in his government to cancel decrees (cf. 1:19; Dan. 6:17). This awkward policy tended to lend weight to the king's official pronouncements (as when the pope speaks *ex cathedra* for Roman Catholics).

3. The royal decree 8:9-14

The first decree, to destroy the Jews, had gone out on April 17, 474 B.C. (3:12).⁵ Ahasuerus published this second one, allowing the Jews to defend

¹Robert J. Littman, "The Religious Policy of Xerxes and the Book of Esther," *Jewish Quarterly Review* NS65:3 (January 1975):155.

²Olmstead, pp. 231-34.

³Baldwin, p. 95.

⁴Wiersbe, p. 742.

⁵R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.-A.D. 75*, p. 31.

themselves, on June 25, 474 B.C. The Jews had over eight months to prepare for the day their enemies might attack them, which was March 7, 473 B.C.

Verse 11 presents a problem: Does the phrase "children and women" refer to the Jews' children and women, or to their enemies' children and women?

"Some commentators understand the verse to mean that the Jewish people were given permission to slaughter even the wives and children of any people that would attack them. Another view is that the Jewish people may not have carried out what was permitted, but killed only the men who attacked them (see 9:6). There is another possibility, that the verse refers to the women and children of the Jews. That is, the assault mentioned in the verse was expected to be directed against the men, women, children, and possessions of the Jews. Against such assault, the Jews were to arm themselves and make proper defenses (see 9:5, 6)."¹

"The Jews could protect themselves. In fact, they could do more than that. They could take the lives of anyone who might attack them, including women and children, and they had a right to plunder and take ownership of their possessions. So at least it was an even playing field. The Jews now had their own defense, established of all things, by the Persian law."²

I think the children and women in view were those of the Jews (cf. 3:13), not the enemies of the Jews.³ This extreme measure enabled the Jews to defend themselves completely. It neutralized the enemy's former advantage (cf. 3:13). In the Hebrew text, this new edict gave the Jews exactly the same power as the former edict gave their enemies.

"It has often been observed that this [fourteenth verse] provides a remarkably cogent illustration of missionary work today. God's death sentence hangs over a sinful humanity, but He has also commanded us to hasten the message of salvation to every land (cf. Prov. 24:11). Only by a knowledge of, and a response to, the second decree of saving grace through the

¹ *The Nelson ...*, p. 821.

² Swindoll, p. 145.

³ Gordis, pp. 49-53; Wiersbe, p. 744; the NIV translation.

Lord Jesus Christ can the terrible effects of the first decree of universal condemnation for sin be averted."¹

"If a group of pagan scribes and messengers, without modern means of transportation and communication, could take Mordecai's decree to an entire empire, how much more should Christian workers be able to take Christ's Gospel to a lost world!"²

4. The joy of the Jews 8:15-17

"Crown" (v. 15) should be "turban." Mordecai's clothing reflected his important position in the government. The whole city of Susa rejoiced over Mordecai's promotion.

"A dress of blue and white was held in great estimation among the Persians; so that Mordecai, whom the king delighted to honor, was in fact arrayed in the royal dress and insignia."³

Evidently, Mordecai read the second decree at a public meeting in Susa. Contrast the Jews' reaction here with their response to the first decree (3:15). God had blown away the dark cloud that had hung over their heads (cf. Prov. 11:10).

"Holiday" (v. 17) is literally "good day" (cf. 9:19, 22). It refers to a religious festival.⁴ This was not the Feast of Purim but a celebration in anticipation of it. Many Gentiles became proselytes to Judaism as a result of God's obvious blessing on His people (v. 17; cf. Ruth 1:16). This is the only mention in the Old Testament that Gentiles "became Jews." They became religious Jews, not racial Jews (cf. Ruth). Another view is that these Gentiles only "sided with the Jews."⁵ This testimony to the fact that Gentiles recognized God's blessing on the Jews would have been a great encouragement to the Jews in the postexilic period (cf. Exod. 19:5-6).

¹Whitcomb, p. 107. Cf. McGee, 2:574-75.

²Wiersbe, p. 745.

³Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown, p. 359.

⁴Moore, *Esther*, p. 81.

⁵Berlin, p. 80.

"Resting on the word of the king, the Jews found peace."¹

5. The Jews' self-defense 9:1-19

The Jews' activity empire-wide 9:1-5

The king gave the Jews permission to defend themselves by killing their enemies. Evidently this meant that they not only met attack with resistance, but in some cases they initiated attack against those who they knew would destroy them.² These would have been people such as Haman's sons, who would have sought retaliation for their father's death in typical ancient Near Eastern fashion.

"There are people who feel that it was brutal and cruel for a court of law to sentence many of Hitler's henchmen to prison, but those henchmen were rascals of the first order. Their treatment of the Jews in concentration camps was absolutely inhuman. To many people on the outside it did not look as though Hitler's men should be treated with such harshness, but those who knew the inside story knew that they got justice."³

The phrase "and no one could stand before them" (v. 2) recalls Joshua 10:8, 21:44, and elsewhere.

The Jews' activity in Susa 9:6-15

"The Jews killed only those who attacked them; they killed only the men (9:6, 12, 15); and they didn't lay hands on the loot, although they had the right to do so (vv. 10, 15-16)."⁴

"And the fact that these people were even willing to attack when they knew the Jews would protect themselves is proof that anti-Semitism was very strong throughout the empire."⁵

¹Ironside, p. 100.

²See Baldwin, pp. 100-2.

³McGee, 2:576.

⁴Wiersbe, p. 744.

⁵Ibid., p. 745.

Was Esther taking unfair advantage of her power by requesting a second day for the Jews to defend themselves and the impaling of Haman's 10 sons (v. 13), or were these requests legitimate? The writer did not reveal her motivation. I tend to give her the benefit of the doubt, but we know plenty of biblical examples of "heroes" who abused their power (e.g., Gideon, Samson, David, et al.).

Evidently Esther had learned of a plot in Susa to attack the Jews on Adar 14 (March 8; v. 13). The purpose of hanging the bodies of Haman's 10 executed sons on the gallows was to disgrace them and to discourage other enemies of the Jews from attacking them (cf. Deut. 21:22-23; Num. 16:27, 32-33; 25:4; Josh. 7:24-25; 1 Sam. 31:8-12; 2 Sam. 21:6).

"Just as the bodies of Saul and his sons were impaled in I Sam. 31:10, now the enemies of the descendants of Saul are impaled [v. 14]."¹

"There's a needed message of fear eloquently communicated in capital punishment."²

Almost twice as many people died in the royal precincts of Susa as in the rest of the city. The word "capital" in verse 6 really refers to the acropolis, the royal section of the capital city of Susa.

ENEMIES KILLED BY THE JEWS			
Number	Place	Date	References
500 men	The acropolis of Susa	Adar 13 (March 7)	9:6, 12
75,000 people	Other parts of the empire	Adar 13 (March 7)	9:16
300 men	Susa	Adar 14 (March 8)	9:15

"The Jews were free to strike back without reservation, in retaliation. But it is clear that they applied self-control. The Jews certainly defended themselves against their enemies,

¹Berlin, p. 86.

²Swindoll, p. 163.

against those who attempted to wipe out their race, but the Jews resisted the temptation to go too far. They had been given permission to take material advantage of their enemies' defeat, but they refused to do that. They held back. Think of it this way: Not only did the Jews gain mastery over their enemies, they gained mastery over themselves."¹

The days of celebration 9:16-19

The Jews in the outlying areas of the empire celebrated on March 8, and the Jews in Susa celebrated on March 9.

