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SEEING GOD'S PRESENCE THROUGH HIS PROMISES:
A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF GOD'S PRESENCE
IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

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SEEING GOD'S PRESENCE THROUGH HIS PROMISES:
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Date _____

To Maribeth, my consort and fellow heir of the grace of life (1 Pet 3:7).

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PREFACE

I am not the same person I was when I began this project. My love for the sovereignty of God and, more importantly, my love for my sovereign God, has grown. One of the reasons that I pursued advanced studies in a doctoral program was to force myself to consider the confounding tension between God's sovereign hand, which works all things after the counsel of his will, and human volition, which follows after the desires of the heart. I am not at all convinced that I have come closer to understanding how it is, as Scripture asserts, that the mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps. I am convinced, however, that I am more confident in the veracity of Job's assertion: indeed, God can do all things, and no purpose of His can be thwarted. Esther's story teaches God's people this, and so much more.

I am thankful to my wife, Maribeth, my good gift from the Lord, for her willing spirit. She was willing to sacrifice a more comfortable and private lifestyle to enter the ministry with me. She willingly compensates in many areas to release me for shepherding responsibilities. Willingly, she entered into this season of doctoral studies, counting the cost and counting our Savior worthy of whatever sacrifice it would demand of her. Beyond Jesus, Maribeth is my greatest blessing.

The church family that I have the privilege of shepherding, Living Hope Community Church, has blessed and supported me in my time through this program. They have responded positively to my own growth as a teacher of God's word. The elders have encouraged me, shared in my excitement for learning, and have shared my love for our Savior and how His word makes us wise unto salvation.

My faculty supervisor, Dr. Jim Hamilton changed my life, and that is no overstatement. I remember sitting in class the first morning of our first seminar, and experiencing a ‘burning heart’ like the disciples reported after having the Scriptures opened up in a Christo-telic way. Being trained by Dr. Hamilton and the other godly men at SBTS has had a more profound impact than I had anticipated; Dr. Brian Vickers too was brilliant, also brilliantly witty. I’m deeply grateful to God for the giftedness of these and the other men who taught us, and for their love for us as they poured into us.

I did not anticipate how greatly I would respect, admire, and enjoy my time with the group of men that God appointed to be in my cohort. Because we are all pastors, we allowed our hearts to be knitted together, sensing that the Lord had sovereignly appointed us for one another, to be shepherded by each other in a way that is often missing in our ministry to others. Matthew Pitts deserves special thanks, as his was the suggestion which led to my selection of Esther as my project focus. He also suggested most of the fellowship outings our hearts were eager to share.

Most of all, I am grateful to the Lord Jesus. Not only did He save me, but as Paul said, He saw fit to put me into service. Jesus is the promise of God that was truly at the heart of God’s sustaining graces in Esther’s story. It is because of God’s promise of the seed of the woman, subsequently promised to come through Abraham’s descendants, that none of His promises failed. Those who have received Jesus as their Lord are able to read the book of Esther and sense God’s presence through those and other promises.

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Bartonville, Illinois

May 2018

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the now classic movie *Back to the Future*, Marty McFly is inadvertently transported back to 1955 by a plutonium powered DeLorean time machine, the product of his brilliant and bizarre scientist friend, Dr. Emmett Brown. The plot follows Marty in his efforts to find, and convince a younger version of Dr. Brown to help him get back to the future through the use of knowledge Brown will only discover later. While being inserted into the past, in the very community he eventually will be born into, Marty meets the younger versions of his own parents. Marty, who is much more sophisticated and interesting than his nerdy future father George, becomes an object of interest to his unsuspecting teenaged mother-to-be. And it is within this scenario that McFly recognizes the danger of tampering with a story whose ending is already written. If Marty's teenaged mother fails to ultimately fall in love with this younger version of his father, then Marty will never exist in the future to which he is so desperately attempting to return.

That story line conjures up the consideration of whether or not a story whose ending is already determined can be manipulated by characters within the plot. The ending of the greatest story written, found in the pages of the Bible, has already been determined. The seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). Through his victory death will be defeated, his people will be liberated from their enslavement, and they shall be ushered into a kingdom whose citizens will fill the earth. Yet, while the ending has been written, an enemy who is unwilling to admit defeat continues in his attempts to change the future.

Esther's story is a part of that great drama of God. Her people, Israel, had experienced an exile due to their rebellion against God; God faithfully had enacted the foretold penalty for covenant infidelity. Only recently had Esther's people begun to trickle back to their land, attempting to rebuild, and reestablish themselves as the people of God in the land he had given them. But the enemy of God, and therefore the enemy of God's people, was about to make a valiant attempt at changing the future, circumventing the plan of God by exterminating the people of God from whom the promised seed, the Messiah, would come.

Biblical Theology in the Church

While the Holy Bible is still the best selling and most widely distributed book of all time, indications are that it is not the most widely read book today. In fact, countless studies indicate that biblical literacy, or familiarity with what's in the Bible, is at an all-time low. At the same time, today's Christian is bombarded with an unprecedented volume of data, information about all sorts of topics, opinions from many voices with diverse perspectives and decidedly unbiblical worldviews. These two realities—growing biblical illiteracy and immersion in unbiblical perspectives—result in a growing number of Christians who have developed a worldview best described as a patchwork of ideas from Scripture and from the unbelieving world around them. The thread used to sew those contrasting patches together is made from a fabric of tolerance, aimed at softening the contrast, blending material at the seams. As go Christians, so goes the Christian church. And a consumer mindset that permeates American culture today results in Christians with that patchwork worldview shopping for a church that reinforces what they hold as truth.

Mark Dever, Senior Pastor of Capitol Hills Baptist Church, asserts that one distinction of a healthy church is basing all ministry and church functions on theology that is derived from the Scriptures, as opposed to a theology that has been shaped by the

shifting cultural landscape¹. Dever would call this a biblical theology, a theology derived from the careful study, interpretation, and application of the Bible.

Defining Biblical Theology

Dever does not intend to use the phrase ‘biblical theology’ to describe that particular discipline of study and interpretation of the Scriptures that is set in contrast to other theological disciplines of systematics and historical theologies. So what is biblical theology as a discipline, and why is it useful, even necessary for the church today?

Biblical theology, as distinguished from other theological disciplines, especially from systematic theology, is not a new discipline, but it has experienced a resurgence of sorts recently. And yet, contrary to systematic theology, a more widespread agreement on how to define biblical theology is wanting. It will be helpful, then, to list some of the more prominent views, in order to understand from those who attempt to practice biblical theology. Following a survey, an approach can be determined that best serves the text of Scripture, and best serves the Church in understanding and applying God’s truths, unchanging truth in a changing world.²

Michael Lawrence, author of *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church*, suggests that biblical theology, at a minimum, should be understood as an approach toward the interpretation of the Bible as a compilation of 66 individual books, all contributing to a coherent, master plot, or metanarrative.³ Lawrence adds, “Biblical theology is how we go about the task of reading the Word and ensuring that it’s God’s

¹Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 57-75.

²For a more thorough discussion on the origin, development, and definitions of the field of biblical theology, see Hamilton’s discussion of the subject. James M. Hamilton, Jr., *God’s Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 41-51.

³Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 15.

Word rather than our words that are shaping people's lives. Biblical theology is how we bring people into the life-changing story of God's redemptive plan"⁴.

Two items are noteworthy in what Lawrence says, above. The first is that biblical theology can be characterized by a particular approach to reading the Bible. The second is biblical theology's goal of helping God's people see their own place in God's story of redemption.

Geerhardus Vos, at his installation as Professor of Biblical Theology in Princeton Theological Seminary, added these thoughts, helpful in shaping one's understanding of any distinction in the discipline of biblical theology from the other theological approaches to Scripture,

The specific character of Biblical Theology lies in this, that it discusses both the form and contents of revelation from the point of view of the revealing activity of God Himself. In other words, it deals with revelation in the active sense, as an act of God, and tries to understand and trace and describe this act, so far as this is possible to man and does not elude our finite observation. In Biblical Theology both the form and contents of revelation are considered as parts and products of a divine work. In Systematic theology these same contents of revelation appear, but not under the aspect of the stages of a divine work; rather as the material for a human work of classifying and systematizing according to logical principles. Biblical Theology applies no other method of grouping and arranging these contents than is given in the divine economy of revelation itself.⁵

Vos's comments are helpful in how he distinguishes biblical theology from systematic theology, in that the former is concerned with the stage at which a revelation is given where the latter is not. Elsewhere, in an expansion of his thoughts, Vos cautioned against concluding that God's revelation was insufficient at any stage of redemptive history, due to the incompleteness when compared with a later revelation. Additionally, Vos suggested that when approaching the study of Scripture through the optics of biblical

⁴Lawrence, *Biblical Theology*, 18.

⁵Geerhardus Vos, "The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as a Theological Discipline," in *Inauguration of the Rev. Geerhardus Vos, Ph.D., D.D. as Professor of Biblical Theology*, Princeton Theological Seminary (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Co., 1894), 10.

theology, there existed a ‘practical adaptability’. By this Vos meant that the fruit of any such study carried with it an inherent nurturing of the believer’s relationship with God; God communicates truths that he wants his people in relationship with him to know.⁶

In their book *Understanding Biblical Theology*, Edward Klink and Darian Lockett initially state that their book is an attempt “to define ‘biblical theology’ by describing various theories and practices of contemporary biblical theology.”⁷ Several pages later, however, the authors indicate that the book is “not an answer to the problem of defining biblical theology,” but only an attempt to frame the dialogue of those who do define the subject in various ways.

The book is helpful from the standpoint of providing a resource that contains those various attempts to define biblical theology. Several of those approaches readily disqualify themselves by the fact that their adherents limit the use of biblical theology either only to the academy, or only to the church. The remaining three views that the authors examine include biblical theology defined as (1) the History of Redemption, or (2) the Worldview Story, or finally (3) the Canonical Approach. It seems, through reflection and consideration that the better definition is not one of these three by itself, but some combination of the concerns of all of them together. That idea is best explained by how James Hamilton defines biblical theology.

In his recent book *What Is Biblical Theology?*, James Hamilton breaks his approach down into three primary aspects (1) story, or the metanarrative of the Bible; (2) symbols, or types, images and patterns, how they function in the story; and (3) church, or

⁶Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), 7-8.

⁷Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 20.

how the story and symbols help the church – the people of God – to understand its place in the story.⁸

According to Hamilton, biblical theology takes into account the interpretive perspective of the biblical authors. This biblical perspective includes how they interpret earlier Scripture, how they understand the big story of God’s plan, and how they convey God’s revelation to God’s people using similar symbols, images and patterns.⁹

Additionally, according to Hamilton, biblical theology concerns itself with understanding how later biblical authors interpreted earlier biblical authors. Hamilton contends that this approach to the Scriptures holds promise for the Church in rightly understanding how God’s people find their own place in that big story, the sweeping story of redemption

Biblical Theology and Preaching

Every text of Scripture finds itself enmeshed in a context that is important to its meaning. The context of every book of the Bible is part of the grand narrative of God’s redemptive work. And every audience must recognize their place in that work that began in Eden and will ultimately culminate in God’s eternal kingdom.

The preacher of God’s infallible word is privileged with the burden of helping the people of God take their place in God’s story. This burden can be lifted only by heeding the pattern of the apostle Paul to declare the “whole purpose of God” (Acts 20:27).¹⁰ This commitment both to preaching God’s word, and the entirety of God’s word will convey to God’s people the sufficiency of Scripture to address every aspect of life.

⁸James M. Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology? A Guide to the Bible’s Story, Symbolism, and Patterns* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014). See Hamilton’s explanatory statements both at the beginning, p. 13, and near the end, p. 97.

⁹*Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard, 1995 Update. I have used the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) version of the Hebrew Bible for quotes from the Hebrew text.

One might worry that some parts of God’s inspired word seemingly have no relevance to today’s Christian. What application might an audience make with certain books such as Esther? Hamilton argues that it is through the use of biblical theology that we can gain an understanding of the how the parts contribute to the whole.¹¹

The approach to biblical theology that will be applied in this project will be consistent with James Hamilton’s approach, which agrees in principle with Lawrence, and Vos. A commitment will be made to interpret the revelation of Esther in light of earlier Scripture, giving attention to how what is written fulfills earlier promises to Israel, how earlier imagery and symbolism is reinforced, and how the faithfulness of God protects and advances his promises, reinforcing the metanarrative, or big story of the Bible. Conclusions will be drawn and applications will be made to the church and today’s people of the unchanging God.

Esther and Biblical Theology

When the book of Esther is considered through the lens of biblical theology, a lens that is especially attentive to the progression of God’s promises, it will provide encouragement for the concerns of today’s disheartened believer. Considering how God faithfully advanced many of his covenant promises to Israel during the period of exile covered by Esther’s story has the potential of bolstering confidence of the people of God living in a world that, as in Esther’s context, rejects His presence and authority. Biblical theology summons the people of God to consider afresh the big story of God, finding their own place in that story, tracing the redemptive patterns of God, considering how his works and promises have developed in the past, looking for how they are being worked out today.

¹¹James M. Hamilton, Jr., “Biblical Theology and Preaching,” in *Text-Driven Preaching: God’s Word at the Heart of Every Sermon*, ed. Daniel L. Akin, David L. Allen, and Ned L. Mathews (Nashville: B & H, 2010), 193-218. For an excellent article on preaching and biblical theology, see Thomas R. Schreiner, “Preaching and Biblical Theology,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10, no. 2 (2006): 20-29.

Esther's story chronicles an earlier day when God's promises were being fulfilled, not miraculously, but subtly, through the invisible hand of God called providence. Jon Levinson remarks that God's behind-the-scenes work recorded in Esther is according to the "old saw that a coincidence is a miracle in which God prefers to remain anonymous."¹²

Support has not been unanimous for including the book of Esther in the Hebrew canon. While there are multiple reasons why some are skeptical regarding Esther's worthiness to be included, the primary criticism is the lack of reference to Israel's God in the entire story. In addition, the perceived enculturation of heroine Esther and her Jewish relative Mordecai is cause for some to dismiss the book.¹³ It will be argued that the promises of God, which explain the circumstances of Jewish exile and also form the basis of future hopes to exiled Jews in the story, serve as a proxy for God's name. In other words, it is not necessary for the author to mention God's name, when His promises reference God's presence throughout. God's promises are the explanation for all of the providential workings throughout the book such that the reader who is knowledgeable of God's promises to Israel reads Esther's drama with an answer key, as it were. Moreover, omission of divine reference in the story powerfully illustrates the reality that God is always at work providentially to accomplish his purposes, even in a culture that rejects his authority.¹⁴

¹²Jon D. Levenson, *Esther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 19.

¹³For a helpful treatments of the book of Esther's inclusion in the canon, see Fredric W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 9 (Dallas: Word, 1998); Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1971); Roger T. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

¹⁴Debra Reid, *Esther*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, vol. 13 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 48-55. Reid provides an excellent summary of potential reasons for excluding the divine name in Esther.

In an increasing measure, Esther's context has much in common with the Christian's context in the United States today. Just as Esther's life seemed to be shaped primarily by the pagan culture that dismissed her God, so also the American Christian is constantly pressured to conform to a culture that marginalizes that same God. That conforming pressure seeks to influence both actions and thinking.

The book of Esther focuses on a period of Jewish history following the seventy years of exile from the land God had given Israel. While some Jews had returned to the land God had promised to their patriarch Abraham, having begun the process of rebuilding the temple and city walls, many Jews remained in the lands to which their people had been exiled. Esther's drama occurred in the midst of the events recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, but from a distance, at the Persian palace in Susa. And although the events recorded in the book of Esther happened far from Jerusalem, those same events threatened the progress, safety, and existence of God's people who dwelt in Jerusalem and elsewhere. So it was that the Purim feast that celebrated God's protective influence through Esther and Mordecai became a national celebration in existence to this day.

Studying Esther through the lens of biblical theology is an exciting endeavor, like hitting a vein of gold when mining for the riches of God's promises and patterns. Many of those promises and patterns can be traced from Genesis to Chronicles, with the drama of Esther pointing to a God who proves himself faithful to his word.

God was faithful to his promise of the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15; Esth 6:13), and his promise to withhold a seed and blessing to Jeconiah (Jer 22:30; Esth 2:6). As in earlier days in Egypt, so also in Esther an attempt to threaten the seed promise was afoot. Yet, again, God was able to elevate a Jew in a pagan kingdom, for deliverance of his people. The curse impacting husband and wife (Gen 3:16) played a prominent role in how the Persian queen, Vashti, was deposed, and in how Esther, through submission, ascended to prominence in the Persian Empire. Esther's willingness to sacrifice herself for the protection of her people, even effecting the crushing blow to the satanic attempt

on her people by Haman, was a fulfillment of the foretold enmity between the seed of the woman and seed of the serpent (Gen 3:15).¹⁵

The context of the book of Esther, the continuing exile of many Jews from the land of promise, was a fulfillment of God's promise through Moses of the curses to come upon God's people as a result of their disobedience and idolatry. Much of Deuteronomy 28 can be read into the circumstances of Israel in exile, reminding that God was as faithful in chastening his covenant people as he was in blessing them. As they found themselves under the authority of gentile rulers, they had no doubt become the tail and not the head (Deut 28:13).

As a portion of Israel remained exiled, others having returned earlier to rebuild with Ezra, an old promise surfaced in this far corner of Jewish existence. Nearly a millennium prior to Esther's day, as Joshua led the Israelites against the Amalekites with the intercessory aid of Moses, God had promised perpetual warring between Israel and the Amalekites (Exod 17:16), enmity that began with their fathers Jacob and Esau. Years after Joshua, Saul, the son of Kish, overcame the Amalekites, yet with incomplete obedience to God, leaving the destruction of the Amalekite king Agag to Samuel, God's faithful servant. That past enmity was the fertile ground that produced the Agagite Haman's hatred when he discovered Mordecai's lineage. While this continued enmity was an outworking of the promised enmity between the seeds of woman and serpent promised at the fall, the specifics of that particular instance seemed to provide an opportunity for Israel to learn and turn, or repent, from past idolatry. Where the Israel of King Saul's day allowed their covetous heart to disobey, keeping the prohibited plunder of the victory, Esther's Jewish kindred refused the spoils of victory that the king permitted, perhaps as a way of indicating that God was their portion (Ps 16:5). This reversal of an

¹⁵Hamilton, *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*, 321-22.

earlier idolatry very well may have been intended, by the author, to indicate regeneration which the Old Testament describes as a circumcised heart in God's people.

Biblical theology is interested in tracing patterns, or types. The author of Esther sees a recurring pattern in Mordecai as a Joseph type figure.¹⁶ Both were raised to a place of prominence by providing information to their king, insight into the future, which would save the king's life, be it economic success, or physical protection. It was the hand of God that provided both Joseph, in Egypt, and Mordecai, in Susa, with knowledge that resulted in their own elevation for the purpose of preserving God's people from famine or the sword.

James Hamilton has likened the approach of biblical theology to that of entering another world, the world of the biblical author, that is, to allow the worldview of the author, cultivated by thinking about life as being framed by all that God had revealed before them, to be the interpretive grid for that reader.¹⁷ Accordingly, when one reads Esther, it should be read in light of all that God had previously communicated through prior Scripture regarding his sovereignty and his control of the circumstances of life. Prior to Esther's day, God had portrayed himself as the God who knew the end from the beginning, causing it to come to pass (Isa 46:9,10). Well before Esther's lifetime, God had taught his covenant people that the mind of man plans his way, but the Lord was the one directing his steps (Prov 16:9). Through the prophet David, who lived hundreds of years before the story of Esther's life unfolded, God had communicated that there was not a day that occurs in an individual's life that was not already written in God's book before it came to pass (Ps 139:16). And extremely important for the book of Esther was the truth that the lot (pur) was cast into the lap, but its every decision was from the Lord (Prov 16:33).

¹⁶Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading* vol. 6, Siphrut (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 222. Grossman has an extensive exploration of "dynamic analogies" based on linguistic cues, as well as types and patterns that is intriguing.

¹⁷Hamilton, *What Is Biblical Theology?*, 22.

When it is recognized that this understanding of the breadth of God's sovereignty, not simply over the miraculous, but over the providential, was the interpretive filter of both the author and the reader of Esther, it informs why it was not necessary to invoke the name of God to authenticate the contents of the book. The promises of God, it will be argued, become a surrogate for the name of God in Esther. This is due to the fact that a promise is dependent upon the one who promised. Thus, to evoke a promise to its recipient is to draw to mind the one who has promised, without needing to specify the name of the promisor. The promise and the promisor become inextricably linked in the mind of those who receive and believe that promise. Scott J. Hafemann explains the connection of faith and promise well, saying,

Faith obligates God to act not because it is a magical incantation that can be used to control God but because faith in God's promises calls attention to God's own faithfulness. The assurance upon which faith is based is the glory of God's character, not the power of our believing. . . . Those who trust God's promises can be assured that God will act to keep them, since God will always act righteously; that is, he will not do anything to detract from his honor.¹⁸

This is why the book of Esther should not be impugned on the basis of the omission of God's name. Throughout the story God's promises were in focus; the promise of exile due to covenant disobedience dictated the circumstances and setting of the story (2:5, 6), the focus of fasting for Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews was their unnamed God, and the promise of preservation, protection and restoration (Jer 29:10; 31:35-37) become the sole hope of God's people.

Familiarity with Literature

Faithful expositional preaching is dependent upon understanding the author's original intent. This requires a working knowledge of the original language used by the author, as well as a historical-grammatical understanding of the text. Because Esther's

¹⁸Scott J. Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith: Understanding the Heart of the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 93-94.

story was penned more than two thousand years ago, the expositor must use a variety of resources, including technical commentaries and historical treatments of the land and time of Esther.

Commentaries

Esther's drama occurred in Persia under the reign of a gentile king, named Ahasuerus. Correspondingly, the culture and customs that control the story are not familiar, even to those readers who have labored with background studies for pre-exilic Israel. As a result, most commentaries on the book of Esther assume the need to provide historical context when working through the text of the story.

Fredric Bush is representative of the more technical commentaries on Esther.¹⁹ Following a lengthy introduction dealing with the obligatory discussion on canonical status, discussion of the varying textual witnesses of Esther, as well as genre classification, Bush divides the drama into ten acts. Following discourse cues, each act is subdivided into the pericopes unfolding therein. It is at this pericope level that the author's translation, commentary on the Hebrew lexical and syntactical structure, and explanation of the text are offered.

Jon Levenson's commentary in the Old Testament Library, while not as technical as Bush, is insightful from a biblical theology perspective.²⁰ Levenson appears to be respected by other Esther commentators, having published in the area of Esther studies beyond this contribution. While the issue of textual witnesses beyond the Masoretic Text is not expected to be a part of this project, Levenson includes a helpful treatment of the subject in this entry. Considering allusions and imagery picked up by the New

¹⁹Bush, *Ruth, Esther*.

²⁰Levenson, *Esther*.

Testament writers will be helped along by G. K. Beal and D. A. Carson's *Commentary of the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament*.²¹

Other commentaries expected to be useful to this study are Carey Moore's study in the Anchor Bible series.²² Adele Berlin's contribution on Esther to the JPS Bible Commentary series makes helpful contributions in the area Persian historical and cultural context. Yet, Berlin reflects many of these more technical scholars in his view of Esther's historicity, opining, "The story is itself implausible as history and, as many scholars now agree, it is better viewed as imaginative storytelling, not unlike others that circulated in the Persian and Hellenistic periods among Jews of the land of Israel and of the Diaspora."²³

Michael Fox has contributed to Esther studies in a unique way through his *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*.²⁴ Fox indicated that his goal was aimed at answering enduring questions for Jews, rather than focusing on the story of Esther historically. Consideration of the answers Fox posits in his character studies will have relevance to the project at hand.

A number of expositional commentaries will benefit the consideration on communicating the truths of Esther to God's people. Barry Davis has joined with A. Boyd Luter in an expositional treatment of the Esther and Ruth stories in *God Behind the Seen*.²⁵ Davis uses captivating prose to unfold the drama of Esther, while relating much

²¹G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the Old Testament's Use of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007).

²²Moore, *Esther*.

²³Adele Berlin, *Esther*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xv.

²⁴Michael Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

²⁵Barry C. Davis and A. Boyd Luter, *Ruth & Esther: God Behind the Seen* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003).

of the ancient story to today's living. While Davis' treatment is generally sound, he does make some unfair and unnecessary assumptions regarding the character of Mordecai and Esther, casting them as unconcerned about their commitment to Judaism. Karen Jobes makes a contribution to the expositional resources for Esther studies in the NIV Application Commentary series.²⁶ This series is known for solid theological treatment with a section which bridges the ancient context to today's, followed by an application section. While the application section in this series is often guilty of limiting the applications to concerns more familiar to the commentator than the reader, the pattern of application proves helpful to any expositor.

Finally, *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, edited by Sidnie Crawford White and Leonard Greenspoon will prove beneficial in taking advantage of a variety of essays written for a recent Esther symposium, including contributions on historic rabbinic interpretations on the book of Esther.²⁷

Theologies

Paul House's *Old Testament Theology* offers a book-by-book analysis of contents of the Old Testament.²⁸ With respect to the book of Esther, House offers various scholarly opinions on its contribution to the canon of the Old Testament, why it was ultimately included. Also included in his treatment of Esther is a theological outline offering broad theological summary statements of the contribution of broad portions of Esther's story.

²⁶Karen Jobes, *Esther*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999).

²⁷Sidnie Crawford White and Leonard Greenspoon, eds., *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (New York: T & T Clark, 2003).

²⁸Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998).

Similarly, *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, edited by Roy B. Zuck, explores the theological themes of each book of the Old Testament, attempting to assess the contribution made to an understanding of God and how He relates to His people.²⁹

Histories and Ancient Near Eastern Studies

Esther's drama took place at a time when many Israelites remained estranged from the land of Israel. The rulers and customs are generally unfamiliar to today's reader of the Old Testament. For this reason, certain historical and cultural studies prove beneficial to the understanding of Esther's context.

Walt Kaiser's *A History of Israel* proves invaluable for grounding the reader in the historical chronology of the Persian dynasty that preceded and governed Esther's circumstances.³⁰ Moreover, reading Kaiser helps to remind that the events Ezra and Nehemiah reported on either end of Esther's story were connected to the same power structure that controlled life in Susa.

James Pritchard's *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*³¹, and Jack M. Sasson's *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*³² are both compilations of articles and studies of the world and time closer to Esther's reality than ours. There are some entries in either book that lend insights helpful to understanding the customs and religions relevant to the Persia of Esther.