Keil defended the large number that the Jews slew ("75,000;" v. 16) as being in line with the population of the Persian Empire at this time ("at least 100,000,000").²

"It is the general custom of the scriptural historians to give in their narratives of wars and battles only the numbers of the slain among the vanquished foes, and not to mention the losses of the victors."³

"This story implies that a surprisingly large number of Jews yet lived in the East, for the slayers must have outnumbered the 75,000 who were slain. These Jews were probably centered in a few particular areas of the empire. The king did send the decree to all 127 provinces (Esther 3:13; 8:9), but this does not necessarily mean that Jews were found in all 127. All decrees likely were sent to every part of the empire. The main concentration [of Jews] no doubt was near Babylon, where they had early established themselves in businesses ... It could be expected, too, that after Persia took control, a significant group had moved to important Persian centers, such as Susa where Esther was queen. Pockets of them would still have been found also in cities of old Assyria, where captives had been taken from Israel in 722 B.C. These would have been the chief localities where fighting transpired and the 75,000 died. As for the province of Judah itself, the decrees would have been valid there too; but no indication is given of fighting. Very likely

¹Ibid.

²Keil, pp. 308-9.

³Ibid., p. 309.

Jews were simply too strong in their home country for any opponents to dare to attempt an execution."¹

Anti-Semitism has a very ancient history, and it continues to be a problem. Apparently it was widespread at this time, but the Jews did not plunder their enemies (vv. 10, 15, 16).

"In Esther, the Jews of Persia 'correct' Saul's error. Saul took booty from the Amalekites although he was forbidden to do so [1 Sam. 15:9]; but the Jews of Persia do not take booty from their enemies even though they are entitled to do so [8:11]. If the feud between Haman and Mordecai is viewed as an extension of the dispute between Agag and Saul, this reversal in reference to booty wipes away the sin of the house of Saul."²

The Book of Esther shows how God cares for His chosen people. Any nation or individual that seeks to persecute the Jews will suffer for it (Gen. 12:3).

Roland Bainton quoted Martin Luther as saying the following concerning the Jews:

"What good can we do the Jews when we constrain them, malign them, and hate them as dogs? When we deny them work and force them to usury, how can that help? We should use toward the Jews not the pope's but Christ's law of love. If some are stiff-necked, what does that matter? We are not all good Christians."³

"His [Luther's negative] position [toward the Jews] was entirely religious and in no respect racial."⁴

"The deliberate decision not to enrich themselves at the expense of their enemies would not go unnoticed in a culture where victors were expected to take the spoil. The very novelty of such self-denial would be remarked upon and

¹Wood, pp. 407-8, including footnote 95.

²Berlin, p. 85.

³Rowland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand*, p. 297.

⁴Ibid.

remembered, and taken as proof of the upright motives of the Jewish communities."¹

Haman's edict, in contrast, had encouraged the Jews' enemies "to seize their [the Jews'] possessions as plunder" (3:13).

"In Deut. 25:17-19, Moses linked the people's continued *rest from their enemies* with the command to 'blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven.' In this chapter, the blessing of rest for the Jewish people is associated with the destruction of their enemies (vv. 18, 22). This similarity with Deuteronomy reinforces the argument that Haman was a descendant of the Amalekites. This group may have been quite large by the time of King Ahasuerus."²

The absence of explicit reference in the text to God helping His people does not deny His help. Instead, it reflects the attitude of the Jews who chose to ignore God's commands, through Isaiah and Jeremiah, to return to the land (Isa. 48:20; Jer. 29:10; 50:8; 51:6; cf. Deut. 28). They had pushed God aside in their lives, as Mordecai and Esther apparently had done to some extent. Nevertheless, God remained faithful to His promises, in spite of His people's unfaithfulness (cf. 2 Tim. 2:13).

IV. THE JEWS' REJOICING 9:20-32

The tables having been turned, the tables could now be spread.³

"Parties are the glue that holds this story together."⁴

A. MORDECAI'S LETTER 9:20-28

Evidently Mordecai issued the decree establishing the Feast of Purim awhile after the slaying of the Jews' enemies (v. 20). His proclamation united the two days on which the Jews had defended themselves (Adar 13 and 14) into one holiday. Evidently the Jews who lived in unwalled villages

¹Baldwin, p. 105.

²*The Nelson ...*, p. 822.

³Wiersbe, p. 746.