²⁹Roy B. Zuck, ed., *Esther in Biblical Theology of the Old Testament* (Dallas: Word, 1991).

³⁰Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998). Also useful is Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008)

³¹James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969).

³²Jack M. Sasson, *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995).

Ministry Context

In 2003, I was called as the planting and teaching pastor of a group of thirty families, commissioned by our mother-church to begin a new work we named Living Hope Community Church. This church plant is located in the central Illinois village of Bartonville. The community of Bartonville is a small bedroom community of Peoria, Illinois, with a population that could be aptly described as hard-working, salt-of-the-earth people. Our core group of people coming from the mother-church was well-taught, biblically, and we immediately experienced transfer growth from other strong teaching ministries.

Despite their coming from sound teaching ministries, I was surprised to find that my people were weak in their understanding of God's sovereignty, especially as it pertains to salvation of unbelievers, those that Scripture indicates are spiritually dead. Now, after twelve years of the expositional preaching of God's Word, there has been growth in acceptance of the doctrine of God's sovereignty. Yet there is still much confusion as to how a sovereign God can work all things according to his will, when humanity has the ability to make real decisions.

My greatest ongoing challenge is teaching God's people of his glorious sovereign hand, without negating man's responsibility. Certainly I am not the first to be perplexed by challenges therein. Don Carson has articulated this challenge well:

The sovereignty-responsibility tension is almost impossibly broad. It lies at the heart of questions about the nature of God, and it poses difficult conundra about the meaning of human 'freedom'. The most common questions it raises are well known. If God is absolutely sovereign, in what sense can we meaningfully speak of human choice, of human will? In what way are we to relate passages which stress divine transcendence and omnipotence with those which speak of divine repentance? How does the shape of the sovereignty-responsibility tension affect the problem of theodicy? Must God be reduced to accommodate the freedom of human choice? Does significant human responsibility so lean on power to the contrary that God becomes contingent?³³

³³D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1994), 1.

Many if not most in my flock have unintentionally reduced God and subtly made him contingent in order to accommodate the freedom of humanity. This error compounds itself, hindering God's people from understanding his sovereignty in salvation, as well as his presence and work in their day-to day lives.

The Old Testament book of Esther is a fitting book for considering God's invisible hand at work in the events of human history. The author refuses to focus on anything other than the actions and desires of the human actors in the events played out in Susa. Yet the entire drama is a provocative illustration of the biblical teaching that "the lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Ps 16:33).

In a culture ruled by an unbelieving king, assisted by advisors of the same ilk, is it possible that God could cause circumstances, events, and decisions to protect and favor his covenant people? Can God fulfill his plan and promises when those who seem to hold the reins of power do not care to honor him, nor give him thanks? (Rom 1:21) If it can be demonstrated through Esther's story that God is able to accomplish his predetermined plan while unbelief prevails, this could offer hope and encouragement for today's believers who, like Esther, live in predominantly unbelieving societies.

Sermon Series

This project developed a series of sermon expositions of the book of Esther from a biblical theological perspective. This entailed considering the interpretive perspective of the author, that is, understanding why he has told Esther's story in the unique way that he has. Attention was also be given on how the author understands individuals and circumstances in the story in the light of earlier Scriptures.

The book of Esther was broken into seven sections, the seventh section being a treatment of the final several chapters whose theme is the satisfactory resolution of the edict to exterminate the Jews.³⁴

Table. Proposed sermon series in the book of Esther

	Sermon Title	Passage
1	A Vacancy in the Throne Room	Esther 1:1-22
2	Esther Wins the Beauty Contest: Influence in Exile	Esther 2:1-23
3	Haman's Promotion and Evil Plot	Esther 3:1-15
4	Crisis in Susa	Esther 4:1-17
5	Esther Rises to the Challenge	Esther 5:1-14
6	A Turn of Events	Esther 6:1-14
7	A Funeral Luncheon with Turning Tables	Esther 7:1-10:3

Esther 1:1-22: A Vacancy in the Throne Room

The story of Esther opens with a description of the extent of Ahasuerus' authority, as well as a description of the excesses of his lavish celebrations. In the midst of his demonstration of power, Ahasuerus' authority is rejected by none other than his wife, Queen Vashti. When Vashti publicly humiliates the king through her refusal of his summons to appear before his guests one festive drunken evening, Ahasuerus overreacts. With the counsel of his trusted advisors, Ahasuerus issues a royal edict deposing Vashti and putting women throughout the kingdom on notice that perceived insubordination will not be tolerated. Marital discord in fallen humanity (Gen 3:16) is alive and well.

Esther 2:1-23: Esther Wins the Beauty Contest—Influence in Exile

If Ahasuerus regretted his rash decision to depose Vashti, it could not be reversed due to the permanence of Medo-Persian laws. So the king's counselors devised a

³⁴Currently, the treatment of the book by pericope is anticipated. However, a number of suggestions of existing literary devices within the book are worth consideration. For the suggestion of arrangement around a sequence of banquets, see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 156-58.

plan to replace Vashti through a kingdom beauty contest. A young Jewish beauty by the name of Esther, who had been raised by her older cousin Mordecai, was gathered along with all the beautiful virgins of the empire. When Esther won the pageant, she became queen. Shortly afterwards, Mordecai overheard and reported to Queen Esther an assassination plot on her new husband's life, which was investigated and foiled. Mordecai was recorded as the informant who saved the king's life, for future reference and reward.

Esther 3:1-15: Haman's Promotion and Evil Plot

Following much good for the main characters, Haman, a descendant of the ancient enemy of the Jews, the Amalekites, was promoted to the second most powerful seat of the Persian Empire. Along with Haman's promotion came the command for all to bow and pay homage to him, an act of worship in that pagan culture. Mordecai refused to obey, both in obedience to Israel's prohibition against worship of any but God, not to mention the long-standing enmity between the Jews and Amalekites. Haman reacted with measured vengeance toward Mordecai by plotting, and casting the lot to find the perfect date to have not only Mordecai, but the entire Jewish population exterminated. Upon proposing the plan and purpose to Ahasuerus, along with the price he was willing to pay for the privilege of killing his enemy, Haman received approval.

Esther 4:1-17: Crisis in Susa

In response to Haman's edict of destruction, Mordecai appealed to Esther to use her access and royal influence to save her people. Esther, however, reminded Mordecai of palace protocol, that approaching Ahasuerus unsolicited might cost Esther her life. Mordecai expressed confidence that the Jews would find deliverance somehow; Esther on the other hand would perish if she refused to use her position on their behalf. Perhaps, Mordecai suggested, Esther had been strategically placed as queen precisely for the salvation of her people. This is the strongest intimation of the hidden hand of the

unnamed God of Israel in the book of Esther. What's more, Mordecai's assertion conjured up the memory of Joseph's God-ordained elevation in Egypt for the ultimate preservation of God's chosen people. Mordecai's rebuke instigated Esther to call for a three day fast of all Jews in Susa on her behalf, after which she would make an appeal to her husband, the king, come what may.

Esther 5:1-14: Esther Rises to the Challenge

At the end of the fast Esther boldly approached Ahasuerus, who received her with favor and an opened heart. When the king assured Esther of her request, she invited Ahasuerus and his henchman Haman to a feast that same day. The king summoned Haman and they attended a banquet where they are made glad with wine and requested by Esther to a second banquet the next day. As Haman left the banquet, filled with satisfaction at his high position in the kingdom, especially that he should be on the short list that day as Esther's special guest, he was confronted by Mordecai's disrespect and lack of esteem. Haman went home seething with a bitterness that robbed him of his self-importance, expressing to his wife and close friends his feelings. They, in turn, counseled Haman to use his clout with Ahasuerus and request permission to hang Mordecai. Moreover, Haman should order the gallows be built immediately, trusting in advance that permission would be granted him. Haman took their advice and prepared himself to approach Ahasuerus first thing the next morning.

Esther 6:1-14: A Turn of Events

That same night that the gallows was built, Ahasuerus had a sleepless night. As a result, he had the more recent history of his kingdom read, making the most of his insomnia. The king was read the recent account of an assassination attempt on his life, and how it had been reported by one Mordecai who had overheard the plot. When Ahasuerus found that no honor had been shown to Mordecai as repayment for the gratitude

of the king, he desired to remedy this inequity immediately. The king summoned the closest advisor, Haman, who was himself waiting to request the life of Mordecai. Before Ahasuerus could hear Haman's death plot, the king quizzed Haman on what actions would be appropriate for one whom the king wished to honor. Haman, thinking the honor must be proposed for himself, told his king exactly how he himself would wish to be treated publicly. In the most humiliating turn of events, the king commanded Haman do all that he had proposed for Mordecai. And not only must Haman see that it be done, but Haman himself was commanded to publicly honor Mordecai, parading Mordecai through the public places as the most respected man in the kingdom. Haman returned home afterwards, not with news of permission to extinguish Mordecai, but rather with a report of having distinguished him publicly, as a servant to this hated one. Haman's wife, who had recommended her husband ask for Mordecai's life, now indicated that it appeared that Mordecai, of Jewish origin, would be Haman's own undoing. In the midst of her ominous pronouncement, Haman is summoned to the second of Esther's banquets.

Esther 7:1-10:3: A Funeral Luncheon with Turning Tables

As the wine flowed at Esther's second banquet, Ahasuerus invited Esther to request what had been on her heart. She wasted no time in telling the king of the wicked plot that had been devised against her people, extermination of the Jews. As Ahasuerus demanded Esther divulge the identity of such a wicked schemer, Esther revealed that it was Haman. The king, in an inebriated state of confused anger and betrayal left briefly to consider what he had just been informed of by Esther, toward whom his heart was extremely tender. While the king was out of the room, Haman pleaded with Esther, even throwing himself and his body at her person and mercy. Ahasuerus returned, only to be further infuriated by his perception of Haman's impropriety of physically assaulting Esther. In that moment a servant of the king informed him that Haman had already prepared the instrument of death for one Mordecai who had saved the king's life; the king

demanded that Haman be caught in his own trap, hung on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. That was what it took for the king's anger to be quelled.

Haman's hanging, however, did not resolve the specter of death stemming from Haman's edict of Jewish annihilation. Ahasuerus gave Esther possession of Haman's estate, and Mordecai his signet ring. Esther having revealed to her husband Mordecai's relation to her, and appointed Mordecai over the former house of Haman. The king, unable to void the earlier edict threatening the Jews, authorized a competing edict be drafted and published throughout the empire. That new edict, authored by Mordecai gave the Jews permission to defend themselves against their enemies, also to plunder the enemies possessions. Esther's story concludes by recording the rise to power of Mordecai and the Jews, their victory over those who hated them, and the establishment of the annual festival known as Purim.

Conclusion

An in-depth study in the book of Esther is timely. The very aspects that have cast concerns regarding the story's worthiness to be included in God's Holy Word are elements that make its lessons timely: the omission of God's name indicative of his virtual exclusion from the focus of the culture, the pressures of assimilation of God's people into the ungodly practices of the world around them, the continued exile from the promised fullness of God's blessings. The message of Esther is humbling to proud hearts that dismiss God's sovereign hand simply because they can't perceive how he might possibly be influencing human decision making. Esther's truths are waiting to be embraced by a new generation, tempted to doubt God's power over those who reject him. Her story is encouraging, reminding God's people that while God has left them in the midst of a culture that rejects his existence, by his Spirit, believers have a greater sense of God's presence through his promises.

CHAPTER 2

A VACANCY IN THE THRONE ROOM

No one enjoys being disciplined. Children lament the time-out punishment. Adolescents fear the forewarned grounding, loss of privileges, and freedoms. Students complain about reduced marks for missed deadlines. Adults resent punitive actions resulting from poor work performance. Even when fair warning is given in advance, the chastening that results in each of these situations is seldom met with joyful acceptance.

The child, the adolescent, student and adult, even a nation, learns a great deal about the character of the authority figure by whether or not disobedience is met by the threatened punitive measure. When a child disobeys but never receives the punishment forewarned, there is a diminished respect for authority. A red line of tolerance is drawn by one nation for another, with the punitive measures spelled out, and yet nothing happens as a result of defiance. Sadly, leniency and mercy seldom produce the grateful obedience desired in the defiant nation.

Often it is only with seasoned maturity that one is able to appreciate the love and faithfulness that motivate a willingness to discipline. An authority figure willing to stand by promises, including promises of punitive action, becomes an authority figure who can be trusted, one who gains respect.

As God's covenant nation, His own possession among all the peoples of the earth (Exod 19:5), Israel had been promised great power, strength, even wealth, as a reward for obedience to God's righteous commandments. At the high watermark of His blessing upon Israel following Solomon's dedication of the temple at Jerusalem, God promised to establish the Davidic throne forever in return for covenant fidelity. Similarly,

Israel also faced the threat of exile and dominance by other nations as punishment for covenant infidelity. And now some 500 years later, in the opening chapter of Esther's story, a portion of the Jewish nation found themselves persisting in a state of exile from the land. Karen Jobes remarks, "The Jews found themselves in Susa beholden to the glory of a pagan king because of the other side of that promise made at the dedication of the temple."¹ Specifically, the Lord's promise of judgment upon Israel's future disobedience as set forth in 1 Kings 9: 6-7:

But if you or your sons indeed turn away from following Me, and do not keep My commandments and My statutes which I have set before you, and go and serve other gods and worship them, then I will cut off Israel from the land which I have given them, and the house which I have consecrated for My name, I will cast out of My sight. So Israel will become a proverb and a byword among all peoples.

So it was that Israel was ruled by a pagan king and nation. Our naïve tendency is to associate God's favor with His blessings of power and wealth upon a nation. The Bible informs us, however, of a more robust relationship between these perceived blessings and God's sovereign purpose in granting them. What secures God's favor is a nation comprised of a king and populace who seek after God's wisdom, and live that wisdom out as the discerning principles of life. And while God freely grants His power and wealth, even to a nation that has rejected His wisdom, ultimately God is faithful to judge that same nation for having arrogantly credited itself for its own strength, rather than the hand of God (Hab 1:5-11).²

Often God's judgment upon a kingdom or nation is a gradual odyssey, tracing the contour of decisions and social practices that progressively deviate from righteousness, catering to the fallen nature and sinful human desires of those holding the reins of power. This was the pattern of God's judgment upon His covenant people Israel, and it was a

¹Karen H. Jobes, *Esther*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 62.

²This astonishing revelation to Habakkuk was that God would raise up the Chaldeans to judge Israel for their covenant infidelity and subsequently judge the Chaldeans for their prideful arrogance. "But they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their god" (Hab 1:11b).

discernible pattern in the history of those kingdoms that God raised up as instruments of His own judgment upon Israel.

As we purpose to study the Book of Esther, we must be reminded that this story is told after the fact, when the outcome was well-known, but the details were not familiar. The outcome of the story was the festival of Purim, dedicated to remembering the deliverance of the Jews from an evil plot aimed at their extermination. And having said this, we will find the author to be a masterful story teller, foreshadowing and building tension in the reader's mind, as any great page-turner might, beckoning the reader to journey on, as the ultimate prize of the story lies ahead.

Context

Esther's story takes place in the wake of God's judgment upon the nation of Israel. For seventy years God's people lived in exile from the land God had given, and only recently had they begun to return to rebuild their temple and their nation. Yet, even in their return from exile, the Israelites were far from being a sovereign nation. Instead they were part of a vast kingdom ruled from Persia by a king named Ahasuerus.

While a small portion of the Jewish population had returned to Jerusalem to live, rebuild, and resume worship of Yahweh, Esther's story takes place in Persia, at the citadel in Susa. Persia was the center of Gentile power and world dominance. This setting reminds the Jews that God is a faithful God, and in this case faithful to His promise to punish Israel for covenant unfaithfulness.

One significant aspect of the book of Esther is that God goes unmentioned throughout the story. Why is this significant? Because it is enigmatic, and elicits the discussion as to whether the Jewish Mordecai and Esther continued to relate to their God as they lived out their days estranged from the land and the temple.³

³Among those who think they do not, is Barry Davis, who indicates in his introduction that neither Mordecai nor Esther give evidence of being righteous or spiritual. Part of Davis' fallacy is that he,

For this reason, Esther and Mordecai are often contrasted with Daniel and his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, who took bold stands to retain Jewish dietary observances (Dan 1:8-16). Daniel's three colleagues even risked their lives by refusing to bow down to the idol constructed by Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3). It is argued by some that no such boldness is evidenced by the Jews of Esther's story. To the contrary, Mordecai even counseled Esther not to divulge her Jewish ethnicity.

Nehemiah, the Jewish cupbearer for a Persian king that reigned after Ahasuerus, Artaxerxes, seemed consumed with the state of affairs back in Jerusalem while also living in exile. It is argued that neither Mordecai, nor Esther seem similarly concerned.

Scholars of the book of Esther are divided on how to characterize both Mordecai and Esther in their commitment to Judaism. In the end, it must be admitted that the text is ambivalent in accusing or recusing either of gentile assimilation. And this is one of the various interpretive shadows cast by the absence of references to Israel's God in the story.

It must be rebutted, however, that to argue that Mordecai and Esther were unconcerned with their commitment to their Jewish distinctiveness is an argument from silence. Based upon the text, Mordecai is guilty of no more than Daniel or Nehemiah, by being a servant in the king's administration.⁴ Nor is Esther indicted by the text for assimilation into the Gentile culture; to the contrary, one could argue that Esther has honored the Mosaic law's restriction regarding sexual purity. In fact, it was Esther's sexual purity that qualified her for the beauty pageant into which she was drafted. And as

like others, reads more into the text than justified. For instance, Davis asserts in his introduction that Mordecai "encourages his cousin (and adopted daughter) Esther to marry a heathen king, even though he knows that God strictly forbade his people the practice of mixed religious marriage." Barry C. Davis, *Ruth & Esther: God Behind the Seen* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003), 100. Davis' assertion is troubling because the text clearly indicates that all the beautiful virgins were gathered on the basis of their qualifications. It was not, therefore, as if Esther had a choice in the matter. This should be seen as a conscription rather than a voluntary enlistment.

⁴Walter C. Kaiser, *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 437.

for the Persian names, Esther's Jewish name being Hadassah, Mordecai's never given, this should be no indictment, as the same was done with Daniel and friends (Dan 1:7).

While there is no mention by name of Israel's God in the book of Esther, God's presence in this first chapter is spelled out in a subtle, yet powerful, way to the Jewish audience for whom the story was intended. For the Jewish mind, shaped by God's written revelation prior to exile, as well as Daniel's exilic writing, the presence of God is evoked through the fulfillment of God's promise to judge Israel. That judgment came by way of Israel's earlier defeat by a gentile nation, and God's conveyance to others the power once delegated to Israel. Israel's defeat began at the hands of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, to whom Daniel boldly and reverently testified of God's sovereignty. Babylon fell to the Medes, who were eventually subsumed by the Persians. The Jewish audience would grasp that the same sovereign God who announced the things to come through that prophet Daniel, was no less in control some 150 years later when His power rested upon the Persian King Ahasuerus.

Ahasuerus displayed great power as well as riches, wealth that likely exceeded the wealth of Solomon, son of David. Yet it was clear that neither Ahasuerus nor his advisors were vested with Solomon's wisdom, ultimately a gift from God to those who fear Him (Prov 1:7; 9:10).

Main Idea

The main idea of this opening chapter can be summarized by the principle that in fulfilling His promise to judge Israel, God may grant power and wealth to a foreign king and his nation, and yet withhold His wisdom from that same nation. When this is the case, God's judgment will begin to work itself out through the foolish counsel and destructive decisions that trivialize the value of the individual, wreaking untold human suffering along the way.

Exposition

The chapter unfolds this principle through two truisms of derived power from God's sovereign hand. We will see that in fulfilling His promises to judge, 1) God is free to grant power and wealth to a nation that lacks wisdom (1:1-9), and 2) God is faithful to judge a nation that lacks His wisdom (1:10-22).

As the story is related, this first chapter served as a reminder that just as God had formerly blessed the nation of Israel with power and wealth, especially the wealth during Solomon's reign, God was free to grant that power and wealth to another nation. Israel, having rejected God's wisdom, forfeited His favor also, and was subsequently living under the authority of a nation and king that lacked God's wisdom. Because the knowledge and practice of God's wisdom was to result in a just society, any kingdom in which the rulers lacked that same wisdom would eventually digress into a society of inequities and oppression among its subjects. That principle is clear in Scripture, specifically through the words of James:

This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. (Jas 3:15-17)

Thus, in the context of God having fulfilled His promise to judge the nation of Israel, we recognize this first principle of derived power from God's sovereign hand.

In Fulfilling His Promise to Judge, God Is Free to Grant Power and Wealth to a Nation That Lacks His Wisdom (1:1-9)

As the God of Israel first entered into a covenant with the nation of Israel, He made it clear that all the all the earth belonged to Him. After all, the God of Israel was the creator of all that existed, and that fact carried the implication of possession as well. And while all the earth was His, God was entering into a covenant relationship with the descendants of Abraham according to His promise in Genesis 12:1-3. Israel would be God's own possession among all the peoples (Exod 19:5).

Nearly forty years later, as God restated His covenant commitment with the nation of Israel prior to giving them that land promised to Abraham, a staggering promise was made to these descendants of Abraham. In exchange for Israel's covenant faithfulness to their God, He would grant them world dominance (Deut 28:1). In addition to this dominant power among the nations, Israel would also enjoy sufficient wealth to be the richest nation of all (Deut 28:11-12).

Following some difficult days as a fledgling nation living in the land of Canaan, days marked by unfaithfulness and division, national unity was finally achieved under king David's rule. Subsequently, David's son Solomon presided over a time of world dominance and unprecedented wealth. The testimony of Scripture is that King Solomon "became greater than all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom" (1 Kgs 10:23), recognizably a result of God's blessing upon Israel. Thus, there was an affirmation that power and wealth belonged to the God of Israel and were His to grant to earthly kings and nations as He saw fit. He granted both to Israel as a result of covenantal faithfulness.

In Esther's day, approximately five hundred years after Solomon's reign, Israel no longer held power, nor vast riches. In fact, the opening verses of the first chapter of Esther make it clear that power had been granted to another nation and that nation's king. And just as the angels stationed at Eden's entrance, refusing access to the tree of life, communicated grace—God graciously protecting fallen man from accessing the fruit of that tree and living forever in an unredeemed state of condemnation – so also this divine transfer of power and wealth communicated grace. God was revealing Himself to His chosen people, graciously rescuing from rebellion His firstborn son Israel (Exod 4:22), forcing Israel to know Him as the faithful God, the God who would carry out judgment as promised. Only then might they turn from their rebellious ways to fear their God.

Judgment through Giving Extensive Power to Another (1:1-3)

What we need to recognize today, something that would have likely been grasped by the original Jewish audience, is the pattern by which the author of Esther's story communicates the extensive power given to Ahasuerus. The author describes Ahasuerus' extensive power, the extensive reach of his power, in essentially the same pattern that Solomon's power was recounted for the Jews by the author of 1 Kings. In 1 Kings 4:21 the author describes the boundaries of the Solomonic kingdom, stretching "over all the kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt," also emphasizing that these kingdoms paid tribute and obeisance to king Solomon. The Jews recognized that Solomon's authority was delegated to Him by Israel's God.

The timing of Ahasuerus' feast connects well to the point in Solomon's reign when all of his adversaries were vanquished. Esther 1:3 indicates that these feasts of Ahasuerus occurred in the third year of the king's reign. Most scholars agree that Ahasuerus was solidifying his authority by means of this long banquet lasting 180 days. Similarly, following the execution of Shimei in the third year of Solomon's reign, the author of Kings indicated that Solomon's kingdom was established (1 Kgs 2:39-46). It was at this point that Solomon, in a vision, asked the Lord God for the enabling gift of a discerning heart, wisdom to lead God's people, Israel. In that same vision, God indicated that not only would Solomon receive a wise and discerning heart, but also riches and honor. And when Solomon awoke, he made sacrifice and "made a feast for all his servants" (1 Kgs 3:15).

Thus, when Esther's story begins by describing the extent of Ahasuerus' reign in those Solomonic tones, the author intends to evoke a better period in Israel's history, and therefore a reminder of judgment – extensive power which God had once granted to Israel's great king had now passed in judgment to a gentile king. In a similar description, Ahasuerus' kingdom is related, "the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces" (Esth 1:1). Many students get bogged down in attempts to verify the

claim of the text, as to the 127 provinces. Daniel reported only 120 satraps, officials assigned to specific provinces known as satrapies, this just one administration earlier (Dan 6:1). It should be noted that the text reports 127 provinces, likely different and smaller regions than the satrapy used in Daniel 6.⁵ Rightly does Bush conclude that the litmus test for historicity of the story should not hang on this matter. Instead Bush asserts that by “the choice of the larger number, the pomp and glory of the empire is magnified, contributing to the sardonic picture presented in this whole chapter.”⁶ The mocking tone Bush refers to is behind the idea that will be discussed shortly, that Ahasuerus has been given power and wealth from God, but not wisdom.

Judgment through Giving Extensive Wealth to Another (1:4-7)

That this theme of judgment is the best lens to read chapter 1 through is reinforced also by reviewing the extensive wealth of Ahasuerus. In his third year, the king gave a banquet for all his his important power brokers. Those who administered Ahasuerus’ vast domain, along with military leaders were all invited. In today’s verbiage we might say that Ahasuerus was “wining and dining” his most important leaders. Some believe that the entertaining that is described here in chapter one coincides with a convening of Ahasuerus’ military leaders for the purpose of devising a battle plan to invade, defeat, and absorb Greece.⁷ It is in the context of this and a subsequent banquet that Ahasuerus’ extensive wealth is reviewed. The passage indicates that for 180 days, or six months, the king displayed “his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty” (v. 4).

⁵Jobs, *Esther*, 58.

⁶Fredric W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 9 (Dallas: Word, 1998), 345.

⁷Kaiser, *A History of Israel*, 435. Jobs, *Esther*, 68.

Jonathan Grossman argues that strengthening the connection in the timing of the feast each king gave in his third year, is an important linguistic connection between Ahasuerus and Solomon. The similar word pair “riches and glory” found in Esther 1:4 (אֶת-עֶשֶׂר כְּבוֹד) and “both riches and honor” in 1 Kings 3:13 (גַּם-עֶשֶׂר גַּם-כְּבוֹד) provides an important connection and a contrast between the two feasts.⁸ Grossman concludes,

Thus, the servants of these two kings were invited to two altogether different feasts: the invitation that Ahasuerus sent to all of his princes and servants asked them to come and celebrate “the riches of his glorious kingdom,” while Solomon’s invitation was a result of the “discerning heart” with which the king had been blessed by God. The hint at an alternative reign lurking in the background of the description of Ahasuerus’s feast may hint at what the protagonist of the chapter, the Persian king, lacks: a “discerning heart.”⁹

Ultimately, it wasn’t Ahasuerus’s glory and splendor which was on display, but the sovereign God of Israel’s delegated wealth. And judgment underscores this description of Ahasuerus in his power and wealth, because he lacks the wisdom of a discerning heart that was desired by and granted to Solomon. And this is the very deficit that would set into motion the events in Esther’s story.

Judgment by Withholding Wisdom (1:8-9)

Following the review of the power and the wealth that God had supplied to Solomon during his reign, the text indicates that God also supplied Solomon with wisdom, the very thing that Solomon had petitioned God for in order to lead the nation of Israel. First Kings 4:29-34 indicates that Solomon’s wisdom exceeded all during his time, demonstrated by his proverbial wisdom, song writing, dominion over nature, and reputation and renown.

⁸Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 42.

⁹Ibid.

It is here that the comparison between Solomon and Ahasuerus breaks down. Ahasuerus was deficient of the wisdom required to skillfully lead a kingdom and manage the extensive resources. While the king surrounded himself with a multitude of counselors, they also were not possessing the wisdom necessary to counsel Ahasuerus in the way that he should lead. It is here that we must remind ourselves of what we touched on in the introduction, the existence of wisdom outside of God's wisdom. While there is a recognized category of wisdom outside of the wisdom of God, it leads to "disorder and every evil thing" (Jas 3:16).

We first see the wisdom of Ahasuerus as incompatible with God's wisdom in that Ahasuerus is guilty of building allegiance by displaying his wealth to those whom he hopes to gain as allies. In this case, they are his princes, officers and noble men. But this should still be interpreted as a show of power to gain allies for battle. And this is precisely what the kings of Israel were chastened for, as they were demonstrating a lack of dependence upon God. Notably, Hezekiah, after showing great humility and dependence upon God for healing, invited Babylonian envoys into his treasury, showing "all his treasure house" (Isa 39:2). The meaning of Hezekiah's treason before God is explained well by Raymond Ortlund:

The erosion of his sense of God deep within is finally showing. His insecure need for worldly recognition is ruining him. He throws open the doors and draws back the curtains and unlocks his vaults and brags to the Babylonians about what a big deal he is. Poor, naïve Hezekiah! He wants to be "a player" in international politics. He wants to be up in the big leagues, even if God isn't there.¹⁰

Hezekiah was trusting power and wealth, and any military alliances that power and wealth might bring, instead of trusting the God of Israel to protect His covenant nation. This attitude was contrary to the right wisdom encapsulated by Psalm 20:7, "Some boast in chariots and some in horses, but we will boast in the name of the Lord, our God."

¹⁰Raymond C. Ortlund, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, Preaching the Word, ed. R. Kent Hughes (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 226.

Next, we see a lack of wisdom in the liberality encouraged by Ahasuerus in the final week of banqueting. The king had made a declaration during this final week of festivities to the end that there were “No restrictions!”¹¹ This removal of restrictions paved the way for a drunken festival, as it gave opportunity for the citizens of Susa to imbibe liberally from the plentiful supply of the royal wine (v. 8). One might wonder how such a magnanimous act by the king demonstrated a lack of wisdom. While the Hebrew Bible, the wisdom of God, does not call for abstinence, it does encourage temperance. Proverbs 31:4 does discourage kings from drinking wine, knowing that it would hinder their ability to rule righteously. Excess would lead to the same hindrance in the subjects of a kingdom as well. Thus a lack of wisdom is insinuated by the author of Esther, despite some possibly interpreting this declaration as generous.

Davis also sees this drinking declaration as a sign of weakness, a demonstration that Ahasuerus is likely attempting to gain the favor of his constituency. The king is unsure of his power base, in this view, and hopes to strengthen it by offering such grand festivities, made merry with much wine.¹² This is not unlike what happens often in today’s business world. A company has their salesforce flown to Las Vegas for a week of spoiling, a week of partying, and often, a week sprinkled with a bit of debauchery. Why? So that the salesmen might remain loyal to the company’s product and not to a competitor’s.

Vashti, the queen, was not present at this banquet. The text indicates that she gave a separate banquet for the women (v. 9). The author has described Ahasuerus as one who holds extensive power and wealth, comparing him to Solomon in these areas. Yet it

¹¹Grossman, *Esther*, 40. Grossman makes an interesting assertion that this rule of “doing according to the desires of each person” (v. 8) also would benefit those who would desire to abstain. This guards the reader from being forced to conclude that the main Jewish characters had been completely assimilated into such riotous living as citizens of Susa.

¹²Davis, *Ruth & Esther*, 115.

is clear that the author is indicating that Ahasuerus lacks the wisdom of Solomon, which was a divine gift to Solomon who requested it that he might lead God's people (1 Kgs 3:6-14).

That deficit, along with violating the wisdom principle that a king not abuse wine, soon worked against Ahasuerus as he foolishly treated his beautiful wife, Vashti the queen, as another of his riches to be displayed. And this is a reminder to us that when a nation and king are blessed by God, and yet they refuse to seek Him and seek His wisdom, God is faithful to judge that king and nation as well.

**In Fulfilling His Promise to Judge, God Is Faithful to
Judge a Nation That Lacks His Wisdom (1:10-22)**

The text indicates that on the last day of the feast, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he sent his royal entourage to make a royal request to Queen Vashti. Vashti was ordered to report to the main banquet hall, notice, with her crown on, so that she could become the final display of the king's splendor and glory (1:10-11). Why? Jobes supposes that this request of Ahasuerus is consistent with what happens in Great Britain today, where a queen is able to inspire a willingness to loyally follow the king and country.¹³

The text simply tells us that Vashti was beautiful. And she was about to become a beautiful ex-queen. She refused Ahasuerus' orders.

One can only imagine the scene when she refuses. There stand Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the eunuchs sent on this mission, perhaps all sent so that Vashti might see what a royal procession her husband wanted to make of the moment. But these men were not accustomed to having the king's order refused. And surely they stood there for a pregnant moment, looking at Vashti, and then looking at one another. And then, the leader of the seven indicated that there was nothing

¹³Jobes, *Esther*, 67.

left to to but to return and indicate to the most powerful man on earth, that his wife was not impressed with his authority.

We need to understand the context of this final week of feasting in order to understand Vashti's unwillingness to make an appearance. Most think that it is pretty clear, especially given that this was a separate men's-only feast, that it was like a bachelor party where untold things are done. Yet Jobes points out that the historian Herodotus gives historical insight that contradicts this opinion. Herodotus recorded that it was a Persian custom for the leaders to deliberate weighty issues while inebriated. Then, after they had become sober, their deliberations were reviewed and reconsidered for making a decision. The rationale behind this was the belief that drunkenness placed them more sensitive to the spiritual realm.¹⁴

And in light of this, considering that the drinking was encouraged by Ahasuerus en route to establishing his power and authority in leading the kingdom against Greece, one can only imagine how the king's temper was inflamed when his own wife refused his authority. As Jobes reasons, "No wonder Xerxes became furious and burned with anger! He needed his men to obey his commands as they went to war, but in his own palace he could not even get his own wife to obey!"¹⁵

It is at this point that we see God's judgment against the king who lacked God's wisdom in several ways. First, in his lacking the wisdom to know that leadership is hindered by drunkenness. And secondly, in his reaction to the out-workings of Genesis 3:16, the strife between husband and wife as a result of the fall.

¹⁴Jobes, *Esther*, 67-68.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 68.

God's Judgment on Drunkenness

Reflecting again on the wisdom of the Proverbs, King Lemuel warns kings not to drink wine, or strong drink, because when they do so, they are not in control of the ability to make wise decisions (Prov 31:4-5). Instead Lemuel, or rather his mother (v. 1), indicated that the drunken king would forget what was decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.

In the context of this scene, Ahasuerus, in his drunken anger, sought counsel from others who were lacking the wisdom of God. Again, God is acting in judgment of this nation because they gladly received God's blessing of power and wealth, but did not seek to know God and search out His wisdom. Therefore, God's act of judgment will be worked out by giving the king and his counselors over to their own vain inclinations (cf. Rom 1:21).

And true to Lemuel's warning (Prov 31:5) Ahasuerus' counselors guide him toward perverting the rights of Vashti. While she is Queen, she is also at the mercy of her husband's wise and gracious treatment of her, like all other subjects. Vashti is vulnerable and dependent upon her husband, also her king, being beneficent toward her. And this leads to the second of God's judgments evident in this first scene of the book. His judgment on marriage.

God's Judgment on Marriage

Because of what happened in the garden, because of Eve's decision to step outside of her position of dependence upon her head, Adam, God placed a curse on the marital relationship. Not a condemnation, but a curse. Lest we think that this is inconsistent with a God of love, we must recognize that this curse is a mechanism which God uses to cause mankind to seek Him. Just as the apostle Paul said many centuries after this night in the palace in Susa,

the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him

who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. (Rom 8:19-21)

So it is that God's judgment on marriage is visited upon Ahasuerus and Vashti with devastating consequences – not only to Vashti, but to all women of the Persian empire! In his hot anger, Ahasuerus endorses the counsel of his wisdom-lacking counselors to immediately depose Vashti. Saying this another way, in Ahasuerus' selfish pride and drunken anger, he divorced himself of the person whom he intended to be the capstone of his glory and splendor (v. 4).

This situation also elicited new legislation, aimed at forcing women throughout the empire to give honor to their husbands, great and small (v. 20). But that, to the Jewish audience, was foolishness. A Jewish audience would have insight from God's wisdom that this was the outworking of the curse on wife and husband. As God had pronounced in the Garden, "your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you" (Gen 3:16). Here, Vashti had made a power play and refused Ahasuerus' authority. And he, in turn ruled over her. He, in return, approved legislation that would inflame, not tame, the problem of the fallen heart.

Conclusion

As this story was told to a Jewish audience that would need to understand the meaning and the purpose of the annual Jewish feast of Purim, this chapter would remind of God's faithfulness. Like the child that dislikes the punishment, but learns of the faithfulness of the parent, Israel would come to know the faithfulness of their God in following through with consequences. This chapter would be an introduction into the story about a promise keeping God. His presence was palpable in their judgment.

The way in which the author described the extensive power and wealth of Ahasuerus would lead the Jewish mind back to a better day when God had given Solomon extensive power and wealth, and also wisdom. Wisdom was lacking in Ahasuerus. And this would cast hope in the heart of the people, that the one true God had

given His people access to a gift that other kings and nations were not given. And the way in which the author described the actions of both the king and his counselors would cast hope, though it be in a shadow at this point, that God is faithful to judge that nation that does not seek after, does not receive, His wisdom.

Because God was revealed in this first scene as faithful, even though it be in His judgment, the Jews were called to a place of hope. As Jeremiah had wrestled with God's judgment, that was not where Jeremiah ended; he ended in a place of hope.

Remember my affliction and my wandering, the wormwood and bitterness. Surely my soul remembers and is bowed down within me. This I recall to my mind, therefore I have hope. The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness. (Lam 3:19-23)

Ahasuerus was cast in the shadow of Solomon, and shown to be deficient. And Solomon, son of David was in the shadow of the ultimate Son of David. Israel must recognize in God's faithfulness, even to judge, that His faithfulness could also be trusted to send that ultimate Son of David. In Isaiah's words,

Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. (Isa 11:1-2)

And just as in the case of Solomon, who asked for wisdom and receive riches and honor (1 Kgs 3:13), so also the ultimate Son of David would bring with Him "the wealth of the nations" to Israel.

CHAPTER 3

ESTHER WINS THE BEAUTY CONTEST: INFLUENCE IN EXILE

When being fitted for corrective lenses at the eye doctor you will be successively asked, “Is this clearer, or this?” The question corresponds to the interchange of lenses with varying magnification levels. This repetition is aimed at finding the optimum lens to bring clarity to the reality around you, visually speaking. Similarly, a second reading of Esther’s story adds clarity to the first reading; each successive reading adding a level of detail and perception over the prior. With successive readings, the student of Esther comes to the understanding that Esther 2:1-23 records more than Esther’s rise above all other entrance in the kings’ beauty contest; Esther’s victory introduces the potential for influence for the Jews in exile.

Context

After being exiled from the land for seventy years, the Jews were granted favor by Cyrus, king of Persia, and began to return and rebuild. Yet not all did return to the land of Israel. Many remained in their places and circumstances of exile, and in this passage we are introduced to two such Jews. We must always avoid making assumptions on their spiritual fervor based on a decision to stay in places of exile. For we recall that even the spiritual luminary Nehemiah of this same general time frame remained in Persia for some time after the return.

Mordecai is the first Jew introduced, a descendent of the tribe of Benjamin, and thus, ultimately related to King Saul, the first king of Israel. Esther, Mordecai’s

younger cousin, is the second. Esther is introduced as lovely, and also orphaned. Mordecai, cares for his cousin by taking Esther into his own home, adopting her as his daughter.

We discern God's abiding presence in the first chapter of Esther's story through His faithfulness to judge His covenant people Israel. This second chapter begins to transition to God's presence through provision. While there are in Esther 2:1-23 references to God's faithfulness to judge, just as He promised in the twenty-eighth chapter of Deuteronomy, the narrator now begins to transition by focusing on God's mysterious hand of providence on behalf of Mordecai and Esther.

Main Idea

This portion of the Esther drama discloses how God worked within the scheme of replacing Vashti, placing Esther within the power structure of Persia. God providentially works out His plan in concert with the decisions and actions of kings and kingdoms. While doing so, God often is preparing people and circumstances for what is to come.

Exposition

Some time had passed since Queen Vashti was deposed, a time which some historians believe corresponded to the period of Ahasuerus' failed attempt to add the region of Greece to the Persian empire. Tasting the bitterness of defeat, the king came back to Susa to face the reality that he was lacking a queen, having deposed Vashti earlier. Verse one indicates that there was at least a bit of regret¹ over having done so, because the decision to depose the beautiful Vashti was not only rash, but permanent.

Ahasuerus' closest advisors, those who had suggested that Vashti be deposed due to her recalcitrance, were quick to propose a remedy to the king's loneliness. The proposal promised to both appeal to Ahasuerus' fleshly desires and rescue the king's

¹Jon D. Levenson, *Esther* (Westminster: Louisville, 1997), 54, writes, "In the Hebrew Bible, the verb 'to remember' often carries with it a note of compassion . . . the implication of 2:1 is that Ahasuerus has become melancholy in the absence of his wife and regretful of the severity of her punishment."

advisors from the possibility that his regret would morph into anger against them, holding them responsible for the counsel that led to Vashti's removal.

The second chapter of Esther is given to introductions. First, the introduction of the scheme that would lead to the selection of a new queen (2:1-4). Also introduced are the individuals, Esther and Mordecai, who would play a starring role in the unfolding drama of this story (2:5-7). The author introduces the reader to how God worked behind the scene to grant Esther favor in the eyes of those overseeing the beauty pageant (2:8-15). That process culminated in Esther's introduction as queen (2:16-18), a status that introduced Mordecai to an access to influence, reporting an assassination attempt in the making (2:19-23). Mordecai's loyalty to his earthly sovereign would be rewarded in due time.

Introducing a Scheme to Find a Queen (2:1-4)

In order to assuage Ahasuerus' regret at having put his beautiful wife away, his advisors introduced a scheme to replace her with another wife of equal or surpassing beauty. In fact, the proposed scheme would leave no eligible beauty off limits. There would be an outsourcing of the search to overseers in the many provinces under the king's control, each overseer being responsible for gathering the beautiful young virgins of his region and sending them to Susa for the selection contest.

While not stated explicitly, it is clear from what is said that the selection process would involve more than beauty. The beautiful young virgins would be brought to the palace and be delivered into the harem of Ahasuerus, an indication that they would serve as the king's sexual companions for the rest of their days. Later in the chapter it becomes evident that an evening of intimacy with Ahasuerus would be a major factor in the king's selection of the next queen (2:14). Following a full year of beauty treatments, an evening with the king would give him an opportunity to sample each young lady as he sought Vashti's replacement.

Many writers assert that this process is spelled out for the reader in order to heap scorn upon Ahasuerus, portraying him as a king controlled by his passions.² Certainly today's reader is generally appalled by the fact that Ahasuerus kept these beautiful young women to be used as objects for his own sexual gratification. It is especially evident that all but one of these women would be resigned to forever be one of the king's pretty play-things.

Unfortunate as it was, this was a practice of that day, even for more esteemed men of God, such as Israel's kings, David and Solomon. Second Samuel 5:13 informs of David's many wives and concubines. Solomon, as well, is recorded as having seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines (1 Kgs 11:3). While that reality does not justify Ahasuerus' practice, it guards us from judging him by our own Christian ethic. Jobes indicates that it was not uncommon for Persian kings to have many concubines over and above their wives.³

What is, however, intended to be an indictment of Ahasuerus' character and wisdom is the fact that he would use such physical and sexual criteria as the means of selecting a queen and spouse.⁴ The text informs that the proposed scheme met with Ahasuerus' full approval. What the reader who is biblically grounded should be considering is how far from the wisdom of God this selection process fell. Hebrew

²For instance, Levenson, writes, "One has the sense that ideas 'please the king' the same way the chosen virgin will 'please' him—that is, in a gross, physical way. . . . Moderation and gradualism are not the strong suits of this court." Levenson, *Esther*, 55

³Karen H. Jobes, *Esther*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 94.

⁴Jobes asserts, "Even by Persian standards, this was not the way a queen was normally chosen." Ibid. Jobes references Herodotus in recording that a wife for the king was often chosen from noble families. The author's original audience would have been aware of this convention, and thus surprised at this aberration. Because of this detail of the story, Jobes indicates that some had concluded this was a fairy-tale. Ibid. Bush agrees, "Surely to imply so subtly and yet so expressively that the only criteria the king and his courtiers have for the woman who will be queen over a vast and powerful empire is her beauty and sexual prowess is to cast a sardonic and jaundiced eye on the Persian monarch and his court." Fredric W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 9 (Dallas: Word, 1998), 315.

wisdom teaches that “charm is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who fears the Lord, she shall be praised” (Proverbs 31:30).

Introducing the Jews Drawn into the Scheme (2:5-7)

A story that has, to this point, focused solely on Persian royalty now transitions to a Jewish family living in exile. The manner of this family’s introduction has the certain effect of recalling God’s judgment upon Israel. Their exiled status is connected back to the judgment of God, when He gave Judah over to the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. It is not enough to tell of the Jewish defeat and exile into Babylon. The particular king who was exiled at that time, Jeconiah king of Judah, is mentioned as well. Adding this detail effectively ties the current circumstances of this family back to the promise of God to judge His people for covenant unfaithfulness.

Nearly 1,000 years prior to this exile setting, Moses had prepared the fledgling nation of Israel to possess the land promised to their patriarchs. As God reaffirmed His covenant with the nation, Moses outlined the blessing that would correspond to their faithfulness, as well as the curses that would follow Israel’s covenant infidelity. Very specific and connected to the way this introduction is made by the author of Esther, we read Moses’ warning: “The Lord will bring you and your king, whom you set over you, to a nation which neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods, wood and stone” (Deut 28:36). What is striking is how the author of Esther references Judah’s king being among those carried into exile. Provoking the memory of God’s promise to judge would have the ability to remind the Jews that their God was still involved in their circumstances, even when their circumstances seemed to indicate otherwise.

In the introduction to this Jewish family in exile, the reader is first acquainted with Mordecai, which is not likely this man’s Jewish name, but none is given. Mordecai is almost certainly a name assigned to him, a derivation of the Babylonian god, Marduk.

Because Mordecai carries only a Babylonian name, he is considered by some to have yielded to worldly assimilation, repudiating the Jewish mandate to remain distinct from the gentile population. This is not necessarily a fair inference. Jewish heroes Daniel, and his three friends, were also assigned Babylonian names in the effort to enculturate them. Thus, this gives no reason to assume that Mordecai lacked commitment in his desire to live for God in a foreign land.

Mordecai, the Jew, is a Benjamite. Most interesting is that this Mordecai is traced back through a Shimei, to a Kish, all being Benjamites. It is uncertain if the author intends to connect Mordecai with the historic Shemei and Kish more closely related to Saul, the first king of Israel,⁵ or if Mordecai's closer relatives took on these names as was common within Jewish families.⁶ Mordecai was not likely to have been a contemporary of Jeconiah more than 100 years earlier. Regardless, the genealogy given here is intended to connect Mordecai to Kish who is introduced in 1 Samuel 9:1, the father of Israel's first king, Saul. As with the successive lenses at the eye doctor, clarifying what can be seen, subsequent readings of Esther would make all too clear that Mordecai's lineage will serve to develop the great drama of redemption that Esther's story records.

Mordecai is a cousin to Hadassah, the daughter of Mordecai's uncle, Abihail (2:15). Hadassah's parents had died and Mordecai had taken responsibility for her care. Like Mordecai, Hadassah had also been assigned a Babylonian name, the name Esther, likely derived from the Babylonian goddess Ishtar.

Esther's Jewish name, Hadassah (הַדַּסָּה), is the feminine form of the Hebrew word for "Myrtle" (סִדְדָּה). Reference to myrtle trees or branches occur six times in the

⁵Jobes, *Esther*, 95, believes this could be a covenantal connection in which, as a Benjamite, Mordecai stands in relationship to his ancestors Shimei, Kish, and Benjamin.

⁶Certainly this trend is revealed by Luke 1:61, when Zechariah and Elizabeth surprise others by naming their child outside the convention of giving children names of relatives. This would be Levenson's interpretation of the text. Levenson, *Esther*, 56.

Hebrew scriptures, and all in the context of God's presence, provision, or protection (Neh 8:15; Isa 41:19, 55:13; Zech 1:8, 10, 11). The book of Zechariah, written prior this moment in Persia, records a series of visions given to the prophet, corresponding to God's restoration and protection of Israel. The first vision was given to Zechariah in the year 520 B.C., the second year of Darius (Zech 1:1). What Zechariah was shown were a number of mysterious horsemen, standing in the midst of myrtle trees (Zech 1:8, 10, 11), whose task was to patrol the earth and assure Israel of God's protection.

Certainly the myrtle trees surrounding Zechariah's vision of horsemen connected their promise of protection to that great promise of restoration made through the prophet Isaiah, when God would cause the land to be blessed, even to the point of sustaining vegetation that prominently featured the myrtle tree. This would be a sign to Israel in that day, "that they may see and recognize, and consider and gain insight as well, that the hand of the Lord has done this, and the Holy one of Israel has created it" (Isa 41:20).

This is not to imply that Esther's Jewish name was not truly Hadassah, and that this was merely a device used by a later writer as imposed code. Instead, it could be viewed as God's providence that this young woman was given the name of Hadassah by Jewish parents in exile who were longing and hoping for the promise of full restoration made long before by the prophet Isaiah. And by this young Hadassah's lifetime, Israel had already begun to return, but by no means to the magnitude of Isaiah's promise.

Now, as an ancient foe of God's people would eventually arise in her own life time, Hadassah's name would be a reminder to God's people in exile that God had promised! Again, while God's name is not mentioned in a culture that forces Jews to take names of other gods, God's presence is subtly and indirectly evoked by Esther's Jewish name, Hadassah. God had promised to restore His people and His land, a promise that was contained in the very context of Isaiah's words of comfort and assurance (Isa 40:1-2).

Should we be surprised when our loving God reminds us of His promises immediately before He passes us through a time of testing? Much later the New Testament writer Paul would teach us to trust God even in the midst of suffering. He instructs to that end by reminding that if God has given us His most precious gift in His Son, will He not also give us what we need in order to be sustained in His plan for His glory (Rom 8:32). Reminders of His promises are among the sustaining graces that God gives to His children.

It may be odd to the reader that the author introduces the scheme to find a queen, then interrupts the flow to introduce Esther and Mordecai, only to return to implementation. This interruption is purposeful. When Esther is introduced, the author informs the reader that this “young lady was beautiful of form and pleasing of appearance” (*יְפֵת־תֶּאֱרָר וְטוֹבַת מְרֻאָה*, 2:7, own translation). This is a phrase quite similar to that used of two other important individuals in Jewish redemptive history. The author is using language strikingly similar to that used of Rachel, whom Jacob found to be “beautiful of form and appearance” (*יְפֵת־תֶּאֱרָר וְיִפְתַּ מְרֻאָה*, Gen 29:17, own translation). The Jewish reader would remember that Jacob had selected Rachel over Leah, Rachel having been described in similar terms to Esther. This would have the effect of raising, in the reader, the expectation that the king might very well choose Esther in this scheme of choosing one beautiful woman over all others.

Yet Esther’s description also echoes that of a young Joseph’s in Egypt. Joseph was described in similar terms as being “handsome in form and appearance” (*יָפֵה־תֶּאֱרָר*, *וְיָפֵה מְרֻאָה*, Gen 39:6). Again, this description of Esther would remind the reader of a young Joseph’s attractiveness as it related to Potiphar’s wife. More importantly, the author’s description of Esther in language similar to an earlier description of Joseph in exile would serve to connect the potential selection of Esther with the thought that her selection might very well be orchestrated by God for the salvation of His people (Gen 50:20).

Summarizing these thoughts here, the specific way that the author introduces Esther served to remind the reader of Rachel, described similarly, who was favored over others in a past instance. Where the Jewish reader might be disturbed by the thought of a young Jew marrying a gentile king, Esther's description would remind the reader that God had placed another Jew, Joseph, similarly described, within the inner workings of a gentile kingdom for the deliverance of God's people.

Introducing the Favor Esther Receives in Preparation (2:8-15)

Given what has been said about the anticipatory language used to introduce Esther, one is not surprised to find that she finds favor with Hegai, the servant in charge of preparing the young virgins to meet the King. Any spectator of modern beauty pageants understands the difficulty of having one contestant stand above the others. Yet that is what the author implies by his recounting of how young Esther received Hegai's favor.

Not only did Esther appear pleasing to Hegai, but the author indicates that Esther "found favor" (2:9) with him as well. This is a fairly common, yet important expression in Scripture. What is unique about the author's use of it here is that the word that 'favor' translates is the Hebrew word טֹפֵן , rather than the more commonly used Hebrew word יָן , which in fact is also used twice to convey 'favor' in this same chapter (2:15,17). While both carry the idea of favor, more often than not, טֹפֵן is used with respect to God's lovingkindness and faithfulness toward His children.⁷ טֹפֵן is used in the cases of Daniel (Dan 1:9) and Joseph (Gen 39:21) to convey God's favor upon His vessels, both while they were in exile. Given that God remains unmentioned in Esther's drama, it is likely that the author is sounding an echo of the treatment that Joseph and

⁷D. A. Baer and R. P. Gordon, "טֹפֵן," in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, ed. Willem VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:211.