⁴Berlin, p. 87.

celebrated Purim on Adar 14, and those who lived in walled towns did so on Adar 15.¹ During the inter-testamental period the Jews called Adar 14 "Mordecai Day" (2 Maccabees 15:36, RSV), but they discarded this special designation later. Modern Jews celebrate Purim on the evening of Adar 14 (usually in early March) "except those living in one of the cities traditionally considered walled at the time of Joshua, which include Jerusalem, Hebron, and Jericho, where Purim is celebrated on Adar 15."² It is their most festive and popular holiday. A modern celebratory food at Purim is hamantashen, a three-cornered cookie filled with fruit jam, nuts, and or poppy seed preserves. The three-cornered shape supposedly represents either Haman's three-cornered hat, the shape of the dice used in the casting of lots, or the three Jewish patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob).³ Esther is the only Old Testament book not found among the texts used by the Essene community at Qumran, probably because this community did not observe Purim.⁴

"Purim" is the plural form of the Persian word *pur*, meaning the "lot" (cf. 3:7). The name "Purim" became a symbolic reminder to the Jews of how God used circumstances, specifically casting the lot (cf. 3:7), to deliver them in 473 B.C.⁵

"Purim is the only Jewish holiday that is mentioned in the Bible but not in the Torah, and our only information about its origin comes from the Book of Esther."⁶

B. ESTHER'S LETTER 9:29-32

Probably Esther sent her decree (v. 29), confirming Mordecai's previous declaration of the official Jewish holiday (vv. 20-21), to encourage its firm establishment. (His first letter was the one announcing to the Jews that they could defend themselves. See 8:8-10.) Esther's letter evidently began, "Words of peace and truth" (v. 30).⁷ There was probably

¹Ibid., pp. 88, 91.

²Jobes, p. 214.

³Wikipedia.

⁴Bush, p. 273; Berlin, pp. xliv-xlv.

⁵See Alfred Edersheim, *The Temple*, pp. 331-33.

⁶Berlin, p. xlv.

⁷Gordis, pp. 57-58.

considerable resistance within the conservative Jewish community to adding another national festival to those prescribed in the Torah.

"The book" (v. 32) must be the one in which Mordecai recorded all these events (v. 20), that most scholars have concluded may have been a source the writer of Esther used. This document was probably not the Book of Esther itself, assuming the writer of Esther was someone other than Mordecai.¹

"In order to have perspective, we must have monuments and memorials, places to return to and learn from and talk about and pass on. If we don't, we are destined to live rootless, fast-lane lives without much significance and all-too-seldom celebrations."²

V. MORDECAI'S GREATNESS CH. 10

Perhaps the writer mentioned Ahasuerus' tax (v. 1) because Mordecai had something to do with it, or perhaps this tax reflects God's blessing on the king for preserving the Jews (Gen. 12:3). Instead of benefiting from the plunder that Haman promised for the Jews' extermination, Ahasuerus had to rely on taxation. Residents of Persia proper had long since been exempted from taxation; it was the inhabitants of the outlying satrapies in the empire that paid taxes—and they were exorbitant.³

Appeal to the official chronicles (v. 2) claimed historicity for the events recorded in Esther (cf. 1 Kings 14:19; et al.). These documents are not available to us today. They may have been Persian⁴ or Jewish⁵ archives.

Mordecai was one of several biblical characters whom God providentially elevated to a position of high government rank (cf. Joseph, Daniel, and Nehemiah). But the writer of this book gave Ahasuerus the credit for advancing Mordecai, not God.

¹E.g., Whitcomb, p. 124.

²Swindoll, p. 182.

³Olmstead, pp. 291-301.

⁴Moore, p. 99.

⁵Baldwin, p. 115.

"God delights in lifting up nobodies and using them as somebodies."¹

"Perhaps there is no severer test of greatness of soul than advancement in the favor of kings. Too often it has meant the undoing of men who, though poor or in disfavor in high places have remained true. The man who can pass to wealth and position among the great ones of the earth, and still maintain his integrity and his loyalty to his own kith and kin, is ever a great man, and the secrets of such greatness invariably are that the man's roots are in God."²

Scholars have long compared the stories of Esther and Joseph because the settings of both are in countries other than Israel, as well as because of other similarities (e.g., cf. Gen. 41:43).³ Mordecai used his position of influence to benefit his people (v. 3). However, there is no evidence that either Mordecai or Esther had any desire to return to Jerusalem and become part of God's theocratic program there. No one prevented them from doing so either, before Esther became queen (cf. Neh. 2:5).