Daniel received when placed under the authority of gentile masters.⁸ This has the impact of alluding to God's favor placed upon His human vessel through gentile authority for God's ultimate purposes, just as in the instances of the earlier exile figures of Joseph and Daniel.⁹ In other words, the $\tau\phi\eta$ that Esther receives from Hegai was derived from the unmentioned God who had worked in this way before, the same God who had earlier granted Daniel and Joseph $\tau\phi\eta$ so that they received favor and compassion from gentiles in key positions of power. If, as Mordecai will assert later, Esther would attain to royalty to intervene for her people, then it is not unreasonable to consider God's work in the hearts of certain Gentiles, granting Esther favor, even $\tau\phi\eta$ in this selection process.

As a result of this favor extended to her by Hegai, Esther was given preferential treatment. Through God's influence, the $\tau\phi\eta$ that Hegai showed to Esther resulted in her preparation being expedited. Esther was treated by this gentile as having favored status among all the contestants. She was given the prescribed cosmetics and food, and, additionally, the best servants and place in the harem. The sense of this statement is that Esther had, by the favor granted her, shortened the time she might otherwise have waited to meet the king. Hegai had essentially determined that Esther was his personal favorite candidate for queen, and thus he did what was necessary to place her before the king sooner rather than later.

Esther made no mention of her Jewish heritage to Hegai, nor to others in the gathering and preparation stages. The insertion of that fact by the author indicates that Esther's ethnicity might have otherwise hindered her treatment. That her heritage was

⁸Levenson, *Esther*, 60, agrees, "Like Esther, Joseph as a slave in Egypt finds favor with his master Potiphar, though there the reason is given: 'his master saw that the Lord was with him' (Gen 39:3). Probably we are to think of the same causation here, except that a lack of editorializing is characteristic of our author's style."

⁹Anthony Tomasino, *Esther*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2013), 187. While Tomasino is in the minority of commentators who remark on the curious use of $\tau\phi\eta$ here, he still stops short of drawing the conclusion that there is any allusion to God's work through gentile instruments.

hidden also communicates to the reader that there was some measure of animosity toward the Jewish population in Persia at this time. Reinforcing this idea was the concern that Mordecai displayed “every day” (v. 11), by pacing in the vicinity of the harem.

Mordecai, as her fatherly figure, was consumed with the welfare of Esther. He recognized that his beloved daughter would either be queen, or a captive object for the gratification of Ahasuerus. This is an echo of God’s stipulated consequence of covenant disobedience. Moses warned of the horrifying circumstances of gentile domination, saying, “Your sons and daughters shall be given to another people, while your eyes look on and yearn for them continually; but there will be nothing you can do” (Deut 28:32). The reader can sense the helplessness that Mordecai must have felt as he paced back and forth, day after day, worrying about the wellbeing of Esther. Any parent could identify with his concern. It is with that lingering picture of Esther’s preparation and Mordecai’s concern that the author returns attention to the search for the new queen.

The process within which Esther was shown favor by Hegai was detailed for the reader. This beautification preparation might have been common, at least to the Persian kingdom, as indicated by the end of verse 3, “and let their cosmetics be given them” (2:3). What is more likely, however, is that this elaborate and expensive process of preparation indicates how extravagant Ahasuerus was. It strains the imagination to invent reasons why each young virgin, whose beauty was already established by her inclusion in this process, would need to spend “six months with the oil of myrrh and six months with spices and the cosmetics” in preparation for, potentially, one night. While Tomasino notes that some of these spices, myrrh especially, are associated with passionate romance in Song of Solomon,¹⁰ the preparation described here may say more about the ego of the king than the necessity for duration of application.

¹⁰Tomasino, *Esther*, 189.

The description of this beautification process is described in a purposeful fashion in order to say more to the reader familiar with the Joseph story of Jewish exile. The author of Esther applies a phrase to the process of preparation found only in the account of the embalming of Jacob, Joseph's father. Just as the time of preparation, **כִּי יָמֵי אֵלֶּיךָ** ("for such is the period required", Gen 50:3)—for embalming—was set forth in the Joseph narrative, so also this elaborate preparation **כִּי יָמֵי אֵלֶּיךָ** (2:12) for cosmetic treatments is stipulated here. Given that the preparation of the young beauties here is likened, by the use of that same language, to the preparation of Jacob's body for burial, Grossman asserts that Ahasuerus is being portrayed as treating these women as objects rather than persons.¹¹

Beyond the beautification process, the author indicates that when it came each beauty's time to spend the night with Ahasuerus, she was allowed to take with her anything from the harem. There are a number of suggestions as to what a beautiful virgin might have taken. Given that this evening had a sexual focus, some have suggested that it was something for enhancing pleasure. Others have indicated that jewelry and clothing are in view here. Still others have pointed to the possibility that musical instruments or musicians are in view, given that concubines often entertained their king as an aspect of their companionship.¹²

In Esther's case, she took only what Hegai, the king's eunuch suggested. Esther's willingness to follow Hegai's advice was meant to contrast her submissive spirit with that of Vashti, the woman she was replacing. Hegai's role of advisor, being one who knew the king and used that knowledge to give Esther an advantage over other young

¹¹Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 62.

¹²Tomasino, *Esther*, 190.

beauties, is yet another way in which Esther received favor in the preparation to meet the king.

Introducing Esther the Queen (2:16-18)

There is no indication of how long Esther was in the preparation phase, a year or perhaps more. The favor she received from Hegai seems to imply that he had put her near the front once he spotted her. Esther gained his favor, as well as all who saw her, according to the text (2:15). But what mattered in this pageant was the king's approval. In fact, it would be possible for Esther, or any other participant to spend only one evening with Ahasuerus and then to never be summoned by him again, forever a member of his reserved concubines. This reality underscores the earlier allusion by the author to the burial preparation of Jacob's body; a young beauty may very well have been preparing an entire year for the purpose of being confined to a lifeless future. Thus, suspense grips the reader at this point in the drama.

Esther had been introduced in a way that alluded to the description of Rachel, Jacob's love. Where Rachel was "beautiful of form and face" (יִפְת־תֹּאֵר וְיִפְת מְרֻאָה), Gen 29:17) what resulted in the contest between Leah and Rachel for Jacob's affections was that Jacob "loved Rachel more than Leah" (וַיֶּאֱהָב גַּם־אֶת־רָחֵל מִלֵּאָה), Gen. 29:30). Not surprisingly, therefore, Esther is introduced being "beautiful of form and face" (יִפְת־תֹּאֵר וְיִפְת מְרֻאָה, Esth. 2:7) and what results is that, in the contest for the favor of Ahasuerus, "the king loved Esther more than all the women" (וַיֶּאֱהָב הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־אֶסְתֵּר מִכָּל־הַנְּשִׂימִים), Esth. 2:17). In describing Esther in similar tones as Rachel, the author is alluding to the result of that earlier contest, and the selection of the one who was beautiful of form and face. Thus, we are not ultimately surprised to find that the beautiful young Jew, Esther, beautiful of form and face, is loved by the king more than all the women.

This same language may be alluding to a more important introduction, one of a Joseph-like figure. What is said of Ahasuerus' love for Esther was said of Jacob's, or

Israel's, preference for Joseph. Just as "Israel loved Joseph more than all his sons" (וַיִּשְׂרָאֵל אֶהָב אֶת-יוֹסֵף מִכָּל-בָּנָיו), Gen 37:3), so also of Ahasuerus. "the king loved Esther more than all the women" (וַיֵּאָהֵב הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-אֶסְתֵּר מִכָּל-הַנְּשִׂימִים), 2:17). It is certainly possible that, at this early point in telling the Esther story, the author desires for his Jewish audience to read this unfolding drama with the melody of God's work through Joseph playing as background music.

Esther found favor with the king, Ahasuerus, and he chose her as queen in the place of Vashti (v. 17). In keeping with his love for banquets, the king gave a banquet as a means of introducing and celebrating his new queen. Again, as in the case of the earlier banquets, Ahasuerus lavished others with his extensive means, in this case giving gifts according to his bounty (also see 1:7).

Introducing Influence Esther's Position Affords Mordecai (2:19-23)

Lest one conclude that Ahasuerus put to rest his sexual indulgences upon finding and marrying Esther, verse 19 likely contradicts that thought. Again, virgins were gathered in a similar fashion to the earlier contest, this second time not in search of a queen, but simply Ahasuerus' continued pleasure seeking.¹³ This scene places Mordecai, now related to the queen of Persia, in the picture.

The author reinforces that Esther, in obedience to Mordecai's strict exhortation, had not told anyone of her Jewish heritage. The mention here of Esther's obedience to Mordecai makes clear that Esther was still connected to Mordecai, despite having become the wife and queen of Ahasuerus. This connection between Mordecai the Jew,

¹³While some commentators view this as an earlier instance of the virgin gathering that included Esther's own gathering, Bush rightly recognizes that in this reporting (2:19), Esther is now queen. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 373, writes, "This scene opens with a temporal clause that sets the time of these events as later than what has gone before and subtly alludes to the lascivious characterization of the king presented in the last scene."

and Esther the Jewish queen of Persia will function as the lever that, when moved, will put the emergency brake on an ancient foe's plan to destroy the Jewish people.

Presently in the story, Mordecai overheard of an assassination plot in the works against Ahasuerus. Mordecai reported to Esther the plot and players, and upon investigation, Mordecai's report was verified and the culprits were executed. One supposes that Mordecai, desiring to rescue Esther from marriage to a gentile king, could easily have let the plot play out. But true to an earlier command of God through Jeremiah, Mordecai was found seeking the welfare of his city, even the king, while in exile (Jer 29:7).

Mordecai's faithfulness was not immediately rewarded by the king. Perhaps Ahasuerus found the plot too unnerving to focus on anything other than putting the would-be assassins to death, that serving as an example and deterrent to others. Esther's safety was likely the greatest concern Mordecai had, and her safety in the king's safety was its own reward. But Mordecai's fealty was recorded in the king's chronicles. What he could not have known was that this incident was ultimately an introduction to a future accommodation that Esther's newfound position afforded Mordecai.

Conclusion

Have you ever met someone who, when they introduced themselves, did so in such a way that seemed curious at the time? As you got to know them better, you replayed their introduction in your mind and realized that they had told you more about themselves than you had at first realized. Such is the case with the author's introductions in this chapter. More is said here than, at first, meets the eye, as the expression goes.

Speaking of eyes, like the eye doctors process of successive readings of charts for finding the right strength of lens to give visual clarity, so successive readings of Esther's story help bring clarity to what the author hints at in these introductions.

God's presence saturates Esther's story without directly referencing His work behind the scene of this drama. For the reader who knows the history of the Jews, God's

presence is evident through the promises He has made that largely control how the author tells the story and introduces the individuals involved. The author seems content to display God's presence, framed by descriptions and reactions that allude to God's clear work in and through others long before.

This chapter is more than an introduction of the important characters to the story. It is also an introduction sculpted in the shape of earlier patterns and persons, all to give an abiding sense that the unchanging God is present and working in Esther's day, even as He worked long before, for the preservation of His people Israel.

CHAPTER 4

HAMAN'S PROMOTION AND EVIL PLOT

By most estimates, some six million Jews, men, women, and children, were killed under the leadership and direction of the German leader, Adolf Hitler. Supporting the conclusion that Hitler was determined to annihilate the Jewish people, his Nazi party dubbed their Jewish extermination plan “Final Solution.”¹

While Adolf Hitler's hatred for the Jewish people, or anti-Semitism, was evident through his plan, the factors motivating his hatred are disputed. One recent historian, Timothy Snyder, points to Hitler's worldview as the basis for Jewish extermination. Snyder concludes that Hitler saw the natural order of human progression as driven by a ‘survival-of-the-fittest’ mentality, where war, conquest, and dominance by a certain people group marks progress. According to Snyder, Hitler believed that the Jewish people had introduced a moral ethic to humanity that suppressed this natural order. It was Hitler's opinion that the Jews needed to be eliminated in order to eradicate that suppressive ethic, and restore humanity to the natural order of conquest. Germany would be the vanquishers in a world without the Jewish ethic, according to this understanding of Hitler's worldview. Snyder posits that Adolf Hitler was more pro-German than he was anti-Semitic. According to Snyder, Adolf Hitler's “Final Solution” was less about a hatred for the Jewish people, and more about his desire to see Germany's dominance, and this, free of any moral baggage.²

¹United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “‘Final Solution:’ Overview,” accessed February 26, 2018, <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007328#>.

²Edward Delman, “Understanding Hitler's Anti-Semitism,” September 9, 2015, accessed February 26, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/hitler-holocaust-antisemitism-timothy-snyder/404260/>

While Snyder's view of Hitler's motivation is interesting, it fails to account for the spiritual, or supernatural, components that yield a more robust explanation for Hitler's anti-Semitism. Erwin Lutzer, in his well-documented *Hitler's Cross*, chronicles Hitler's rise to power alongside his fall to satanic influence. When this spiritual dimension is acknowledged, one recognizes that Adolf Hitler's hatred for the Jews is rooted in the biblical metanarrative, where perpetual enmity has been pronounced between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman (Gen 3:15). Hitler was one in a long line of individuals, including Pharaoh of the Exodus account, Haman of Esther's story, and Herod of the Gospels, who opposed the plan of God mediated through His people.

Of the aforementioned individuals, Haman, the Agagite (Esth 3:1), most closely resembled Hitler in his hatred toward the Jews and his focused plan to exterminate them from the face of the earth. Haman's animosity toward the Jews was one link in a much longer chain. Haman traced his ancestry back to Esau, the brother of Jacob, or Israel. And Esau's descendants the Amalekites were the first to oppose Israel after their deliverance from Egypt. Israel's God, also the God of Mordecai and Esther, had promised perpetual enmity between the descendants of Amalek and Israel. There would not simply be ethnic tensions between the two peoples, but Israel's God, himself, had promised to "war against Amalek from generation to generation" (Exod 17:16).

Haman's introduction to this story links him to the Amalekites through the notable Amalekite king, Agag. This lineage heightens the foreseeable tension between Mordecai and Haman by reminding of an earlier battle between Mordecai's forefather Saul, the Benjamite, and Agag, the Amalekite. Saul and the Israelites defeated Agag and the Amalekites. From the opening of this chapter the reader recognizes that Mordecai has been placed subservient to an enemy of his people, even an enemy of his God.

Thus, in the midst of Esther's ascension to the throne of Persia, a descendant of the Amalekites had been promoted to the highest position in Persia under the king, Ahasuerus. And the command from Ahasuerus that Mordecai and all his fellow servants

must bow down and pay homage to Haman caused Mordecai to be conflicted on several fronts. First, Haman belonged to a people with whom Mordecai's God had pledged to oppose. Secondly, God has promised that Jacob's king would be higher than Agag's, the forefather of Haman's. Mordecai defied the king's command, trusting in the promises of God.

God's Promises Influence Mordecai's Actions

The narrator of Esther's story reports Mordecai's rationale for refusing to bow before Haman, "he had told them that he was a Jew" (3:4). Commentators are divided on how they understand Mordecai's justification for disobeying the king's command. Some attribute arrogance as the motivating trait in Mordecai, with Timothy Stone upgrading his arrogance to less of a personal pride than an ethnic snub.³ Others rightly attribute the historic enmity between the Jews and Amalekites as the issue here, but all seem to stop short of considering God's prior promises as possibly motivating Mordecai's refusal to honor Haman as commanded. The reason for this may be that many commentators assume the assimilation of Mordecai to the pagan culture, which carries with it the assumption that Mordecai was no longer clinging to God's promises for his people. There is nothing, however, that validates this assumption. Mordecai's refusal to give honor to Haman could easily be explained by an abiding hope in God's promises, both against the Amalekites and for the Jews.

Haman, the Agagite, a descendent of the Amalekites, was promoted over all the princes and servants of Ahasuerus, including Mordecai. The king's command that all his servants must bow down and pay homage to Haman presented Mordecai with a dilemma – in honoring Ahasuerus' command Mordecai would also be honoring a perpetual enemy of his people, and more importantly his God. Long before, God had

³Timothy J. Stone, *The Compilation History of the Megilloth* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 162.

promised to “utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven”; the Lord, himself, had promised to have war against Amalek throughout generations (Exod 17:14-15). When, in the days of Samuel the prophet, King Saul gave honor to Agag the Amalekite king by sparing his life, God judged Saul severely. Now Mordecai was commanded to honor one whom his God had promised to be warring against. In obeying the command to bow down and pay homage to Haman, Mordecai would be giving honor to an enemy of his God, an enemy over whom God had promised Israel’s ultimate exaltation (Num 24:7, 20). Mordecai chose to believe God’s promises and disobey Ahasuerus’ command to give honor to Haman. Because of this, Haman plotted to destroy both Mordecai and his people, the Jews.

Context

Just as the reader senses that all is well in Susa, Esther having become queen, and Mordecai loyally exposing a plot against the king, an ancient foe of Israel rises to power and prominence in Persia.

Main Idea

Mordecai, in defiance to the king’s command, refuses to bow down to Haman, an enemy of the Jews, and therefore an enemy of God’s. Haman uses his position and craftiness to pass legislation to have both Mordecai and the Jews annihilated.

Exposition

The drama of this chapter records a new installment in an ancient struggle. Haman the Amalekite was promoted over all the king’s servants including Mordecai the Jew. That promotion created a dilemma for Mordecai when he, like the rest of the officials were commanded to pay homage to Haman. We will treat the chapter as one overarching drama in which the Jew denies homage, the Amalekite denies existence (3:1-15). This will work itself out in three movements.

The Jew Denies Homage, the Amalekite Denies Existence (3:1-15)

As the author introduces a new scene in the exile drama of Esther, there is an intentional connection to the previous scene in which Mordecai uncovered, reported, and foiled an assassination attempt on the king (2:21-23). The phrase “After these events” (3:1) intends to be more than a time marker, also serving to connect the reader to the events of Esther’s coronation (2:17-18), and more significantly, Mordecai’s heroic thwarting of the plot to assassinate Ahasuerus (2:19-20).

Specifically, the connection to the prior events is very likely intended by the author to illicit in the reader feelings of injustice.⁴ Because Mordecai had faithfully protected his king, Ahasuerus, there follows for the reader an expectation of reward for Mordecai. Yet, not only is there no mention of reward for Mordecai, but there is also the introduction and promotion of another.⁵ To add perceived insult to injury, the individual promoted happens to be a descendant of Agag the Amalekite, an ancient foe of Israel. That Haman is a descendant of Amalekites makes it all the more horrifying that Mordecai, along with all the king’s servants, was now required to bow down before Haman paying homage.

Mordecai Refuses to Bow to an Enemy of God (3:1-6)

There have been a number of suggestions by scholarly voices for why Mordecai refused to bow down and pay homage to Haman as commanded by the king. Many of

⁴Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), 35. While the author seems to desire, by this connection to prior events, to illicit feelings of injustice in the reader, one must be careful not to assume that Mordecai shared such sentiments. To assume this would likely force an interpretation of the motive for Mordecai’s refusal to bow to Haman, as reported in vv. 2-4. However, saying that one must exercise caution here is not the same as concluding that Mordecai did not wrestle with a sense of unfairness in being passed over for promotion. We simply do not know.

⁵As before, God’s presence is felt even in the sting of his persistence of judgment. Deut 28:43 warned that God’s judgment would be meted out by the promotion of foreigners over God’s covenant people.

them find their basis in a negative portrayal of Mordecai's character. Among them: Mordecai's pride prevented him from honoring Haman; Mordecai's bitterness at having been passed over for the promotion Haman enjoyed motivated disobedience.⁶ These and other negative slants on Mordecai's person are almost certainly read back into this circumstance after the entire story is read and assessments are made in light of the assumption that Mordecai had assimilated into a pagan culture, having denied his distinctive Jewish heritage and customs. Yet, such an assessment should be challenged due to the fact that Mordecai, in protecting King Ahasuerus, seemed to have heeded God's command for Jews in exile to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile" (Jer 29:7). To assume pride or bitterness as the motivation for Mordecai's civil disobedience is an argument from deafening silence, not to mention contrary to the portrayal of Mordecai thus far.

A more promising explanation for Mordecai's refusal to bow before and pay homage to the Amalekite prince Haman is an adherence to the first and second commandments of Moses. The thought is Mordecai had concluded that to bow before Haman was an act of worship, which he refused outright. Yet this explanation is less attractive in light of prior instances of God-fearing Jews bowing in reverence to other earthly authorities. One example is the reverence that David showed to King Saul, even as Saul sought David's life, "David bowed with his face to the ground and prostrated himself" (1 Sam 24:8).⁷ In order to justify this explanation, others have argued that Haman made reverence impossible because he bore some sort of pagan image embroidered on his garment, which would make bowing tantamount to idolatry, and not

⁶Anthony Tomasino, *Esther*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2013), 217. Tomasino gives several possibilities for Haman's action. One suggestion is that pride motivated Mordecai, while another suggests Mordecai was motivated by bitterness.

⁷If it were argued to be a question of intent, rather than posture, there David is also said to have paid homage (יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה) to Saul, the same reverence Mordecai refused Haman (יִשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לְאֵל).

simple reverence.⁸ Bush, however, recognizes that any such assumption is speculation rather than historically validated.

An enemy God had declared for all generations. The most convincing explanation for Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman is tied to the way in which Haman is introduced.⁹ Haman is an Agagite, and therefore a descendant of Agag the Amalekite king whose army was destroyed by King Saul. In an act of disobedience to God, Agag had initially been spared by King Saul, but subsequently was executed by the prophet Samuel.

It is important to recognize, however, that God's command to destroy Agag and all the Amalekite people was tied to the Amalekites having made war against the Israelites in their most vulnerable moment, as God was guiding them from Egypt into Canaan. That famous battle, in which Israel was led by Joshua and interceded for by Moses, resulted in God's pledge to make "war against Amalek from generation to generation" (Exod 17:16). Note that God Himself had vowed to oppose the Amalekites for perpetuity. This is different that God simply foretelling of continual strife between Israel and the Amalekites, and it should impact how the faithful Jew viewed that people group.

Very often in the Hebrew scriptures, the enemy of God is the enemy of God's faithful ones. David, the man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14), exemplified this fidelity when he told his God, "Do I not hate those who hate You, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with the utmost hatred; they have become my enemies" (Ps 139:21-22). With Haman being introduced as a descendant of

⁸Fredrick W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 9 (Dallas: Word, 1998), 379.

⁹Karen H. Jobes, *Esther*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 119.

God's perpetual enemy, it is most fitting then that Mordecai would refuse to bow before him.

An enemy God had declared subservient to Israel. Not only was Haman a descendant of an enemy of God, therefore an enemy of Mordecai's people, but God had promised, specifically, to exalt Mordecai's people above Haman's. That promise came through the unlikely person of Balaam, the gentile prophet. While Balaam had been hired to pronounce curses upon Israel for the benefit of Moab's King Balak, Balaam was prevented by God from doing so.

Rather than cursing Israel, Balaam foretold of God's many future blessings upon His chosen people. In his final of several discourses, a discourse likely pertinent to Mordecai's thinking and actions here with respect to Haman, were the following promises:

How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel! Like valleys that stretch out, like gardens beside the river, like aloes planted by the LORD, like cedars beside the waters. Water will flow from his buckets, and his seed will be by many waters, and his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted. God brings him out of Egypt, He is for him like the horns of the wild ox. He will devour the nations who are his adversaries, and will crush their bones in pieces, and shatter them with his arrows. He couches, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion, who dares rouse him? Blessed is everyone who blesses, you, and cursed is everyone who curses you. . . . Amalek was the first of the nations, but his end shall be destruction. (Num 24:5-9, 20)¹⁰

Within these final prophecies of Balaam there is an application of the Abrahamic promise from Genesis 12:1-3, specifically that Amalek's attempt to oppose Abraham's seed has brought condemnation upon Amalek's seed. This also yields the most plausible explanation for Mordecai's refusal to bow and pay homage to Haman, in that Mordecai believed God's promise made through Balaam at the time of the exodus from Egypt.

¹⁰Here is essentially an application of the Abrahamic promise from Gen 12:1-3, and therefore an understanding that Amalek's attempt to oppose Abraham's seed has brought condemnation upon Amalek's seed.

Mordecai in Joseph-like terms. God's presence is elicited by the author's characterization of Mordecai in Joseph-like terms. Just as Joseph, when pressured by Potiphar's wife (וַיְהִי כִּדְבָרָהּ אֶל-יֹסֵף יוֹם וָלַיְלָה שָׁמַע אֲלֶיהָ, Gen 39:10) day after day, did not listen to her, so the author records that Mordecai, when pressured to bow (וַיְהִי כְּאֲמַרָם וַיִּשְׁמַע אֲלֵיהֶם, Esth 3:4) day after day, did not listen to them. Having used this similar language to Joseph in exile connects the reader to the Joseph narrative.¹¹

Through recurring dreams, Joseph had been granted assurance from God that his place would be higher than that of his older brothers, that they would be subservient to Joseph in the future. Joseph's confidence in God's promise contributed to the resentment his older siblings felt towards him, and their desire to extinguish Joseph's life and dreams of future superiority. What is remarkable is that Joseph did not waver in faithfulness to his God while in exile. In the face of repeated sexual temptation by Potiphar's wife, when it would have been easy to conclude that God had abandoned him, having given him over to the treachery of his brothers, Joseph remained faithful, exemplifying an abiding hope in God's word.

When Mordecai indicated that the reason he would not bow to Haman was his own ethnicity, the reader must not be satisfied with the ancient grudge between Mordecai's people and Haman's as the entire explanation for Mordecai's disobedience. That grudge, combined with a remembrance of God's promise to exalt Mordecai's people over Haman's likely impacted how Mordecai related to Haman. The fulfillment of Joseph's dreams of ruling over his family had occurred after a time of exile. And just as exile did not signal a failure of God to fulfill Joseph's elevation, it need not for Israel's either. There is little surprise, then, that Mordecai's confidence in God's promise of ultimate Israelite superiority causes him to behave in a way that draws the ire of Haman. What, for Haman, was a sign

¹¹Jon D. Levenson, *Esther*, The Old Testament Commentary (Louisville: Westminster, 1997), 68. Levenson sees this linguistic connection to the Joseph narrative as the author's way of connecting Mordecai's fidelity to God as parallel to Joseph's faithfulness Potiphar and God.

of disrespect, was, for Mordecai, a sign of faith in the promises of God. Thus, the author's portrayal of Mordecai's resistance in language similar to Joseph's provides a key to understanding Mordecai's motivation. That was an abiding confidence in, and faithfulness to, the promises of God, despite contradictory circumstances.

God's people of every age, including our own, have faced the challenge that Mordecai faced, and that Joseph faced. That is the challenge of believing God's word even when it appears that God is silent, and God's enemies seemingly hold control over us. Many who read Esther's story, even some who write commentaries on this book, begin with the assumption that Mordecai had given up his commitment to God and had assimilated into the pagan culture of Persia. There is nothing that forces this interpretation of Mordecai, and I would argue there are indications to the contrary. Yet even if Mordecai had been struggling, as we sometimes struggle, to live in a distinctly committed way to God in a pagan culture, there always come these moments of truth. These are instances when God's people are forced to decide if they are going to believe God's promises, especially when it appears as if those promises are in question. God is always present in His promises. And when God's people cling to His promises in societies that have marginalized God, then it may, and often does, produce these confrontations where you and I refuse to bow to the mandates of a God-hating world. Jesus warned us, "In this world you have tribulations," but then He encouraged us, "but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

As a result of Mordecai's refusal to heed his coworkers' challenges to honor Haman (3:4), they reported to Haman the disrespect of Mordecai, as well as his justification. Perhaps they truly wondered if there was, for Jews, an exemption from showing Haman the honor commanded by the king. Or, perhaps this was another indication, which many don't recognize, that Mordecai did live with Jewish ethics that set him apart from his peers, causing resentment. When they reported to Haman Mordecai's refusal to pay him homage, Haman was outraged.

The narrator indicates in verse 6 that Haman's anger gave way to the same overreach as Ahasuerus' in the opening scene.¹² Where Vashti's disregard of the king's summons led to an action intended to impact every wife of the kingdom, Mordecai's disobedience brought retribution to all the Jews throughout the whole kingdom.

In the overarching narrative of Scripture, Haman's desire to punish all Jews for Mordecai's disrespect goes further than equating him to Ahasuerus' in his earlier overreach. It now emerges that Haman should be viewed by the reader as the offspring of the serpent from Genesis 3:15. As Cain murdered the righteous Abel, as Pharaoh began to murder the male children of Israel, God's son (Exod 4:22) in Egypt, even as Esau's descendent Amalek attempted to destroy Jacob's descendants, who are the children of God, so now Haman shows his spiritual pedigree through his murderous intentions.

Haman Devises a Plan to Destroy God's People (3:7-11)

Haman was not content with punishing Mordecai alone. He determined to gain the permission from the king to exterminate all of Mordecai's people throughout the extensive kingdom, essentially the entire Jewish nation. Just as Haman had very likely risen to his high post through shrewdness and political maneuvering, he devised a plan that would gain approval by demonstrating advantage to Ahasuerus, the king. Yet, Haman was unaware that aspects of his plan that were more than a threat to the existence of Mordecai and his people. Haman was issuing a challenge to the God of the Jews.

A plan devised in the shadow of the Passover. Verse 7 informs that in the first month, the month Nisan, Haman set about determining the proper timing of his plan. Historians indicate that this timing, for Haman, was consistent with the Sumerian cultural

¹²Levenson sees this as "part of the genius of the plot" in how those "similar but independent events come to intersect, with enormously positive results for both the Jews and the empire." Levenson, *Esther*, 68.

practice of feasting, celebration, and seeking divine guidance in important matters for the year ahead.¹³ What is remarkable about Haman's timing is the fact that his casting of Pur coincided with the anniversary month of the Jewish Passover. Passover was the birthday, in certain respects, of God's chosen people Israel, the moment in history when God redeemed His firstborn son by killing the firstborn of the Egyptians (Exod 4:22-23). Birthdays have a way of stirring up memories of our younger days and upbringing. In God's providence, the communication of Haman's death plan in the shadow of Passover (v. 12) very likely caused them to consider their earlier redemption, and the God who had redeemed them long before. Correspondingly, Israel's God had warned of exile for continued unfaithfulness to His covenant, but He had also promised to restore them from their forewarned exile:

“Fear not, O Jacob My servant,” declares the Lord, “And do not be dismayed, O Israel; for behold, I will save you from afar and your offspring from the land of their captivity. And Jacob will return and will be quiet and at ease, and no one will make him afraid. For I am with you,” declares the Lord, “To save you; for I will destroy completely all the nations where I have scattered you, only I will not destroy you completely. But I will chasten you justly and will by no means leave you unpunished.” (Jer 30:10-11)

A plan devised consulting a method that God controls. Although the wording in the original Hebrew is a bit awkward, the context helps to add clarity to the meaning of verse 7. What is understood is that in that first month, Nisan, Pur was cast before Haman as the means of setting the date to carry out his diabolic scheme to annihilate Mordecai and his people. In that process, which the author indicates was equivalent to the Jewish practice of casting of the lot, the month and day was selected, a date that Haman was then prepared to propose to Ahasuerus, Haman's superior. Yet the Jewish audience the story is aimed at understands, by their wisdom literature, that the result of casting the lot is controlled by Israel's God (Prov 16:33). Thus, within the

¹³Tomasino, *Esther*, 220. Also, Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Other Narrative and the Hidden Reading* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 95.

devising of Haman's plan to destroy God's people there are reminders pointing to God's steadfast love and sovereign control in face of annihilation.

It is not unlikely that Haman's rise to power was associated with Ahasuerus' vulnerability, following the assassination plot that was foiled due to Mordecai's report. And if this was the case, it is easier to understand why the king was so receptive to Haman's report of a people who posed a threat to Ahasuerus' power. Haman's portrayal of this people-threat included the proverbial half-truths and lies that are so common in deception. While the Jews did have laws regulating aspects of life and ethics, even distinguishing them from gentiles, faithfulness to those distinctions posed little to no threat to Ahasuerus' kingdom. In fact, the Jews had been instructed by the prophet Jeremiah to "seek the welfare of the city . . . for in its welfare you will have welfare" (Jer 29:7). The only individual whose interests seemed to be threatened by any among the Jews was Haman. Haman proposed this virulent threat be eliminated.

In order to create an interest beyond the elimination of any threat to Ahasuerus' power, Haman promised a significant financial consideration. He would pay ten thousand talents of silver into the king's treasuries (v. 9). Timothy Beal indicates that this amount of money was upwards to two-thirds of the yearly inflow to the Persian economy.¹⁴ Most assume that Haman would get this sizable amount from the plunder that resulted from annihilation of the Jewish population (v. 13).

What is perplexing is the ease with which Ahasuerus could be persuaded by Haman. There is no recorded inquiry by the king regarding who this people is that pose so grave a threat. There is no questioning as to how Haman would secure such massive wealth. The willingness of the king to be led by his counselor here, as in the earlier Vashti incident, calls into question the leadership of this gentile king. However, again it

¹⁴Timothy K. Beal, *Ruth, Esther*, Berit Olam, ed. David W. Cotter (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 53.

is remembered from the Hebrew wisdom literature that while the king may be swayed by poor counsel, ultimately it is the Lord who allows the king's heart to be turned one way or another (Prov 21:1), all for the Lord's wise purposes. This truth does not dismiss human responsibility, but it does comfort His people that God's hand remains steady at the wheel, even as we pass through turbulent, and uncertain waters.

So it was that King Ahasuerus gave Haman the authority, as represented by his signet ring. The author states this in ominous terms when recording that the king's authority is not simply given to an underling, but to Haman, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. Along with that vested authority, the king also yielded the power to destroy the unspecified people, who were none other than Haman's enemies (v. 11). Haman's enemies, however, are God's people.

An Edict of Destruction Is Issued against God's People (3:12-15)

Nearly a millennium earlier, on what became known to the Jews as the Passover, "the Lord struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of cattle" (Exod 12:29). The Lord "passed over" the homes of the Jews, which by faith in His command were marked by the blood of a sacrificed lamb. That event became a defining moment for the Jews, a redeemed people, a moment observed every year by the command of God, "Now this day will be a memorial to you, and you shall celebrate it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations you are to celebrate it as a permanent ordinance" (Exod 12:14). Now, on the eve the Passover, the very existence of God's covenant people was threatened with extermination. Not simply threatened, but actually codified as law.

A destruction edict issued throughout the vast empire. The scribes of Ahasuerus were quickly gathered to Haman's presence so that he could dictate a legal

authorization for use of force against the Jewish population throughout Persia's empire. The scribes wrote that message of Jewish annihilation in the language of each region and people group controlled by Ahasuerus. To ensure that the message carried the weight and authority of the king, it carried his name and official seal.

A destruction edict issued with the speed of immediacy. While the day of destruction was set off in the near future, eleven months from the day it was written, Haman dispatched messengers with a sense of urgency. While the author indicates that the edict was sent by courier, or literally 'runner' in the Hebrew, later in Esther's story these couriers are said to be on horseback (Esth 8:10, 14). The ability of Haman to send the message quickly throughout the Persian empire seems to add a sense of powerlessness to the Jewish plight. It is as if Haman has all of the resources of Ahasuerus behind him in his plot to destroy his Jewish enemy. This powerlessness inclines the reader to see the need for God's power to intervene on behalf of the people He had redeemed long before.

A destruction edict issued with total vengeance. There are no soft edges to Haman's edict. The Jews are to be destroyed, killed, and annihilated, according to the legal proclamation. Tomasino argues that the use of these three terms is rhetorical, not redundant, and intends to communicate totality in the death sentence.¹⁵ There is nothing left to uncertainty in the command to eliminate the Jewish population. And not simply adult, fighting age males, but "all the Jews, both young and old, women and children," were to be destroyed in one day, and that day was determined to be the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (v. 13). The language of the edict goes beyond completeness, to convey a sense of vengeance, and the fruit of the destruction would be the possessions of the Jewish population. Not only would Haman take the lives of the Jews, but their riches as well.

¹⁵Tomasino, *Esther*, 232.

Haman's edict of destruction was sent to the king's satraps, governors of provinces, and princes of the various peoples of the Persian empire (v. 12). It was published, also, for popular consumption (v. 14). The purpose of this was that the populations throughout the kingdom would ready themselves to exterminate the Jews of their communities. It is hard to imagine, today, such a preauthorization for hatred, violence, and annihilation against a certain portion of the population. One can only imagine the pandemonium such an edict would have produced everywhere throughout the Persian kingdom.

Conclusion

It was not simply Mordecai whose existence was threatened by Haman's evil plot, but all of Israel. As was said just prior to these events, the one who threatened Israel was threatening the apple of God's eye (Zech 2:8). And in this case the aggressor was an enemy God had promised to fight on Israel's behalf. This promise made God's presence, though unmentioned, seem palpable. What is more, the timing of Haman's plotting conjured up God's presence by reminding of God's historic deliverance of Israel. It was as if Haman unwittingly gave hope to the audience as his plot was being hatched, even with a process God had reminded that He controlled (Prov 16:33).

Mordecai's actions, as he resisted authority and sought to honor God's promises, are cast in the mold of the Joseph narrative. Just as God had promised Joseph greatness and Joseph chose fidelity to the Promisor over the flesh, so Mordecai chose to honor God, believing His promises.

If the author is indeed echoing elements of the Joseph narrative, then it is no surprise to find that just as Joseph's brothers sat down to eat upon having committed to Joseph's elimination from their lives (Gen 37:25), so also Haman and Ahasuerus sat down to drink with equal callousness (Esth 3:15).

Not so with the city of Susa, the center of the drama. Susa was set in confusion. The author chose to convey this confusion with a Hebrew term (בִּיָּד, root word meaning “to be agitated; to wander around in confusion”¹⁶) that is used only several times in the Old Testament canon. Each other time it is used it implies a sense of helplessness that has resulted from God’s hand, and the need to look to God alone for the remedy. Moses used the word to record God’s revelation of Pharaoh’s perception of the Israelites’ vulnerability after leaving Egypt (Exod 14:3). Again, the word is used to describe the confusion even of the cattle as a result of God’s judgment upon Israel, and the need for a fast (Joel 1:18).

The connection to the prophet Joel is fitting, as Joel called for a consecrated fast in light of God’s coming judgment (Joel 1:14). Fasting, in the Hebrew Bible, when from the heart, was always an act of contrition. Fasting was intended to demonstrate to Israel’s God that the individual fasting was humbling his or her self, looking to, and dependent upon His intervention. This imminent threat of extermination, which was real, pervasive, and complete, would be used by God to bring about a confusion that would force the Jews to look to the promise-making God to make good on His promises.

¹⁶Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), 100.

CHAPTER 5

CRISIS IN SUSANNA

To feel alone in the midst of crisis is part of the human condition, especially when the crisis is some existential threat. And when one's desperate circumstances might be tied to some prior unfaithfulness, the growing hopelessness can also be mingled with a sense of abandonment. As the news of Haman's extermination edict was communicated throughout the Persian empire, that very sentiment must have been felt by the Jewish people. Had their God abandoned them? Had God's promises to Abraham's descendants been negated by their own covenant infidelity?

Ironically, Israel's God was very much present in all of their adverse circumstances. God's faithfulness had been demonstrated by raising up enemies who would carry Israel into exile (Deut 28:41). God faithfully dispensed His promise to give their sons and daughters to another people as His covenant nation looked on helplessly (Deut 28:32)—Mordecai was powerless to stop Esther from being absorbed into the royal harem through the audition for queen (Esth 2:8, 11). And now, God's faithful pledge to rob His people of an assurance of life (Deut 28:66) was enacted through Haman's plot to rid the Persian empire of the Jewish population. It is not simply grasping at optimism to conclude that the execution of all of these judgments upon God's people testified to His faithful presence. As Solomon had taught the Jews in their wisdom writings, "For whom the Lord loves He reproveth, even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights" (Prov 3:11).

Some fifty years prior to this moment, the Jews had begun to return to the land, and Jerusalem, but their existence there was far from stable. The book of Ezra, recording

those early days of return, indicated that they were “terrified because of the people of the lands” (Ezra 3:3). And now in Susa, legislation had authorized the extermination of the Jews. What could Israel’s God be up to, if He was truly for His people? What purpose could the God of Israel possibly have for allowing the survival and destiny of His covenant people to hang in the balance?

The apostle Paul, formerly Saul, of the same tribe of Benjamin, the same lineage as Mordecai and Esther, learned at a much later date a lesson about the unchanging God that gives insight to Esther’s circumstances as well. Paul wrote words that teach all who would consider and take them to heart, helping to understand the ways of our God that, at times, seem counter-intuitive. He wrote,

For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead; who delivered us from so great a peril of death, and will deliver us, He on whom we have set our hope. And He will deliver us. (2 Cor 1:8-10)

There are times when God forces His people to transfer our weight from the uncertain circumstances where we are tempted to stand, in order to set our feet back on the solid foundation of Himself and His promises. These instances always bring about a crisis of faith. Do we believe God’s promises? Are God’s promises reliable, even when circumstances call them into question? When God’s people choose to take refuge in His promises, they find Him present, a very present help in trouble (Ps 46:1). Haman’s plot to destroy the Jews becomes one of those crises that orchestrates a crisis of faith to the Jews of Persia, and especially for Queen Esther. What Esther was forced to wrestle with were the weighty words of Mordecai—had their God placed Esther in a position of authority for such a time, for such a crisis, as this?

Exposition

In this chapter of Esther there is considerable dialogue between Mordecai and Esther, by way of Esther’s eunuch Hathach. While the back and forth interaction between

Mordecai and Esther flows in a normal fashion, the most helpful way to understand the chapter is by way of a chiasmic structure that Barry Davis has suggested.¹

A chiasmic structure, named for the Greek letter, Chi, which is similar to an English X, identifies corresponding layers of ideas in the author's organization of a plot or argument, all building to the main idea in the center of the passage. Davis identifies the passage's central point of the chiasm to be Esther's "excuse for not taking action to resolve the situation" (4:9-12). While our treatment will agree with Davis' on the overall structure and the points leading up to and away from the central thrust, we will characterize Esther's response in verses 9-12 as Esther's crisis of faith. It was Esther's crisis of faith that was responsible for what Davis perceives as an excuse. Correspondingly, the outline of the exposition is shown in the figure below.

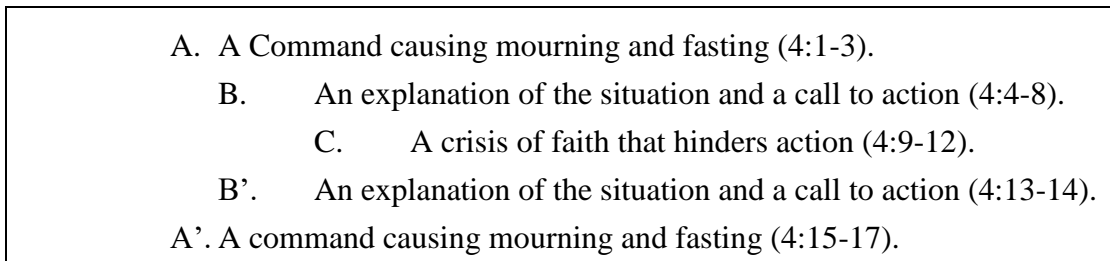


Figure. Chiasmic structure in Esther 4:1-17

A Command Causing Mourning and Fasting (4:1-3)

The issuing in Susa of the destruction command (3:15) must have caused Mordecai to make inquiries of his internal connections in the administration, the same sources that helped him to learn of the earlier assassination plot (2:22). As a result,

¹A. Boyd Luter and Barry C. Davis, *Ruth & Esther: God Behind the Seen*, Focus on the Bible Commentary (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003), 219. Davis authored the treatment of Esther and will alone be referred to henceforth.

Mordecai learned more than what was published, for the text says that he learned “all that had been done” (v. 1). Mordecai’s response to the edict of the future annihilation of his people was the classic cultural demonstration of deep distress and mourning.²

How Mordecai is viewed by a particular commentator – faithful Jew, or assimilated paganized Jew – seem to largely impact how his actions in verses 1-3 are interpreted by that commentator. Often that perspective is not stated outright by each author, but is discernible through their assessment of motives. In this case, the question becomes whether or not God’s presence is elicited through Mordecai’s expressions of public grieving over the recent edict. In other words, was Mordecai crying out to the God of Israel, or simply to gain Esther’s attention, or perhaps both?

A heartfelt response. Without knowing for certain his intended audience, Mordecai’s response certainly seemed heartfelt. Grossman observes that Mordecai’s response was similar in its gut-wrenching sentiment of protest to that of Esau’s when he learned that Jacob had stolen his blessing from Isaac.³ Upon hearing the words of his father, Esau “cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry” (Gen 27:34) (וַיִּצְעַק צָעֶקָה וַיִּבְרַח). In the case of Mordecai, he reacts similarly, when he “wailed loudly and bitterly” (4:1; וַיִּצְעַק צָעֶקָה גְדֹלָה וַיִּבְרַח). Wood indicates that often the verb is used to convey the sense that the subject is “not in summons of another, but an expression of the need felt.”⁴

²Karen Jobes, *Esther*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 131-32. Jobes remarks that this behavior was shared by the Persians, who also tore their clothes in grief upon losing the battle at Salamis to the Greek army.

³Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading*, Siphrut, vol. 6 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 111.

⁴Leon J. Wood, “570 צָעַק,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 248. The distinction between the two verbs in these essentially similar phrases is that צָעַקָה was used earlier, with צָעַק replacing it in later biblical Hebrew.

Given the characters of this story, descendants of Jacob and of Esau, it is likely that the author intends to remind the audience of the origins of this existing ethnic tension.⁵ Animosity between the two peoples did not begin with the attack on the Jews by the Amalekites in the wilderness passage recorded in Exodus 17, but with the stealing of their father's blessing in Genesis. A similar reaction at the reversal of fortunes seems to fit with the story the author is telling. That reversal, and the way that plunder is handled later, compared to the sin of 1 Samuel 15, will continue this theme.

Mordecai tore his clothes, which was often a sign of deep grief in the one who did so. Reuben did so in panic when he found that Joseph was no longer rescuable from the pit into which he and his brothers had thrown Joseph (Gen 37:29). Jacob tore his clothes as a show of his grief over the reported death of Joseph (Gen 37:34). Joshua and Caleb tore their clothes at the cowardly report by their fellow spies regarding the inhabitants of the land (Num 14:6). Josiah, the young king, tore his clothes at the reading of the rediscovered book of Moses, fearing God's displeasure with His people (2 Chr 34:19). Mordecai was experiencing a legitimate despair that he and his people had been singled out for destruction by an ancient enemy who had gained the authority to do so.

A divinely required response. Throughout the history of the Jews in the land, prior to exile, there had been many times when their religious routines lacked the proper heart attitude. By the prophet Isaiah, God condemned Israel's false worship, saying,

“What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?” says the Lord. “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle; and I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats. When you come to appear before Me, who requires of you this trampling of My courts? Bring your worthless offerings no longer, incense is an abomination to Me. New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies – I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly. I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, they have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them, so when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you; yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are covered with blood.” (Isa 1:11-15)

⁵Grossman, *Esther*, 111.

Simply going through the motions of worship without the proper heart attitude was offensive to Israel's God, and His judgment was upon them.

Yet Israel's prophets foretold of a future time, following Israel's exile, when God's favor would revisit them. That return of God's favor would be accompanied by a corresponding zeal in the Jews to relate to their God properly, to call upon Him, to pray to Him, to seek Him with a whole heartedness (Jer 29:12,13). This new intimacy between Israel and her God would happen, Jeremiah prophesied, after the seventy years of exile, but there was no indication in Jeremiah's message of what would cause the Jews to call upon, and seek God fervently. Individually, Daniel had done that before this moment, and Nehemiah after. On a national basis there had been no significant revival recorded.⁶ Perhaps this threat of extermination was just the precipitating even that would force the Jews to recognize their utter dependence upon their God.

Through the prophet Joel, God offered a future hope that if His people returned to Him with the right heart attitude, then perhaps God might hear their heartfelt cries and relent of His judgment. To that end, it is particularly compelling to consider that the author was connecting to just such a hope when, in verse 3, he indicates that "there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing; and many lay on sackcloth and ashes." As Davis remarks, the actions of the Jews here connect to what the prophet Joel held out as the spiritual condition that must mark God's people in order that God might relent of His judgment upon them.⁷ The prophet Joel wrote, "Return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping and mourning" (וּבְצוּם וּבְרִבְבֵי וּבְמִסְפָּד) which

⁶The celebration recorded in Ezra 6 at the observance of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread seems situational and not yet a reflective of the earnest seeking described by Jeremiah. This would be reinforced by the subsequent struggles that motivated Nehemiah to return and provide leadership in Jerusalem.

⁷Davis, *Ruth & Esther*, 222. Davis does not believe, however, that their heart was reflected in their actions.

is precisely what the author indicates was now happening with Jews throughout the Persian empire (וְצוֹם וּבְרָכָה וּמִסְפָּד).

The question that resurfaces here is whether or not the fasting, weeping and mourning is Godward, since God's name is omitted throughout the book. Commentators are divided, yet all struggle to explain what might have been the purpose of fasting if those fasting were not appealing to a higher power outside themselves. In fact, Paton indicates that it was a widely held belief in the Ancient Near East that "these rites ... were believed to be efficacious in turning away divine wrath". He goes on to remark that "nothing is said by the author of any religious significance in Mordecai's conduct, but it can hardly be doubted that this was in his mind."⁸ Thus, one thinks of fasting, when done with the proper attitude, as a drawing near to God in humble dependence, with a contrite, repentant spirit. In defense of a Godward focus to this and the subsequent fasting in the chapter, Levenson remarks,

In Esther, the mention of them (mourning, tearing of clothing, donning sackcloth, putting on ashes, and wailing publicly) and of fasting later in the same chapter (vv. 3 and 16) is as close to traditional religious practices as the book of Esther ever gets, and some have thought that they here serve only as conventional expressions of grief or as a way to capture the queen's attention, rather than as theurgic performances. As the story develops, however, a marvelous set of coincidences does indeed reverse the apparently hopeless plight of the Jews, and it is best to think that the author wants us to suspect that this was indeed partially in response to the extraordinary penitential exercises of Mordecai, Esther, and the rest of the Jewish people.⁹

Thus, it is argued that the hope of God's presence was mediated through His promise to draw near to those who would humble themselves and draw near to him (Jas 4:8).

An Explanation of the Situation and Call to Action (4:4-8)

While Mordecai was a servant of the king, his access to the palace was now

⁸Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, International Critical Commentary (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1908), 214.

⁹Levenson, *Esther*, 78.

limited due to his humble apparel (v. 2). Had Mordecai truly been only concerned with gaining Esther's attention, he would have dispensed with the 'sackcloth and ashes' which made entrance beyond the gates impossible. This is another indication that Mordecai's mourning was not simply for show. Nevertheless, Mordecai's loud and bitter wailing, along with his appearance, became known to Esther through her messengers (v. 4). More than likely Esther was informed by her servants that Mordecai was not alone in his distressed state; others in Susa were unsettled by some recent event and the city was said to be in confusion (3:15).

Despite Esther's being part of the power structure of Persia, it appears that she was not aware of the edict that had been so recently communicated, condemning her people. There is no reason, here, to conclude that Esther's servants were informing her of Mordecai's public outcry because they knew of their kinship. More likely, Esther, being sheltered from much of the goings-on in the busy citadel, was being informed of Mordecai's behavior as the latest gossip.¹⁰

When her maidens and eunuchs informed her of Mordecai's distress, Esther became filled with distress as well. This was no doubt a deep concern that came from learning that her loved one was distraught, and her own feelings of helplessness to prevent his discomfort. The narrator uses a strong expression to indicate Esther's concern, saying that she "writhed in great anguish". The queen was no doubt perplexed regarding what could be so unsettling to Mordecai. Esther's sending garments to clothe Mordecai (v. 5) was not because she was embarrassed by Mordecai's unpleasant behavior, as Fox suggests.¹¹ Instead, Esther seeks to remedy the barrier, the prohibition against sackcloth,

¹⁰Anthony Tomasino, *Esther*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2013), 242.

¹¹Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 59.

that prevents Mordecai from communicating more directly with Esther.¹²

Mordecai refused Esther's attempt to remedy their barrier to communication. This was most likely, as Josephus asserted, because the circumstances causing Mordecai's grieving state had not been resolved, and his people were still facing annihilation.¹³ As a result of Mordecai's refusal, Esther dispatched her attending eunuch, Hathach, to go and learn exactly what was this troubling event that had Mordecai and others so unsettled.