¹Swindoll, p. 190.

²Morgan, *An Exposition ...*, p. 200.

³See Baldwin, p. 25, n. 1, for a list of such studies.

Conclusion

The personal relationship that Esther and Mordecai enjoyed with Yahweh is a very interesting subject of study. The answer to this puzzle explains why God's name does not appear in the book and what God's purpose was in preserving this book for us.¹

Without question Mordecai was a man of great ability and admirable character. He also demonstrated faith in the Abrahamic Covenant and in God's providential care of His people (4:13-14). Esther, too, showed some dependence on God for His help (4:16). However, these qualities characterized many Jews who, Jesus Christ in His day said, were not pleasing to God (cf. Matt. 3:9; 6:16; John 8:39). Mordecai and Esther, it seems, were eager to preserve their nation and their religion, but they give little evidence of desire to do God's will personally. In this respect they contrast with Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

No one forced Esther into Ahasuerus' harem.² She evidently ate unclean food for months (2:9; cf. Dan. 1:5, 8). Furthermore, the king did not know she was a Jewess for five years (2:16; 3:7).

"For the masquerade to last that long, she must have done more than eat, dress and live like a Persian. She must have worshipped like one!"³

We cannot excuse her behavior on the ground that she was simply obeying Mordecai's orders (2:20). Her conduct implicates him in her actions.

"The Christian judgment of the Book of Esther has been unnecessarily cramped through our feeling that because Mordecai is a Bible character, he must be a good man. ... Like Jehu he may have been little more than a time-server. The Bible makes no moral judgment upon him, but it expects us to

¹For helpful insights into the writer's reasons for omitting God's name in this book, see Michael V. Fox, "The Religion of the Book of Esther," *Judaism* 39:2 (Spring 1990):135-47; and Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "A Rhetorical Use of Point of View in Old Testament Narrative," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 195:636 (October-December 2002):413-14.

²See my comments on 2:7-11.

³Carl A. Baker, "An Investigation of the Spirituality of Esther," pp. 21-22. See also Bush, p. 322, for other morally indefensible actions of Mordecai and Esther.

use our Christian sense. He was raised up by God, but he was not necessarily a godly man."¹

The Book of Esther shows how God has remained faithful to His promises, in spite of His adversaries' antagonism and His people's unfaithfulness.

"The lovely story of Esther provides the great theological truth that the purposes of God cannot be stymied because He is forever loyal to His covenant with His eternally elected nation."²

The writer did not omit God's name and references to Israel's theocratic institutions because God's presence was absent. He did not do so because thousands of Gentiles died at the hands of Jews, nor because the Jewish hero and heroine were personally self-willed, as some commentators have suggested. I believe he left them out because they were of little concern to Esther, Mordecai, and the other Jews who did not return to the land.

"In His providence He [God] will watch over and deliver them; but their names and His name will not be bound together in the record of the labor and the waiting for the earth's salvation."³

"The early Jews sought to remedy the lack of explicit references to God and religious observances by attaching six Additions to Esther (107 verses) in the Greek version, including a dream of Mordecai, and prayers of Mordecai and of Esther. These sections form part of the Old Testament Apocrypha, which was declared to be canonical for the Catholic Church by the Council of Trent in 1546 in reaction to Protestant criticisms [of the Book of Esther]."⁴

¹Wright, p. 45. Cf. Henry, pp. 785-88.

²Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 205.

³*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 1939 ed., s.v. "Esther, Book of," by John Urquhart, 2:1009. Cf. Edward J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, pp. 377-79; and Archer, p. 417.

⁴Yamauchi, "The Archaeological ...," p. 111. See Berlin, pp. xlix-l, for more information about these "Additions."

"There are few books of the Old Testament more relevant to life in a society hostile to the gospel."¹

¹Breneman, p. 370.

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