Mordecai wasted no time communicating to Hathach the full extent of what had transpired. He gave Hathach the background to Haman's edict by telling "all that had happened to him," undoubtedly communicating his own refusal to honor Haman, and the pressure he received from his fellow servants (3:3). Mordecai indicated to Hathach the inside information, apparently gained from his informant, of the blood money Haman had pledged as an incentive to Ahasuerus for the permission to destroy Mordecai's people. Finally, Mordecai put a copy of the edict into the hands of the eunuch in order that Esther might see for herself what had been officially communicated throughout the kingdom.

By Mordecai's instructions to show, inform, and order Esther to go to the king (v. 8), he was allowing no uncertainty in what he desired Esther to know and to do as a result of his communication through Hathach. Mordecai was attempting to remove the possibility that there would be any lack of clarity in what he desired for Hathach to impress upon Esther as the necessary actions for her to take.

A Crisis of Faith That Hinders Action (4:9-12)

Mordecai's "order" (v. 8) to the queen seemed fitting given their relationship; Queen Esther was also Mordecai's daughter (2:7). Mordecai might also have assumed

¹²Frederic Bush, *Esther-Ruth* (Dallas: Word, 1996), 394. As Bush points out, the superficiality that Fox charges Esther with "hardly fits with the narrator's positive characterization of her throughout."

¹³Paton, *Esther*, 216.

that Esther possessed the leverage to make such a bold request of the king given that she had won Ahasuerus' heart more than all her competitors (2:17). By her response, however, Esther did not feel herself to be on such firm footing with her husband as Mordecai assumed was the case. She indicated that it had been a full thirty days since she had been intimate with Ahasuerus (v. 11).

This news should have been cause for concern to Mordecai, just as it seemed to concern Esther, for it was well known that the king had a notorious sexual appetite.¹⁴ And in light of this, even as Jobes remarks, it appeared that “five years into her marriage, the king's desire for her has cooled.”¹⁵ Esther's mind raced immediately to palace protocol as a paralyzing concern for approaching her husband unsolicited. As Esther reminded Mordecai through Hathach, it was unlawful for anyone, even the queen, to rush into the king's presence without being summoned (v. 11). While it was possible that the one doing so might receive special favor and gain an audience with the king, there was no guarantee of this happening. Given their cool relationship over that past month, Esther was not confident that she would be received. If, by chance, the king did not hold out the golden scepter signifying reception of her unexpected visit, by law Esther would be put to death.

Esther was experiencing a crisis of faith. As a later biblical writer stated, it is impossible to please God without faith (Heb 11:6). The Hebrew Scriptures were replete with statements demonstrating God's sovereign hand in the circumstances of His people. It was God's providential hand that Esther had witnessed in granting her favor with Hegai in the beauty contest (2:9), and it was God's sovereign hand that turned the king's affections toward her, making her his queen (2:17). Nevertheless, could God give Esther

¹⁴Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 432. Kaiser indicates that following his military loss to the Greeks in 479, Ahasuerus turned to a life of indulgence that was largely focused upon sexual encounters, which would have included the events recorded in Esther 2. Ultimately Kaiser writes that the king was killed by a jealous husband within his inner circle.

¹⁵Jobes, *Esther*, 132.

favor with her husband in the matter at hand? Would God deliver Esther from the possibility of execution due to a presumptuous visit? Moreover, did Esther have enough clout to convince her husband, the king, to overturn the recent death decree?

Esther's fear is not foreign to us. Our own fears of a worst case scenario can grip our hearts in some dangerous situation, especially when we are dealing with fallen humanity. What's more, as in this situation for Esther, it is not necessarily that our fears are unfounded – sometimes we have legitimate concerns. While Davis, as mentioned before, may characterize Esther's objection to Mordecai's direction as an excuse, with other commentators believing Esther was being selfish, their opinions don't change the fact that there was a legal prohibition that she was confronting.¹⁶ Not to mention that Esther may have felt vulnerable due to the lack of recent contact with her husband. And yet, this is precisely when the believer must rehearse the biblical truths about God's ability to influence others for His own purposes and glory.¹⁷

Prior to Esther's time, God had worked in a remarkably similar way to place individuals from her people, Joseph and Moses, inside Gentile administrations, elevating them to positions of influence. In both of these prior instances, God had elevated them for the ultimate purpose of delivering the Jews. Esther's reflection on this redemptive pattern would have helped her in the midst of this crisis of faith to focus less upon the obstacles that loomed large, and more upon the God who is able to influence hearts and circumstances for His purposes.

As we consider God's presence through His promises, Esther's fears eclipsed an awareness of God's presence, much like the moon does to the sun at certain times. At this particular moment it must have seemed to Esther that Israel's God was not present in

¹⁶Davis, *Ruth & Esther*, 227.

¹⁷One thinks of statements like Prov 16:7, wherein God is able to favorably incline the hearts of those who might normally be in opposition to an individual, for God's ultimate purposes.

the crisis at hand. But just as the sun is still shining despite the moon blocking its brightness, God was still present while the circumstances of fear and death prevented the warmth of His presence from being felt. Thus, Esther, gripped by fear rather than God's promises to His covenant people, sent word back to Mordecai that she was prevented by palace protocol from honoring his plan of action. Esther's message was taken back to him by Hathach.¹⁸

An Explanation of the Situation and a Call to Action (4:13-14)

When Mordecai received Esther's reply he wasted no time in responding, and doing so in a way that might help Esther grasp the dire situation that they and their people faced. While Esther had indicated that appearing unsolicited before Ahasuerus carried for her the risk of execution, Mordecai reinforced that self-preservation was not an option.

God's presence is most palpable in this response by Mordecai to Esther. Mordecai responded in a way that indicated that he had an unwavering confidence in God's deliverance. Mordecai's confident rebuke of Esther's timidity in the face of her fears is considered to be the most significant statement of the story:

Do not imagine that you in the king's palace can escape any more than all the Jews. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this (Esth 4:13-14)?

While Mordecai doesn't specifically mention Israel's God as the power behind his people's sure salvation from the death edict, it seems clear that the promises of God toward Israel are Mordecai's surety. God had promised that Agag would be subservient to Israel (Num 24:7), and would ultimately be destroyed (Num 24:20) – promises

¹⁸Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 395. In a somewhat perplexing change, the narrator indicates that "they" returned Esther's message to Mordecai, rather than the expected "he" referring to Hathach, who had been the sole mediator thus far. Bush argues that the use of the indefinite subject is purposeful, and functions as the passive voice.

guaranteeing Israel's deliverance.¹⁹ God had promised a Messiah, the seed of the woman, who would trace his lineage through Abraham, and David, ultimately receiving an eternal throne (Gen 3:15; 12:1-3; 2 Sam 7:13) – a promise not yet fulfilled, thus guaranteeing Israel's deliverance. God had promised to restore Mordecai's people to the land, and to affect a spiritual awakening as a nation (Ezek 36:24-28) – a promise not yet fulfilled, thus guaranteeing Israel's deliverance. God had promised to not only restore Israel, but also to draw the nations to Himself (Isa 49:5-7) – a promise not yet fulfilled, thus guaranteeing Israel's deliverance. These are only a few of the many promises of God whose fulfillment was still waiting, and their fulfillment was certain, not because of Israel's worthiness, but for the vindication of God's holy name (Ezek 36:22-23).

Mordecai reinforced to Esther that while she was concerned for her own potential demise if Ahasuerus were to reject her impromptu appearance, her position in the palace did not exempt her from Haman's edict. In fact, Mordecai predicted that she too would perish if she were to do nothing. In other words, Mordecai was indicating that if she wanted to save herself, she must act.

There are various interpretations of how it was that Mordecai could speak with certainty about Esther's own destruction if she were to do nothing. The views range from a veiled threat by Mordecai to the thought that God's judgment would be meted out upon Esther for her cowardice.²⁰ Yet the meaning behind Mordecai's prediction may easily be explained by the reality that Esther's ethnicity had now been exposed through the

¹⁹This reference to Agag, long before the time that Saul led Israel against King Agag and the Amalekites in 1 Sam 15, and certainly long before Esther's day, has caused some confusion. Most likely, Agag in Num 24 is a reference to "a dynastic name among the Amalekites." Dennis R. Cole, *Numbers*, The New American Commentary, vol. 38 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman 2000), 420.

²⁰Jobes, *Esther*, 134. Jobes notes that Ronald Pierce takes the view that Mordecai is threatening Esther, to not simply expose her as kinsman, but to actually kill her. See Ronald W. Pierce, "The Politics of Esther and Mordecai," *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 2 (1992): 87. Jobes contrasts this view with the other option of divine judgment, but believes that the author of Esther "leaves the reader with tantalizing ambiguity."

interaction she and Mordecai were having through Hathach – a eunuch of the king’s and therefore, one would assume, in the service of the king and bound to his edict.

Mordecai, however, was confident that the promise keeping God of Israel would deliver Mordecai’s people. And to that end he suggested that if Esther was unwilling to use her position and influence to plead for her people, then God would deliver through another means. Mordecai used the phrase “from another place,” most likely to be indefinite in where that deliverance would come, in spite of his confidence that deliverance would come. Rather than seeing Mordecai’s statement as a reference to “some other means,” some commentators have understood this to be the most direct allusion to Israel’s God. Behind this view is the fact that in some rabbinical teachings God is referred to as “the Place.”²¹ Bush refutes this, however, asserting that the inclusion of the adjective ‘another’ would translate to “another God” which would be unacceptable.²² It should be satisfactory to recognize that Mordecai’s confidence in God’s deliverance was so great that if Esther refused to use her influence, then God was not limited in His means of deliverance.

Nevertheless, in as strong a statement of God’s providential work as one might hope for where God was not openly referenced, Mordecai suggested that it was worth considering that Esther was now presented with the very circumstances that might explain why God’s sovereign hand had placed her on the throne. Mordecai prefaced his motivational statement with the words “who knows” (מִי יוֹדֵעַ), a phrase used in several other key instances in which God’s mercy is the focus of the hope stated (2 Sam 12:22; Jonah 3:9; Joel 2:12). The most relevant of these is the connection to Joel’s prophecy referenced earlier. According to Joel, if God’s people would return to Him with all their heart, with fasting, weeping and mourning, if they would rend their hearts and not simply their garments, then “who knows if God might not turn and relent” (Joel 2:12-14). This

²¹Jobes, *Esther*, 133.

²²Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 396.

was a hope that carried with it the potential of God's presence, and the possibility of His protection and deliverance of Esther's people. This was a hope for just such a desperate time.

Each of us needs believers like Mordecai in our life. Mordecai represents those individuals who, when our fears have eclipsed the fullness of the light of God's presence, they come alongside us to help us lay hold of the light that is still visible. The 'Mordecai's' of the faith help us to cling to the promises of God when we've been tempted to let go of them because of our blinding fears. And not only do we need the 'Mordecai's', but we want to strive to be like him to others whom God has placed in our lives. Knowledge of God's word, and maturity in believing the promises of God despite the circumstances are what enable us to be like Mordecai for others.

A Command Causing Mourning and Fasting (4:15-17)

Esther, by virtue of Mordecai's having clarified the situation, and giving her a sense of God's presence in her life, a sense of God's divine hand, was emboldened to make a plea for her people. Because of Mordecai's confidence in God's certain deliverance of their people, Esther determined to play what seemed to be the part God had written for her, rather than play the spectator. And where before Mordecai had ordered Esther on what she was to do, Esther seemed now to embrace her own opportunity and authority, and she gave orders to Mordecai on what he and others must do.

Esther commanded Mordecai and all Jews in Susa to fast for her, abstaining from both food and drink for three days, indicating that she also, with her maidens would do the same (v. 16). Following that fast, Esther committed to going unannounced to the king.

Just as Joel called for the blow of the trumpet, signaling for God's people often a call to gathering, Esther told Mordecai to assemble all who were in Susa in order to fast on Esther's behalf (v. 16). As Jobes remarks, "whether Esther was mindful of Joel's

prophecy or not, she in effect ‘blows the trumpet in Zion,’ commanding Mordecai to call a fast for all the Jews of Susa, to see if the Lord may relent from sending this calamity on her people.”²³

While Israel’s God is not mentioned in this fast, nor the earlier mentioned fast of the chapter, Jobes quotes Richard Hays as asserting that when a text “echoes” another prior text, it carries with that echo the “unstated or suppressed (transumed) points of resonance between the two texts.”²⁴ In this case, Esther’s fast, in connecting to the demands of Joel 2:12-14, it is argued, would carry with it the Godward focus of Joel’s words.

Some commentators assume that because Esther does not mention prayer to the God of Israel in the context of this fast, that there is no intended spiritual orientation to the fasting. Davis is among those exemplary of this sentiment, quoting Paton in agreement as follows: “No religious enthusiasm lights up Esther’s resolve. She goes [to the king] as one would submit to an operation, because there is a chance of escaping death in that way.”²⁵ Davis continues in this line of thinking, “All other options have been taken away from her, and what is left seemingly forces her into her worst nightmare. All things considered, Esther’s declaration is an expression of resignation, not of courage.”²⁶

What Davis and others fail to explain is how Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews of Persia would have justified the efficacy of depriving one’s self of food in this case, if it were not to seek their God. What, would have been the value of fasting for one day, not to mention three days, night and day, in this case (v. 16).

Finally, just as Hays argues that Joel’s context is carried into Esther’s fast, so also Joel’s “who knows” is carried in with Mordecai’s statement. Thus, it should be

²³Jobes, *Esther*, 137.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 135.

²⁵Paton, *Esther*, 226.

²⁶Davis, *Ruth & Esther*, 239.

understood that Esther's final conclusion, stated as "If I perish, I perish," must not be seen as resignation, but rather appealing to the same possibility that God would relent of the giving of Israel, His people, over to Haman's evil edict.

Conclusion

It has been observed by some that between Esther's coronation and the dialogue of chapter 4, there had developed a distance between Esther and Mordecai, between Esther and her Jewish people. Esther, for the majority of this dialogue, seemed more Persian than Jewish, notably represented by Esther's ignorance of the news that caused all other Jews to enter into fasting, weeping, and wailing. Yet, this chapter also marked a return to her people. As Mordecai confronted Esther regarding her unique, God-given access to influence the king and plead for her people, Esther moved from hiding her association with the people of God, to being willing to die for their deliverance.

It has also been noted that this appeal for Esther to go before the king invites an analogy with Moses in the Exodus account. As Moses went to Pharaoh, so Esther was to go before Ahasuerus to plead on behalf of God's people.²⁷ This comparison reminds of what is said of Moses by the author of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews:

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward. (Heb 11:24-26)

Moreover, Moses' example corresponds to the prophet like him (Deut 18:18), Jesus our Lord, who was not ashamed to call his people brethren (Heb. 2:11). Having left the glories of heaven, Jesus humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death on the cross (Phil 2:8). Like Esther, and Moses before her, Jesus did so for that his people might live.

²⁷Levenson, *Esther*, 79.

CHAPTER 6

ESTHER RISES TO THE CHALLENGE

The risen Lord Jesus appeared to two disheartened disciples on a road leading from Jerusalem to Emmaus on the third day following his death. Thinking that Jesus the Nazarene's ministry had fallen short of redemptive expectations when it had ended on a cross, they expressed their confusion that there were rumors of sightings. What's more, Jesus' body was missing from the tomb where he had been laid to rest. At that point in the conversation, the resurrected Jesus began to share with these disciples the "things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27).

One wonders if Esther's example was part of that explanation. How Esther, though royalty, was willing to sacrifice her high status in order to identify with her people. How Esther was willing to lay down her life in an effort to save her people from certain destruction. How Esther, in a similar manner after 3 days of affliction, presented herself to the king on behalf of her people.¹ Whether Esther rises to the stature of a type of Christ, or something less with compelling parallels in the story, Esther's story is part of a canon of Scripture that continually reminds God's people that apart from God's intervention, his people have no hope of redemption.

Context

The reader senses a turning point of sorts. Esther had voiced concern about the

¹Michael G. Wechsler, "Shadow and Fulfillment in the Book of Esther," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (1997): 280-83. Wechsler portrays Esther as a type of Jesus, arguing that their "humiliation" commenced and ended similarly in proximity to the Passover, both put on royalty at the conclusion, and both presented themselves to the king on behalf of their people.

legal prohibition against an unsolicited appearance before the king, with the potential of execution for doing so. However, Mordecai had exhorted Esther that quite possibly this annihilation threat that faced her people was the very reason that she had acceded to the Persian throne. Just as Israel's God had placed their ancestor, Joseph, in a position of influence within a gentile nation many years before in order to preserve Israel, perhaps Esther had "attained royalty for such a time as this" (5:14). With that challenge, Esther determined to fast, in concert with the rest of the Jews of Susa, and then approach the king, come what may, to plead for her people.

Main Idea

Esther risked potential execution for an unsolicited appearance before her husband, the king, in order to plead for her people, the Jews. Esther demonstrated selflessness and humility, while Haman manifests selfishness and pride.

Exposition

The drama of the story increased significantly, as Esther took some significant risks on behalf of her people, and Haman schemed to destroy Mordecai ahead of the wholesale annihilation of the Jews. To that end, we will break the drama into two movements. In the first movement, Esther set her plan of redemption into motion (Esther 5:1-8). In the second movement, Haman devised Mordecai's destruction based upon vindictive emotions (Esther 5:9-14).

Esther's Redemption Set into Motion (5:1-8)

Long before Ahasuerus' reign, Herodotus tells of the Median king, Deioces, having put into effect a law that forbade unscheduled visitors to the king. According to Herodotus, the law was enacted primarily to keep the king from becoming commonplace

to others, in the fear that this would encourage rebellion.² Accordingly, by the time of Ahasuerus, the protocol to be followed would have been to request an audience through one of the king's eunuchs. According to one source, there were seven of the king's close associates of the court, the king's "Friends" as they were called, who were permitted to come unannounced into his presence, unless he was sleeping with a woman.³

Esther Appeared Unannounced before the King (5:1-2)

Despite palace protocol, Esther went unannounced before her husband, the king, in the wake of a Susa-wide fasting by the Jews. If we recall what was stated in the text, in chapter one, "the laws of Persia and Media ... cannot be repealed" (1:19), then one might only wonder what recourse Esther believed she could have as she went into the king's throne room. Recalling that Daniel faced the enforcement of the same irrevocable nature of the law, being thrown into the lion's den, and yet protected by God's angels, may have brought encouragement to Esther. Nevertheless, Esther's uninvited visit was punishable by death, unless she found the king in good spirits, willing to receive her. Given it had been thirty days since Ahasuerus had summoned Esther to himself (4:11), that was an uncertainty.

Esther approached on the third day (5:1). For the ancient Jewish audience, the author's emphasis of the phrase "on the third day," was likely to bring a needed sense of hope, perhaps for several reasons. First, the "third day" time frame was a connection to the hope offered by Hosea's prophecy, "Come, let us return to the Lord, for He has torn us, but He will heal us; He has wounded us, but He will bandage us. He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day that we may live before Him" (Hosea

²Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus*, in *Great Works of the Western World*, vol. 6, ed. Robert Maynard Hitchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 1.99.

³Jobes, *Esther*, 132.

6:1-2). Certainly the hope was that Haman's evil edict would not end in the destruction of the Jews, and the time-phrase reminded of that hope. Secondly, the "third day" reference connected the reader to significant moments of God's past redemptive work. Notable was the connection to God's redemption of Isaac (Gen. 22:4) and of Jonah (Jon. 1:17). Supporting this assertion is the later Jewish teaching on this very passage of Esther that asserted that "Israel are [sic] never left in dire distress more than three days."⁴

For the Jewish reader there was another important connection triggered by the "on the third day" reference, one that was especially applicable to this context of exile. As the Jewish patriarch Jacob was making an exodus from years of exile back to Canaan, he was pursued by Laban, his father in law. Jacob sought to put some distance between his slow traveling family, and Laban, who desired to prevent Jacob from leaving with that which Laban believed was his – daughters, grandchildren, and livestock. Knowledge of Jacob's departure eluded Laban's discovery until "it was told Laban on the third day that Jacob had fled" (Gen. 31:22). That head start appears to have been divinely enabled, as God also communicated to Laban in a dream that he was not to prevent Jacob from leaving. Thus, the time phrase connected Esther's readers with God's work of protection over His people in exile in the past.

Esther put on royalty (5:1). In what is very likely an allusion to Mordecai's earlier challenge to Esther, "And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time at this?" (4:14), we are told that Esther, more literally, "put on royalty" (v. 1). The trappings of royalty are, practically speaking, the royal apparel and crown that outwardly communicate royalty. Esther undoubtedly removed any garments of fasting and mourning from the previous two days in order to go before Ahasuerus. Thus, where the word 'robes' is appropriately supplied in our English translations, the author most

⁴Jobes, *Esther*, 146. Jobes also mentions a "Jewish tradition that the dead will come to life only after three days from the start of the final judgment." *Ibid.*, 146-47.

likely intends to send a deeper meaning than the addition makes clear. What the reader is intended to understand is that Esther rose to Mordecai's challenge. If, indeed, Esther had attained to royalty for such a time as this, she accepted that same royalty in both regalia and opportunity to influence.⁵ As Levenson concludes, "we see Esther the beauty queen giving way to Esther the true queen, willing to intercede with the king to prevent an unnecessary killing."⁶

Esther obtained favor (5:2). In this first of what will be several moments of truth, Esther, having put on royalty and approaching the king on the third day, 'obtained,' or won, favor. The narrator uses the Hebrew word, *נָחַם*, generally used as 'pleasing' but here used to imply favor, as also used in the case of Noah with God (Gen. 6:8), and Joseph with Potiphar (Gen. 39:4).⁷ Something more in the expression "obtained favor" (5:2, *נָחַם הַמֶּלֶךְ*) intends to emphasize that the favor Esther received from the king was more about Esther, and less about the king, for she 'won' his favor, rather than 'found' favor.⁸ Perhaps this was owing to the principle taught in the Hebrew wisdom literature, "When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Prov. 16:7). The point here is that God is able to influence others to favor His people, as He wills. The king's favor was expressed by his extending to Esther the golden scepter, to which Esther came near to touch the top.

⁵Adele Berlin, *Esther*, The JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 52.

⁶Jon D. Levenson, *Esther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 89.

⁷Anthony Tomasino, *Esther*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2013), 258.

⁸Levenson, *Esther*, 89. *נָחַם הַמֶּלֶךְ* translates "lifted up favor." Levenson observes that Esther's winning or obtaining favor was due to a mysterious charm she exerted on key individuals. Frederic Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 9 (Dallas: Word, 1996), 404, notes that the narrator uses the active expression rather than the more passive expression that Esther, herself, uses in 5:8.

Esther Hosted a Banquet (5:3-8)

Ahasuerus' favor was further expressed by his taking what seemed to be a genuine concern about what had motivated Esther's unsummoned visit.⁹ And perhaps to erase any doubt of his concern due to Esther's break with protocol, the king honored Esther's request in advance by use of the expression of expansive benevolence, "And what is your request? Even to half of the kingdom it shall be given to you" (5:3).

Esther invited the king and Haman (5:4-5). Many wonder why Esther did not plead for her people in that moment, with what seemed like a guarantee of any request (5:3). The historian Herodotus clarifies what was likely behind Esther's motivation to host a banquet. According to Herodotus, in the Persian culture it was nearly impossible to refuse any person's request made at a Persian banquet.¹⁰ This cultural etiquette explains why Esther had already prepared the first banquet. This is evident from her invitation, "may the king and Haman come this day to the banquet that I *have prepared for him*" (5:4, emphasis added).

It also is surprising that Esther invited Haman to the banquet. We are not told why, and there are various theories offered. Jewish rabbis later would argue that Esther's aim was to make her husband jealous of Haman, and thus more willing to have Haman killed at the proper time.¹¹ Other interesting opinions for this surprise move of inviting the enemy to the party focus more on keeping Haman in Esther's sights, preventing him

⁹Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 281, argues that the concern expressed in the question "What is troubling you" is justified by the grammar; however, Bush believes that context dictates whether this is so. Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 404, believes the emphasis is less on concern, and more on simply learning what Esther's request is.

¹⁰Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading*, Siphrut, vol. 6 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 126.

¹¹Tomasino, *Esther*, 260. Tomasino concludes that this idea has little to commend it. Grossman, *Esther*, 129-31, however, finds this idea of invoking jealousy as a possible explanation for Haman's invitation to both banquets, as well as the reason Ahasuerus was unable to sleep later than night.

from learning of the queen's connection to Mordecai, as well as generally keeping Haman's mood light and gay with wine. All of these seem possible. Given that Esther has already prepared a banquet to which she invites both the king and Haman seems to be an indication that she is fully in control with a plan for redemption that she has set into motion.¹²

True to his expressed concern, Ahasuerus accepted the Esther's invitation. The king also commanded that Haman be summoned to the prepared banquet as Esther had requested. Ahasuerus likely assumed that Esther would make her request at the banquet, and he had already indicated his desire to grant her request. His eagerness, as indicated in the command to bring Haman quickly, demonstrated that Ahasuerus desired to know what the queen would request of him (5:5).

Esther obtained advanced favor for her request (5:6). As in chapter 1, the wine flowed at the banquet that Esther hosted for the king and Haman. This is indicated by the author's description of the banquet as literally a "wine banquet" (5:6). With his heart glad from the wine (Ps. 104:15), and with a predisposed desire to grant Esther's request (5:3), the king inquired for the second time that day what Esther would request of him. Again, the virtual guarantee of Esther's request being granted was communicated by the phrase, "it shall be granted to you. . . . Even to half of the kingdom it shall be done" (5:6). This was essentially advanced favor for Esther's request.

Esther invited her guests to a second banquet (5:7-8). With what seemed to be a guarantee of having her request granted, however she might approach the matter, Esther took an approach unexpected by the reader. She did not make her request that evening, but instead Esther invited both men to a banquet the next day.

¹²Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 72-73.

Some have concluded, on the basis of Esther's response in verse 8, that Esther was as surprised by her response as the king likely was. They liken Esther's reply to the equivalent of stuttering, out of sudden fear, or a sense that the timing wasn't right to plead for her people, and against Haman's plot.¹³ Others have concluded that the second banquet was a literary device, a necessity to make room in the story for the things that took place that night. But that approach equates the story to something less than historical, simply to explain what is not explained by the narrator.

The invitation to the second banquet served Esther by causing the king's curiosity to be heightened to the point of being unable to refuse the offer.¹⁴ What is more, by the way that Esther had worded her invitation to the second banquet, she had nearly forced the king's granting of whatever request she would make there by his presence. In other words, the whole purpose of the second banquet would be to finally hear and grant that request of Esther's that the king had already promised with words, "even to half of the kingdom it shall be done" (5:6).¹⁵

What the Christian sees in Esther's unfolding plan is wisdom from God. We have, really, an illustration of what the New Testament book of James promises:

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But he must ask in faith without doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (Jas 1:5-8)

We should understand Esther's fasting as precisely what fasting is understood to be in the true biblical sense – a seeking of God's wisdom and favor. And we should not then be

¹³Rabbi Ibn Ezra believed that Esther did not see a sign from God that night, and therefore she scheduled a second banquet to await such a sign. However, Grossman rejects this view because this would put Esther in a loop of continued banquets until such a sign from God was evident. Nevertheless, Grossman, *Esther*, 128-29, does lay hold of the basis of Ibn Ezra's view that this was a spontaneous and awkward response because Esther chose to procrastinate.

¹⁴Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 73.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

surprised that Esther was following a plan devised according to the wisdom that God had given her in response to her request, as well as the request of others on her behalf (4:16).

Haman's Vengeance Hurried by Emotions (5:9-14)

From the reader's vantage point, the first of Esther's banquets ends with only uncertainty. Why did Esther choose to delay her plea on behalf of her people, the Jews? Why has Haman been invited to both the first and the subsequent banquet scheduled for the next day? We might also wonder whether the king might be in a less favorable disposition the following day, or if Haman might possibly discover Esther's connection to Mordecai and the Jews. In fact, as this fifth chapter closes out, circumstances will only get more dire for Mordecai, who will go from having some eleven months to live, to possibly less than a day, if Haman secures permission for vengeance.

Haman Went from Glad to Mad in an Instant (5:9)

One experience that is virtually universal to the human condition is to have one's emotions changed from happy to sad, or from glad to mad, in an instant. In only as long as it takes to learn of some personal misfortune or disappointment, our spirit can be brought from a soaring height to a disheartened low. So it was with the recently elevated Haman, the enemy of the Jews (3:10). Everything seemed to be going his way, from winning authority to exterminate the Jewish population of Persia, to being on the most exclusive guest list at Queen Esther's banquets.

Appearance of esteem made Haman glad (5:9a). Haman departed from the first 'wine banquet' on an emotional high. What seemed to him as a vote of confidence from Queen Esther, having been included at that intimate banquet, gave Haman the appearance of esteem from both the queen and king.

The narrator indicates that Haman left in an emotional state familiar to the Jewish reader: "glad and pleased of heart" (שִׂמְחָה וְטוֹב לֵב). This phrase would serve to

remind the audience of a better day when the presence of Israel's God was manifested to them in the dedication of Solomon's Temple. Following those days of feasting and dedication, the people departed for their homes, just as Haman was departing for his, being "joyful and glad of heart" (שְׂמֵחִים וְטוֹבֵי לֵב, 1 Kgs 8:66). Yet it would also serve as a reminder to the Jewish audience that Esther's story was set in exile, far from the former Temple because after Solomon's day the Jewish people refused to serve their God with "joy and a glad heart" (בְּשִׂמְחָה וּבְטוֹב לֵבָב, Deut 28:47).¹⁶

Thus, there is a subtle contrast drawn for the reader between what rightly should make the heart glad – the presence and favor of the true King, God - and the wisdom of Haman, who is so enamored with the esteem of a fickle king and his queen (5:11-12).¹⁷

Lack of esteem made Haman mad (5:9b). Haman left the presence of the royal couple joyfully looking forward to the next day's banquet. But as soon as he saw his nemesis Mordecai, his glad heart was filled with anger. It was not simply the sight of Mordecai that enraged Haman, but Mordecai's continued defiance of the king's command to bow down and pay homage to Haman.

Some might think that Mordecai made matters worse for himself by bearing down on his refusal to honor Haman at this point.¹⁸ Thus, it is helpful to remind ourselves of the context of Mordecai's continued refusal to honor Haman as commanded by the king. Reflecting on the fact that Mordecai had shared with Hathach, eunuch of the king, all that had happened leading up to the edict of annihilation (4:7), it could be said that

¹⁶Grossman, *Esther*, 132-33.

¹⁷Ibid., 133. Also Levenson, *Esther*, 91-92.

¹⁸Levenson, *Esther*, 92. Surprisingly Levenson writes, "In fairness to Haman, Mordecai does seem to have escalated his noncompliance. Whereas before he had only refused to prostrate himself (3:2-5), now he neither rises nor stirs on account of the prime minister." This statement is shocking given that Mordecai, more than any, understands that the death edict is a direct consequence of Haman's hatred for Mordecai and the Jews. Why Levenson would now expect Mordecai to comply is beyond understanding, and it again forgets that Haman is not simply Israel's ancient enemy, but God's also.

none in Susa understood Haman's animosity toward Mordecai more than Mordecai. So, we should not be surprised that Mordecai, knowing that Haman is behind the decree, does not begin to honor Haman.

It almost seems surprising that Haman had such a powerfully mood-altering response, given that Mordecai's doom is sealed by the recent decree. Yet it speaks to Haman's character that the issue of esteem from others was such a controlling aspect of his heart. And the lack of esteem, even from one who should have been expected to hate him, sends Haman to the depths of anger and disenchantment.

This spirit of rivalry can be the downfall of those who refuse to seek their approval in God alone. Haman had just left the presence of the king, whose approval had elevated him over all other princes in the land. And yet allowing his mind to move to what should have been of lesser importance – the honor of Mordecai – caused a spirit of bitterness that led to the desire to kill. So also it was with Cain, who refused to seek the approval of God alone – approval that was attainable if met with willingness – and instead focused upon the bitterness of rivalry with Abel, to a murderous conclusion (Gen 4:1-15).

Haman Identified Mordecai as His Barrier to Joy (5:10-13)

Where the esteem of the king, and the appearance of esteem from Esther, had made the heart of Haman glad, the lack of esteem from even a hated foe made Haman mad. While Haman may have desired to deal with Mordecai on the spot, instead the narrator records that Haman controlled himself (5:10). He traveled back to his house and immediately Haman surrounded himself with those whom he felt sure cared for him, his friends (אֲרֵיכָהֶן) and Zeresh, his wife.

Initially, it seems that Haman showed wisdom by gathering a multitude of counselors. The Hebrew wisdom literature of Proverbs reinforces how with many counselors, plans succeed (Prov 15:22) and that an abundance of counselors brings victory (Prov 11:14). This is proverbial wisdom, of course, and is not a guarantee of a

certain outcome. Rather it underscores the need to humbly seek the counsel of advisors, and to not be a law unto one's self.

However, there is also a sense in which the proverbs of the Hebrew Bible are assuming that there are some who fear God in the mix of counselors, which was not the case within Haman's coterie. What's more, one familiar with the history of Israel prior to this moment is also familiar with the way in which Israel's God was more than able to influence and frustrate the counsel of the wicked to effect the outcome of said counsel. This being the case, the narrator tells of the meeting that Haman called with his wife and friends.

Haman recounted the many blessings that should satisfy him (5:11-12).

Haman reviewed for his gathered audience the abundance that was his, "the glory of his riches and the number of his sons" (5:11). At this point in the story, this is new information to the reader, but it was obviously familiar to those close to Haman.

According to his own assessment, Haman was a wealthy man. Possibly that reality was what had given assurance to Ahasuerus that Haman could honor the pledge he had made to add ten thousand talents to the king's treasuries as a bounty for destroying the Jews (3:9). Beyond wealth measured in monetary standards, Haman had been blessed with a 'multitude' of sons (וְרַב בְּנָיו), ten we are told later (9:10). As was common in many ancient cultures, including the Jewish culture of the Bible, children were considered a blessing on par with monetary wealth.¹⁹ It wasn't that Zeresh and Haman's friends were unfamiliar with the external blessings that were Haman's. Instead, Haman is building a case for how one so blessed by the world's standards should experience the satisfaction corresponding to those blessings.

¹⁹Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 74. Fox references Herodotus' indication that this was especially a Persian perspective (Herodotus, 1:136).

Beyond these measures of blessing, Haman recounted how he also enjoyed the blessing of power and prominence, having been promoted above all others in Persia, second only to the king (5:11). And that very day Haman had been the only invited dignitary at the royal couple's banquet. That honor, Haman proudly announced to his wife and confidants, would be repeated the following day as well. What more could an individual hope for or desire?

Haman pointed to the one thing that stole his joy (5:13). Yet there was one thing, Haman confided, that was robbing him from experiencing the satisfaction commensurate with all of that blessing. It was the sight of Mordecai each time Haman saw him "sitting at the king's gate" (5:13). It is important to understand that what is implied by Haman's words, "sitting at the king's gate" was the active service in the king's administration. Haman was galled each time he considered that Mordecai the Jew, he who refused to give Haman the esteem he so terribly craved, was still actively serving under Haman, and would be until the death decree was carried out.

As Michael Fox has observed from this scene (5:9-14), "Haman displays his bloated pride and his obsession with Mordecai's lack of deference."²⁰ Fox believes that the reason Mordecai is able to rob Haman of the satisfaction of all his many blessings is as follows:

He [Haman] has not forced Mordecai to recognize his power. Nor is Mordecai's impending death a sufficient personal triumph for Haman, because the Jew can still withhold fear and thus trivialize the power Haman does have. . . . If Mordecai continues to defy him for the next eleven months, his defiance will endure as a victory that mere murder cannot expunge. Haman's domination must be absolute and it must be universally recognized, otherwise he cannot believe in it himself.²¹

The implication of all of this for Haman, as it stood that evening, was that he would be attending Esther's follow-up banquet the next day, yet unable to enjoy it as he

²⁰Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 178.

²¹Ibid. 179-80.

believed he ought, all because of Mordecai's visible disregard. Mordecai the Jew stood between Haman and Haman's enjoyment of his many blessings and prominence.

**Haman's Counselors Advised
Eliminating Mordecai for
Haman's Joy (5:14)**

Haman was, by all estimates, a capable and accomplished individual. By his own admission he had amassed significant wealth (v. 11). By his promotion over all the princes and servants of the king (v. 11) he had proven himself capable in the eyes of Ahasuerus. By his shrewd conniving Haman had negotiated the extermination of his enemy Mordecai and the Jewish people (4:8-9). All of this points to the competency of Haman in many facets of life, and all of this makes it all the more surprising that Haman allowed Mordecai's disrespect to be so debilitating. Powerful Haman was brought to a point of weakness, to the point of needing to gather his wife and others for counsel on how to handle Mordecai. As one commentator has concluded, "[t]heir solution turns out to be staggeringly simple – kill Mordecai!"²²

Haman's counselors encouraged him to hang Mordecai (5:14a). The narrator reports that Zeresh gave voice to the counsel of Haman's counselors. Haman's wife and friends suggested that a gallows be conscripted by Haman, and that Mordecai be hanged after receiving the king's approval first thing the next morning. This quick plan addressed the concern of his counselors that their beloved Haman would be free to truly enjoy Esther's banquet later that next day.

As Zeresh conspired to solve what could be characterized as childish sulking by her husband, there is a strong hint being given to the Jewish reader regarding both the character and the outcome of this husband and wife duo. This scene of Esther's drama

²²Grossman, *Esther*, 134.

has more than a faint echo of an earlier Hebrew narrative involving a wicked king of Israel, Ahab, and his wife Jezebel (1 Kgs 21:1-24).²³ Like Haman, Ahab was childishly pouting over being refused something also – the vineyard of Naboth. Like Zeresh, Jezebel’s solution was to kill the denier, Naboth. Ahab’s weak character was on display, and the correspondence conveys the same of Haman. What is more, Ahab’s wickedness was condemned by God through Elisha, and his doom prophesied. The similarity in the current drama would likely cause the Jewish reader familiar with Ahab’s judgment to suspect that Haman’s demise is being hinted at.

Haman was pleased by the counsel and acted (5:14b). Just as Jezebel encouraged Ahab to let his heart be joyful in light of her plan, Zeresh suggested that Haman’s joy would be restored in Haman’s hanging. The advice from Haman’s ‘Jezebel’ was pleasing and Haman acted immediately. Using his power and authority he conscripted the gallows be made, not just any gallows, but one that was fifty cubits, some seventy-five feet high. Most conclude that the exaggerated size of the gallows was due to Haman’s ego and the desire to belittle Mordecai in death.²⁴

Jonathan Grossman is very helpful in understanding the purpose behind having Mordecai hanged. He points to the earlier executions of Bigthan and Teresh, the two disgruntled officials who attempted to assassinate King Ahasuerus who were both hanged on a gallows. Grossman argues that Zeresh’s intent was to have Mordecai executed in the same ignominious fashion as those men who were earlier known to be traitors.²⁵ Haman,

²³Jobes, *Esther*, 145.

²⁴Tomasino, *Esther*, 272. Tomasino, however, sides with those who conclude that the instrument of execution was a “pike” rather than gallows.

²⁵Grossman, *Esther*, 135-40. Grossman compellingly bases his assertions on intent by identifying literary units in the narrative. He, like others, is uncertain as to whether the method in both cases was hanging, or possibly crucifixion.

accordingly, was to report that Mordecai had been acting in some treasonous way, and that would keep Haman's dignity from being diminished by appearing to have Mordecai executed over a personal slighting.²⁶

Conclusion

As the scene closed, Haman had set into motion the plan suggested by his wife and close friends – the hanging of Mordecai. Mordecai had already been slated for destruction by the earlier edict Haman had pushed through with Ahasuerus' approval. For the reader there is great tension at this point, because Esther was planning on pleading for the lives of her people, including Mordecai, at the banquet the next day. But now it was possible that Mordecai may be hanged before Esther was able to make her request. Thus, if both Haman and Esther got their way, Mordecai would die, but the Jews would be saved. Yet, if Esther was successful, Haman too would be exposed in a plot that would ultimately have impacted the queen. That would likely lead to Haman's demise.

It was difficult to know what God would allow to transpire in the next twenty-four hours. But there was one thing that was certain if the promises of God were to be believed, and that was that the Jews would not be destroyed.

²⁶Grossman, *Esther*, 135-36n8.

CHAPTER 7

A TURN OF EVENTS

Near the end of Job's travail, after God finally defended his wisdom to Job through creation (Job 38-41), Job affirmed God's sovereignty, saying, "I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). Those who, like Job, have a high view of God's sovereignty and power might agree that God is able to do all things, yet still struggle to explain how God works out His own sovereign purposes when people make real decisions as well. Enter God's providence.

One evangelical theologian defines providence as follows:

God is continually involved with all created things in such a way that he (1) keeps them existing and maintaining the properties with which he created them; (2) cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do; and (3) directs them to fulfill His purposes.¹

In other words, the sovereign God of the universe is able to so work in nature, in every creature, and in the hearts and minds of all humanity, in such a way that they perfectly accomplish God's plan and purposes. As the apostle Paul said in his letter to the Philippian congregation, "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil 2:12-13).

If one were to meditate on this concept of God's control of all things through normal, everyday circumstances of each individual, creature, and weather pattern, it would boggle the mind. It is as miraculous as the parting of the Red Sea (Exod 14:21-29), or the sun stopping in the middle of the sky for nearly a whole day (Josh 10:12-14). God's

¹Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 315.

providence, however, is God working within the laws of nature and creaturely volition, rather than suspending certain laws of nature, as in the miraculous. God's behind-the-scenes work of providence, what is often labeled coincidence, is as Jon Levenson has remarked, according to the "old saw that a coincidence is a miracle in which God prefers to remain anonymous."²

It is obvious then, by definition, that God's providence has played a role up to this point in Esther's story, but now providence takes on a role as best supporting actor on behalf of Esther and Mordecai in their work to stop the plans of Haman. As Job learned before this time, God's purposes, in this case God's purpose to protect Israel, to bless those who blessed her and curse those who opposed her (Gen 12:3), could not be thwarted. God's promise of a future for Israel becomes the lever that directs God's providential workings in the events that are recorded in the sixth chapter of Esther's drama. The presence of God is sensed through his providential work in support of his promise of a future for his covenant people Israel.

Context

Esther has begun her plan for the redemption of her people, the Jews. The reader wonders why Esther did not simply plead for her people when Ahasuerus extended his golden scepter and guaranteed her request, up to half the kingdom (5:3). Or again when, during the first banquet, the king made the same offer (5:6). We sense that it was not fear, or cold feet, that caused Esther to delay for another day and for another banquet. The second banquet seemed to be Esther's design, intending to compound the king's obligation to honor what has now become a two-fold offer to grant her request, up to half his kingdom. Still, Esther could never have known in advance how God would work providentially to protect Mordecai from Haman's plan to hang him. And Haman could

²Jon D. Levenson, *Esther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 11.

never have imagined that he would have to honor the one person who stood between Haman and a sense of satisfaction (5:13).

Main Idea

The God who promises is the God who is also able to protect His promises by working in the most common aspects of life. In this passage, God uses insomnia and pride to bring about a reversal of fortunes for both God's people and their enemies.

Exposition

While actions already taken by Esther, Mordecai, and other Jews in Susa mark a turn in the story – especially Esther's decision to contend for her people – the events of this chapter signal a dramatic turn in the fortune of the Jews of Susa and throughout the empire. In keeping with this thematic turn, we will consider the chapter as a series of turns. First, when sleeplessness turns to discovery (6:1-3); second, when pride turns to humiliation (6:4-11); finally, when encouragement turn to enigma (6:12-14).

Sleeplessness Turns to Discovery (6:1-3)

The king had been eager to grant Esther's request at the first banquet (5:6). Instead Esther prolonged the suspense by putting her request off until the following day, to be presented at a second banquet to which the king and Haman were both invited again. While Haman was characterized as having left the banquet in high spirits, we are not told how the delay impacted Ahasuerus. While it is reasonable to wonder if the suspense was what caused the king's insomnia that night, the narrator doesn't say. What we are told is that "the sleep of the king fled."³ Interestingly, in the Greek translation of Esther, which attempted to cure the troubling omission of references to God by adding to

³Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1971), 63. As Moore remarks, "The cause is left to the reader's imagination."

the Masoretic Text, there is an explicit attribution to God, reading, “The Lord took sleep from the king that night.”⁴

In the king’s sleeplessness, he had the chronicles, the record of events, brought into his presence and read before him. The portion that was read to the king were the circumstances surrounding the earlier assassination plot by Bigthana and Teresh (2:21-23). Also recorded there was the fact that Mordecai the Jew had reported the plans of the two, a report that led to the subsequent execution of those would-be assassins. For whatever reason this report had escaped Ahasuerus’ attention at the time of the report, investigation, and execution of Bigthana and Teresh, and Mordecai had gone unrewarded for his service of loyalty to the king.

In hearing of Mordecai’s praiseworthy deed, Ahasuerus immediately asked what the chronicles recorded as the reward, or honor, bestowed upon Mordecai. The king’s servants indicated that nothing had been done for him, and therefore no honor or dignity was recorded in the chronicles. It helps to know at this point that this was not an acceptable situation that Mordecai had received no honor for his act of loyalty to the king. Herodotus indicated that Persian kings were known for rewarding those who were loyal to them, if for no other reason than engendering loyalty for self-preservation.⁵

If the reader were to question God’s involvement in Esther’s story thus far, because of a lack of reference to the divine, it is difficult to dismiss his providential working in these circumstances. The king happened to have a sleepless night, and then, in the command to have the chronicles read, chanced upon the record of Mordecai’s loyal service, at just the moment when Mordecai needed an advocate to protect him from Haman, who planned to ask for permission to have Mordecai hung. Levenson speaks to this providential working, remarking,

⁴LXX of Esth 6:1.

⁵Karen Jobes, *Esther*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 153.

It is likely that the kings' insomnia is another one of those strangely unmotivated events, like Vashti's refusal to come to the banquet, Esther's winning the favor of all who see her, and Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman. Actions seem to come out of nowhere in this tale, but they gradually link together to form an immensely positive and meaningful pattern of Jewish deliverance: If the term "theology" means anything in reference to the book of Esther, this is its theology.⁶

One might wonder why Mordecai's loyalty was overlooked at the time it occurred. Jobes has observed that Mordecai's character is commended in that he continued to serve faithfully despite his good deed having gone unrewarded.⁷ Instead it is best understood that God's hand of protection was withholding Mordecai's reward 'for such a time as this.' Had Mordecai been honored at the time of his report, the amazing turn of events that played out presently in the story would not have been as they were.

The God who was at work through providence in the lives of these Jews long ago is the same God whom we serve today. He is the unchanging One who is vigilant in the lives of his people. He can be trusted to orchestrate the events of our ordinary, day to day lives in such a way as to bring glory to himself, and peace to our hearts as we learn to trust him more completely.

Pride Turns to Humiliation (6:4-11)

Ahasuerus was eager to right the wrong of having allowed Mordecai to go without being honored for his loyalty. And yet, the king desired counsel on what honor would be fitting. Seeking to learn who might be able to speak into this matter, Ahasuerus demanded to know who was available at that moment. Haman just happened to have entered the palace, with intentions to ask permission to hang the very individual the king desired to honor.

⁶Levenson, *Esther*, 95. Levenson seems to imply that the theology of Esther is largely, then, a theology of God's providential workings to accomplish His promises on behalf of His people.

⁷Jobes, *Esther*, 153.

Pride Motivated Haman's Visit (6:4-5)

It was Haman's pride that led him to believe that his own happiness was more important than Mordecai's life, especially given the fact that Mordecai's days were already numbered by the edict of Jewish annihilation that had already been issued. Regardless of the fact that Mordecai was already destined to die, Haman could not bear the thought of having to endure Mordecai's lack of esteem until then. In fact, so filled with self-importance was Haman that he wanted Mordecai dead before the banquet later that day, in order that his existence did not dampen Haman's enjoyment of Esther's feast.

It was Haman's pride that convinced him that his request for Mordecai's life was virtually certain. He had, after all, already had the gallows constructed suddenly, and quickly, the prior evening. This was because Haman's pride had convinced Haman that Mordecai's life was insignificant in an empire in which Haman was second-in-command. As Bush observes,

If the king could be manipulated to consent to the annihilation of a people, how difficult should it be to gain his consent to the elimination of one man? But Haman's prospects have actually peaked in a manner that he could never have imagined. His decision to speak to the king in the morning about having Mordecai hanged meets with a set coincidences so remarkable that they can hardly be anything but the narrator's cipher for "divinely arranged" (Clines, 307). Haman's plans are about to run head on into the providence of God.⁸

Pride Motivated Haman's Counsel (6:6-9)

A pride-filled Haman had just entered the outer court, intending to speak with the king regarding his plans for hanging Mordecai. Ahasuerus had no idea that this was the reason Haman had come to visit. Haman had no idea, on the other hand, why the king had bid Haman to come into his throne room. It is likely that Haman simply attributed this to his own perceived importance to the king. In fact, what happened next was all a product of Haman's inflated ego.

⁸Frederic Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 9 (Dallas: Word, 1996), 418.

Without asking Haman the reason for his visit, King Ahasuerus quickly posed his pressing question regarding a fitting way to distinguish a man whom the king desired to honor (6:6). The king did not specify the identity of this man he desired to honor, and this lack of clarity was all that was necessary for Haman to fall into a trap – a trap set by none other than Haman’s pride. When Haman heard the king’s question he immediately assumed that he himself must be the one whom the king wished to honor. He could think of no one else whom the king would desire to honor. Here the reader hears echoes of Haman’s earlier discussion with his wife and friends, as he recounted “every instance where the king had magnified him and how he had promoted him above the princes and servants of the king” (5:11).

The wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible spoke often about the danger of pride to an individual’s welfare. Proverbs 16:18 warned, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling.” The Jewish audience familiar with God’s word might very well have read Haman’s thoughts through that filter, having a heightened sense of anticipation that Haman’s fall was in process.

That Haman’s pride was motivating his response to the king’s query is obvious through his recorded thoughts and elongated verbal reply. Michael Fox notes this, writing,

Haman is fascinated by the phrase, “the man whom the king desires to honor.” The break in the syntax suggests that Haman is pausing to savor the phrase, which he applies to himself. . . . Haman rolls the phrase “the man whom the king desires to honor” around in his mouth four times, beginning and ending his little speech with it.⁹

Assuming himself as the intended recipient of that honor, a result of his pride, Haman began to describe his own dream parade. First, the man whom the king desired to honor must be robed in a royalty. According to Haman, this should not simply be a royal robe that was fitting for the king. It must be a royal robe that the king had already worn.

⁹Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 76.

Historians indicate that in the Persian culture, the royal robes, even the king's bed and his royal throne were objects believed to impart benefits of royalty to the one who wore them.¹⁰ As Jobes observes, because of Haman's high station in the Persian Empire, some association with royalty beyond being the highest prince of the land, was the only honor Haman was lacking.¹¹

With one of the king's robes draped around the man whom the king desires to honor, that same man should be placed upon a royal steed (6:8). Again, the honor would be in that this was a horse that the king had ridden upon as well. In fact, that horse should be adorned with a royal crown also.¹² As Haman's enormous desire to have his own ego built up was informing his counsel to Ahasuerus, it was clear that the wearing of the king's robe and riding his horse was intended to communicate to the population of Susa a close bond between the king and this man whom the king desired to honor.

Some would argue that Haman was envisioning more than honor from the king, but actually imagining a conferring of royalty itself. In fact, Jon Levenson states that "[t]he investiture in royal garb that Haman seeks for himself and that Mordecai actually receives is reminiscent of the ancient Mesopotamian institution of the substitute king, of which echoes were still heard in the time of Xerxes."¹³

None of that was complete, according to Haman, apart from some sort of heralding of the importance of the man whom the king desired to honor. Haman indicated to Ahasuerus that such a man, royally arrayed and regally transported, must be given into

¹⁰Jobes, *Esther*, 153.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 154.

¹²While crowning a horse may seem odd to today's reader, and some have indicated that this verse was intended to imply that a crown should be set on the honoree's head, Assyrian reliefs portrayed the king's horses wearing tall head ornaments. Carey Moore also refers to reliefs of Xerxes with horses wearing crowns (Berlin, 59-60).

¹³Levenson, *Esther*, 98.

the hands of one of the king's most noble princes, who would then lead both horse and honoree through the city square. While leading them, Haman added, that high ranking official should proclaim, 'Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor' (6:9).

One can almost imagine Haman's chest swelling with pride as he drew his counsel to a close, imagining himself as the focus of this honor. Had Haman not believed that he would be the recipient of this honor, it is likely that his counsel would not have devised such grand treatment. And it certainly would not have been so, if Haman had been told by the king that this honor was for Mordecai the Jew.

Perhaps as we consider the humiliation that Haman had set himself up for in this situation, we can also use this lesson to derive a gauge for our own tendency toward becoming prideful. When we begin to think that we deserve treatment, or honors, that are far above what we could tolerate if our rival were to receive them, then pride has ensnared us. Any honor that we might receive, or hope to receive, must always be viewed as a gracious gift from God, derived as a result of God's enablement rather than our own innate talents and ingenuity. If pride goes before destruction, learning to humble ourselves in this way can keep us from such painful falls.

Humiliation Replaces Pride as Haman Honors Mordecai (6:10-11)

Haman's pride turned to humiliation when Ahasuerus commanded him to do just as he had proposed, but for the person of Mordecai. Haman had come that morning hoping to secure permission to put Mordecai to death. While being distracted from his murderous plot for long enough to imagine his own pseudo-coronation, suddenly Haman was jolted back to reality, but it was a reality that must have seemed like Haman's worst nightmare. Haman was being commanded to confer an honorary treatment that he had devised for himself upon his worst enemy.

This turn of events in which Haman was commanded to honor “Mordecai the Jew” (6:10) confirms that Haman had been vague when he had sold his plot of destruction to the king earlier. As the text indicated, Haman simply described the targets of annihilation as a “certain people” (4:8), and not the Jewish people. For if Haman had identified the Jews earlier, that would have likely registered to the king at this point. Now the mention of Mordecai as ‘the Jew’ added insult to torment for Haman, as he is commanded to honor his enemy, also a representative of the enemy of his own people, the Amalekites.

Haman did as he was commanded by the king. In fact, Haman wasn’t allowed to delegate the leading of Mordecai to another noble prince. Instead he, being the highest of the noble princes, was responsible for carrying out the honoring of Mordecai. There is no record of any dialogue that the two men may have had. Nor is there any record of an explanation that Haman might have given to Mordecai in the process of carrying out the king’s honor. There is not even any indication that either Haman or Mordecai were informed that this honor was a late payment for Mordecai’s earlier act of loyalty toward the king. All of this silence seems to spotlight and magnify the significance of the humiliation for Haman.

Where Mordecai had avoided bowing to Haman, Haman was now forced to honor Mordecai with an honor that Haman desired for himself. While Israel’s God goes unmentioned in Esther’s story, his presence is felt through fulfillment of a promise made long before. A promise that referenced these two people groups represented in this scene had certainly not failed.

How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel! . . . Water will flow from his buckets, and his seed will be by many waters, and his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted. . . . Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you. (Num 24:5-9)

Jacob’s representative here, Mordecai, is exalted above Agag’s (Num 24:7). And what is also stated in that context, a restatement of the Abrahamic promise, will soon

come to fruition for Haman: “Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you” (Num 24:9).

Words that conjure up humiliation. Jonathan Grossman recognizes a veiled reference here, in the context of humiliation. The words that Haman had designated for his own honor, but was forced to proclaim for Mordecai, allude back to the humiliation stemming from the law of levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-10). If a brother was unwilling to raise up a seed for his deceased sibling, then the dead brother’s widow was commanded to remove one sandal from the disobedient sibling, spit in his face, and proclaim “Thus it is done to the man” (כָּכָה יַעֲשֶׂה לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר, Deut 25:9). Here, in this moment of humiliation, Haman is forced to say similar words, “Thus it shall be done to the man” (כָּכָה יַעֲשֶׂה לְאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר, 6:11). While the proverbial sandal may be on the other foot in this case, the connection to such a humiliation is likely intended by how the author reports Haman’s proclamation of honor. Grossman equates Haman’s being forced to proclaim honor for Mordecai as “a spit in the face” from Deuteronomy 25:9.¹⁴

As the expression goes, ‘what a difference a day can make,’ had certainly borne itself out in the story at this point. If Mordecai’s very presence was enough to rob Haman of his satisfaction (5:13), how great a blow to his pride it must have been to be forced to herald the king’s approval of Haman’s enemy. What began for Haman as a day filled with pride, and hope – the hope of eliminating his barrier to joy, Mordecai – quickly turned to humiliation.

Encouragement Turns to Enigma (6:12-14)

As the Jewish audience for whom Esther’s story was penned read the description of Mordecai’s honor, it is likely that another historic scene came into their

¹⁴Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading*, Siphrut, vol. 6 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 147.

minds, one that reminded of God’s past work in exile.¹⁵ When Joseph was promoted in Egypt, he received a public recognition similar to the honor showed to Mordecai that day.

Then Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand, and put it on Joseph’s hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen, and put the gold necklace around his neck. And he had him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, “Bow the knee!” And he set him over all the land of Egypt. (Gen 41:42-43)

This connection to the Joseph story, once again, would have the impact of reminding the reader that just as God was present with Joseph in exile, protecting and ensuring the survival of Abraham’s descendants, so also was God present with Mordecai and Esther in Susa. If not by name, God was certainly present through his promises. Very shortly, God’s presence would be manifested through his promise to curse those who cursed Israel (Gen 12:3; Num 24:9).

Haman Returns Home to His Encouragers (6:12-13)

Following his public honoring, Mordecai “returned to the king’s gate” (6:12), which seems to imply that Mordecai did not let this honor impact him in the same way that Haman had envisioned it for himself.¹⁶ Mordecai’s temperance in emotions is contrasted with the swing in Haman’s, who left the scene devastated – mourning with covered head – returning home to seek the solace of his wife and friends.

Enablers turn to wise men. As he had done the night before, Haman gathered to himself his wife, Zeresh, along with his friends (אֲהַבָיו), literally, “those who loved him,”¹⁷ in order to share “everything that had happened to him” (6:13). The last time Haman had done this, the prior evening, his wife and friends played the role of enablers.

¹⁵Fox believes that Esther’s author “clearly models the forms of royal honor on those accorded Joseph (Gen 41:42-43).” Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 76-77.

¹⁶Grossman, *Esther*, 148.

¹⁷Ibid., 153.

Rather than counseling Haman with wisdom regarding contentment, rather than challenging Haman on allowing another person's opinion of him to diminish his happiness, instead they enabled Haman's arrogance by encouraging him to have Mordecai hanged.

Haman's closest advisors, his wife and friends, had acted as enablers the prior evening. Instead of reminding Haman that Mordecai, his source of frustration, would soon be removed by the death edict, his enablers encouraged Haman to eliminate his anguish by executing Mordecai the very next day. Now, because of their enabling counsel and the events that had just played out, Haman felt as though his world had crumbled.

On top of Haman's humiliation, an ominous and disturbing turn occurred in the counsel of Haman's advisors, Zeresh and his friends. This turn is indicated by the author's change of terms used to characterize Haman's counselors. Where the prior night Zeresh his wife and all his friends (5:14) had encouraged Haman to have Mordecai hanged, now this same group of advisors became "his wise men (יִחְזְקֻהוּ) and Zeresh his wife" (6:13). What was being communicated by the narrator to the audience by the use of this change in terms is explained by Jonathan Grossman:

These are clearly the same people, but the change in title requires explanation. The term wise men appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible: Pharaoh (Gen. 41:8) and Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 2:12-13) sought wise men to interpret troubling dreams. Earlier in Esther, Ahasuerus sought "wise men who knew the times" (1:13). "Wise men," then, reputedly knew how to interpret dreams, soothsay, and divine the future. We may reasonably posit that Haman valued their ability to advise him regarding the hidden powers that govern the world, influencing success and failure, prosperity and downfall.¹⁸

The biblical perspective on wisdom is that its origin is from the one, true God (Prov 8). Thus, it might trouble the reader that these friends of Haman's could be possessors of wisdom, or truth. However, as Michael Fox notes, there are other instances in the Hebrew Scriptures in which God's wisdom is spoken through Gentiles. Fox

¹⁸Grossman, *Esther*, 153-54.

indicates that when this is the case it is “to show that the truth about Israel and its God is so certain and obvious that even neutral or hostile people recognize it.”¹⁹

Counselors speak an enigma. Where the night before, Haman’s counselors were positive towards Haman’s ability to extinguish Mordecai’s life, the recent events seemed to change their perspective. It was obvious to them through the events of that very day that there was another force, working on behalf of Mordecai and against Haman.

The enigma that Haman’s wise men and his wife Zeresh spoke related to that which had transpired earlier that day, indicating that the humiliation of Haman was the beginning of a fall, one that could not be reversed. That fall of which they spoke so decidedly about was tied to Mordecai’s ethnicity. Because Mordecai was of Jewish origin, Haman would ‘not prevail’ (לֹא-תִכֹּל; 6:13). Instead, they enigmatically assured him that “falling you will fall before him.”

The reason that these wise men and Zeresh gave for Haman’s certain fall was that Mordecai was, literally, ‘from the seed of the Jews’ (6:13). This enigmatic statement to Haman brought God’s promise to Abraham into focus as the promise responsible for the dramatic turn of events that day. In determining to oppose Mordecai and his Jewish people, Haman had sided against the seed of Abraham, the seed through whom the families of the earth would either be blessed or cursed (Gen 12:3). More importantly, Haman had sided against the God of Abraham, the same God that had promised Abraham’s descendant Jacob a place above Agag (Num 24:7).

Haman Summoned to the Second Banquet (6:14)

With the enigmatic omen ringing in his ears, a heart heavy with humiliation, Haman was summoned by the eunuchs of the king to attend the second banquet of Esther.

¹⁹Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 79. Fox references Num 22-24; Dan 2:46-47; 3:28-33; 4:34.

Haman had begun the day hoping to rid himself of the existence of Mordecai the Jew by having him hanged on the gallows Haman had prepared in advance. Had that been accomplished, Haman believed that he would be able to go joyfully with the king to the banquet (5:14). Due to the incredible turn of events that day, it was unlikely that Haman was joyful at that moment. It is more likely that Haman was filled with confusion and bewilderment as a result of the ominous prediction from his counselors (6:13).

As Haman was whisked off to that second banquet, perhaps he was hopeful that he could comfort himself by once again being in the exclusive company of the king and queen (5:12). Perhaps Haman hoped to forget the humiliation of that day, having had to honor his bitter enemy with a procession that he had designed for himself; Haman may have hoped to drown his sorrow with the queen's finest wine. As Barry Davis observes, "Haman, being demoralized, quite probably thinks that life could not get any worse for him, yet, as he soon learns, life can and will take one final turn for the worst."²⁰

Conclusion

There are lessons to be learned from this passage, lessons about the danger that pride poses to our well-being, about the dangers of presuming that we can always bring our plans to fruition as we live out our days in a fallen world. James reminds us about the sin of pride and presumption in planning when he writes,

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that." But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil. Therefore, to one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, to him it is sin. (Jas 4:13-17)

This lesson can only truly be embraced by those who embrace a faith in the God of the Bible, who reveals that he controls the minutest details of our lives. He is the

²⁰A. Boyd Luter and Barry C. Davis, *Ruth & Esther: God Behind the Seen* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2003), 277.

God who is vigilant even over the seemingly inconsequential sparrow that falls to the ground only by his oversight (Matt 10:29).

Along with this, perhaps the greatest lesson we can learn, or be reminded of from this passage, is that our God is the God who works providentially to carry out his work in our world and in our lives. When it appears, as it must have to Mordecai and Esther, that God is silent, we remember that he is always at work, fulfilling his plan and purposes, and keeping his promises. We must actually sense God's presence through his unfailing promises. We can trust him in this because he has given us his Son, Jesus – how will he not also with him freely give us all things (Rom 8:32)?

CHAPTER 8

A FUNERAL LUNCHEON WITH TURNING TABLES: ESTHER 7:1-10:3

Maribeth and I celebrated our first anniversary in Atlanta, Georgia, having just moved there several weeks prior from Chicago, Illinois. Immediately upon moving to that thriving city in the Southeast, we began to explore all that Atlanta had to offer a young adventurous couple. And we set our sights on celebrating our one-year anniversary with a night out in Atlanta. I rented a tuxedo, Maribeth had her hair done, and I made reservations at one of Atlanta's premier restaurants – The Sundial – high atop the Westin Peachtree Plaza, in the heart of downtown Atlanta.

What made The Sundial so noteworthy was not the endless shrimp cocktail, nor the fifty-dollar price tag on each of our steak meals (pricey in 1988), but the fact that the restaurant was circular in shape, and turned slowly throughout the meal. Each table fixed in place, rotated 360 degrees slowly and almost imperceptibly, giving a full view in every direction over the course of the meal. This feature of the Sundial Restaurant gave its patrons a breathtaking view of the Atlanta skyline at night. Our anniversary dinner was a unique dining experience with turning tables, so to speak.

Esther's second banquet in as many days became a luncheon in which the tables were turned, metaphorically speaking, on Haman the Jewish foe, marking his end and a new beginning for Mordecai and the Jewish people as a whole.

Context

We come to our final, and long, portion of Esther's drama. Not long before this moment in the story an edict had been signed into law authorizing the annihilation of the

Jews throughout the extensive Persian empire. Mordecai the Jew had offended Haman the Amalekite by refusing to bow down and pay homage to him. We understand that for Mordecai to bow to Haman would have meant the seed of the Woman forced to bow before the seed of the Serpent (Gen 3:15). We recall that Satan attempted to convince Jesus to bow before him, and Jesus refused, just as Mordecai refused to bow before Haman. We also recall that God's promise was that Jacob's throne would be above Agag's. Thus, God's presence was manifested in this promise that the author seemed to be evoking in reporting Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman.

Mordecai had convinced Esther that she very likely had come to the throne of Persia in order to use her influence to oppose the evil Haman and his edict of destruction against the Jews. Thus, after fasting, and on the third day, Esther put on royalty and set her plan of deliverance into motion. The author did not state in advance what Esther's plan was, but has forced the reader to follow along as her plan played out with much suspense and uncertainty.

Esther had invited King Ahasuerus and Haman to a first banquet, one featuring much wine. After the king's heart was made merry with wine, when he had sought to learn what Esther desired to request from the king, Esther invited both her husband and Haman to a second banquet scheduled for the very next day. It was at that point that we discern God's sovereign hand working providentially through the events that played out over the next twenty-four hours, or less.

Having a sleepless night, Ahasuerus asked that the royal chronicles be read and made a discovery that Mordecai the Jew had never been rewarded for his loyal act of protection years earlier. The king's desire to honor Mordecai then intersected with a vindictive Haman's desire to be honored. Haman had come to ask for Mordecai's execution on gallows prepared just hours before, but was interrupted by the king's query for counsel in designing a fitting tribute for an unnamed honoree. Assuming himself to be the unnamed individual the king desired to celebrate, Haman designed his own dream

honor parade, filled with hints of royalty. Then to his own chagrin, Haman was commanded by the king to honor Mordecai accordingly.

Haman returned home mourning and in shock that he had just been forced to honor the very man whom he wished to destroy. As he reported the turn of events to his wife and counselors, Haman was met with words that brought even greater confusion – if Mordecai before whom he had begun to fall was of the seed of the Jews, then Haman would not overcome him, but instead would surely fall before him (6:14, paraphrase). With those enigmatic words hanging in the air, eunuchs of the king came to hurry Haman off to what would actually become a funeral luncheon, one in which the tables turned.

Haman will attend Esther's second banquet, a meal that will be Haman's last, a funeral luncheon so to speak. The events that have occurred in the hours preceding Esther's second banquet, events that portend the salvation of Mordecai and the Jews, will culminate in the final and complete undoing of Haman, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews (3:10; 7:6; 8:1; 9:10). Beyond Haman's demise, the Jews will be given legal sanction to defend themselves.

Main Idea

When God's people appeal to him, trusting in his unfailing promises, God is able to cause others to be favorably disposed to his people for their protection. God is able, also, to give his people victory over their enemies, for God's glory and the fulfilment of his promises.

Exposition

In reality, funeral luncheons occur after the death of a loved one. However, we will recognize this second banquet of Esther's as a funeral luncheon figuratively, as the banquet in which the tables are turned on Haman, a meal that leads to Esther exposing Haman as the enemy of the Jews, as well as the enemy of Esther, the Jewish queen of Persia.

We will consider the remainder of the book of Esther in several segments, the first dealing with the funeral luncheon, and the second dealing with the settling of Haman's affairs, so to speak. We will consider this first segment as the funeral luncheon (7:1-10) in which Esther orders off the menu (7:1-4), and Haman is served Mordecai's meal (7:5-10).

Just as following the death of an individual, there are often property matters to be dealt with and canceling of commitments of the deceased individual's affairs, so also with the property of Haman and settling of his interests. We will consider the transfer of Haman's interests (8:1-14), the rise of Mordecai and the Jews (8:15-9:19). Finally, we will acknowledge the author's commemoration of Purim (9:20-32) and a postscript on Mordecai (10:1-3).

A Funeral Luncheon (7:1-10)

Haman was hurried off to Esther's second banquet as the enigmatic statement still echoed in his mind, a prediction of Haman's certain fall before Mordecai. The reason Haman's fall was certain, according to his 'wise men' and his wife Zeresh, was Mordecai's ethnic heritage. Mordecai was a Jew. In fact, the way in which Haman's counselors alluded to Mordecai's invincibility was to tie him to the 'seed of the Jews' (מִזְרַע הַיְהוּדִים, 6:13). The author likely intended the reader to remember the inviolability of the various 'seed' promises of God.

To Satan, God had promised to put enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent (וּבֵין זֶרַעַךְ וּבֵין זֶרַעָהּ, Gen 3:15). Tracing that seed through Abraham (Gen 12:3; 15:5), the Messiah would ultimately be the son and seed of David, a seed after David (אֶת־זֶרַעַךְ אֶחָדֶיךָ, 2 Sam 7:12) who would receive an eternal throne. God had also promised to bless those who blessed Abraham and his descendants, and curse those who cursed Abraham and his descendants. In this case, Haman has aligned himself with the seed of the serpent, with those who would curse and desire to destroy Abraham's

descendants. Thus, it is likely that the author, by referring to Mordecai as ‘from the seed of the Jews’ intends to connect the inevitability of Haman’s fall to the fact that he has opposed the seed of the Jews.

Esther Orders Off the Menu (7:1-4)

Once again, the banquet seemed to focus on wine (7:1). There was very likely a meal also, but as with the day before where wine played a central role (5:6), and as with the opening banquets of chapter one (1:7, 8, 10), the wine was a focus of the banquet. Wine, in the right context, was considered a blessing from God (Ps 4:7), able to make the heart glad (Ps 104:15). Undoubtedly, Esther wanted her husband to be merry, favorably disposed to her, when she made her request. According to the Hebrew wisdom, a king was to be cautious to drink, lest he forget important matters of justice, and what had been decreed (Prov 31:4-5). Perhaps this was Esther’s intention, to weaken the king’s resolve to enforce the annihilation decreed against her people.

Once again, Ahasuerus solicited Esther’s request, seemingly eager to make Esther happy. And once again, the king underwrote his willingness to meet her demand, “even to half of the kingdom it shall be done” (7:3). The king also addressed Esther with her title, ‘Queen Esther.’ It is likely that Esther’s stock had risen overnight, as Ahasuerus was reminded, in the reading of the chronicles, of Esther’s participation with Mordecai the Jew in reporting the assassination plot.¹

Esther wasted little time in stating her request. Esther likely understood that what she was asking, the rescinding of the edict of destruction, was not possible – it was off the menu, so to speak. As had been acknowledged before (1:19), and would be later, “a decree which is written in the name of the king and sealed with the king’s signet ring

¹Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading*. Siphrut, vol. 6 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 158. Grossman posits that like Mordecai, Esther’s loyalty was confirmed through the chronicle entry.

may not be revoked” (8:8). And so, in an effort to make possible what seemed impossible, Esther tied her request to the king’s obvious favor toward her. “If I have found favor in your sight . . . and if it pleases the king *to grant my request*” (italicized words are added to complete the implied statement). Both of those conditions were very much the case at that moment. The king had pledged in advance his desire to grant her request.

Spare my life. Esther began by requesting that her own life be spared. This was a brilliant way to begin, as she began with a request that would communicate to the king that his own precious wife had been included in the evil plot Esther was preparing to expose. By starting with herself, Esther would be predisposing the king to say yes to the bigger request, the request that would stay the execution of her people, the Jews. What would have been fascinating would have been to watch the expression on Haman’s face as he came to realize that he had unknowingly and unwittingly prejudiced the king against himself by having included the queen in the destruction decree. Up until this point, neither the king, nor Haman were aware that Esther was a Jew, let alone related to Mordecai. It had become clear that Haman had tried to solve his own equation of hate without knowing all of the variables involved.

Spare my people. The greater request was that the king might spare Esther’s people, the Jews. Haman had not discussed the specifics of this people group with the king, only that they were a people whose “laws are different from those of all other people, and they do not observe the king’s laws, so it is not in the king’s interest to let them remain” (3:8). The king’s willingness to grant this obscure request seemed to indicate that Ahasuerus was a sovereign who was not so benevolent, and not so concerned with the welfare of the citizens of his vast kingdom. Thus, the concern arises in the readers mind, “why would such a king be moved to rescind the decree of destruction for a people group he was only informed might pose a threat to his sovereignty?”

By saving this greater request for last, the destiny of an entire people group, and by tying this greater request to the first request, one that the king was emotionally predisposed to grant, Esther demonstrated strategic brilliance. It seems that the same God who had granted Solomon unparalleled wisdom had also visited his wisdom upon Esther. That is, this Esther, the Esther who had chosen to identify with her people, who was willing to die for her people, this same Esther who had sought the God of her people by fasting for three days and night, joined in petition by her people (4:15-17).² The wisdom displayed by Esther from the moment that she determined to accept Mordecai's challenge (4:14) and seek God for wisdom serves as an illustration of what the New Testament writer, James, would promise regarding God's willingness to grant wisdom to those who would beseech him (James 1:5).

Sold to destruction rather than slavery. Esther indicated to her favorably inclined husband that the peril she and her people were destined for was slaughter. At this point Esther walked carefully through a mine field that contained the explosive potential of angering the king's pride, since he had been a party to the transaction of her people.³ Esther suggested that had she and her people simply been sold into slavery, she would have accepted their lot and determined not to trouble the king. Instead they had been sold "to be destroyed, to be killed and to be annihilated" (7:4). By using the identical threefold description of Haman's death edict (3:13), Esther served notice to the listening Haman that he was the agent of destruction from which she was seeking refuge. Just as God had promised retribution upon the nations that had dared to plunder Israel, "the apple of His

²Jon Levenson, *Esther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 78. As was quoted in chap. 5, "As the story develops, however, a marvelous set of coincidences does indeed reverse the apparently hopeless plight of the Jews, and it is best to think that the author wants us to suspect that this was indeed partially in response to the extraordinary penitential exercise of Mordecai, Esther, and the rest of the Jewish people."

³Fredric W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 9 (Dallas: Word, 1998), 431.

eye” (Zech. 2:8), Haman now must have felt the weight of despair from having threatened Esther, the delight of the king.

Haman Is Served Mordecai’s Meal (7:5-10)

By Ahasuerus’ reaction, it is difficult to discern how much the king owned up to his own complicity in Haman’s attempt to destroy Esther’s people. When one reflects back on Haman’s selling of his proposal to the king (3:8-11), the king did not engage deeply in the details of Haman’s proposal. Instead, Ahasuerus seemed satisfied with two details of Haman’s proposal – that the existence of a certain people group, likely undefined by Haman, was not in the king’s interest, and that Haman was willing to remunerate the king for the right to dispose of them. Thus, it need not be a surprise that the king was shocked to find that Haman’s proposal had somehow impacted the queen.

The king’s reaction betrayed both shock and anger. “Who is he, and where is he,” was the enraged response by Esther’s husband. Ahasuerus’ response in the underlying Hebrew communicated what one scholar characterized as a “sound like machine-gun fire when pronounced aloud.”⁴ Tomasino points out that at this point the question that the king has asked could easily lead back to himself, as Ahasuerus was the one who actually ‘sold’ Esther’s people, leaving Haman as the purchaser in the transaction.⁵ The next portion of the king’s query, however, served to isolate Haman alone as the party upon which the king could focus his indignation. The question, “where is he, who would presume to do thus?” (7:5), is literally, “where is he, him who has filled

⁴Karen Jobes, *Esther*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 165.

⁵Anthony Tomasino, *Esther*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 295.

his heart to do this” (אֲשֶׁר־מָלְאוּ לְבוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת כֵּן). The culprit was isolated as the one whose heart was filled with hatred for Esther’s people. Haman was the man!⁶

The king’s passionate demand to learn who was behind this plot for Esther’s demise was met with her eagerness to expose Haman. Esther’s response was stated with a disdain equal to that in her husband’s request, “in Hebrew, her words ring out with staccato cadence. Esther answers both the ‘who’ and the ‘where’ with her succinct accusation.”⁷ “Esther said, “A foe and an enemy is this wicked Haman!”” (7:6).

A terrified Haman pleads for mercy. The author indicates that as Haman watched this scene build into the crescendo that Esther’s accusation brought, Haman became filled with terror in the presence of the royal couple (7:6). Perhaps the enigmatic prediction of his certain fall (6:14) echoed in his mind as fear clouded Haman’s mind.

Haman very likely fixed his eyes upon the king in order to gauge his response to Esther’s accusation. The author does not report any attempted response, defense, or denial of intentions by Haman. If there were unrecorded objections raised by Haman, their omission causes the reader to experience the heaviness of the moment, as was also the case in the earlier scene when Haman was forced to honor Mordecai. The next thing we are told of was the furious king’s exit from the banquet hall (7:7).

Ahasuerus stormed out into the palace garden, likely for fresh air to clear his head, which was now filled with wine and anger. Without an advisor to consult, as Ahasuerus was prone to depend upon, the likely quandary in the king’s mind was whether or not he could justify punishing Haman given that the king was a party to the edict Esther had decried.⁸ That was the dilemma the king needed clarity on.

⁶Jobs, *Esther*, 164. Jobs has noted that the similar “oblique tactic” was employed by Nathan to David, in order here to elicit indignation in the heart of Ahasuerus.

⁷Ibid., 165.

⁸Bush, *Ruth-Esther*, 433.

As the king left the room, the author indicates that Haman understood his dire circumstances, “for he saw that harm had been determined against him by the king” (7:7). Rather than follow the king, Haman remained in Esther’s presence in order to plead for mercy from Esther, or more literally, “to beg for his life”. Haman apparently calculated that with the rage he had seen in the king’s eyes, Esther held the key to defusing her husband’s wrath against Haman.

Haman’s predicted fall comes true. The concept of ‘falling’ is a key concept in the Esther story.⁹ It is primarily used in a figurative sense to convey a sense of ruin. In the case of Haman’s enigmatic prediction (6:13) of a ‘fall’ before Mordecai, or demise, the Hebrew word ‘נפל’ is used three times in that verse. Later, in the ‘rise’ of the Jews that is contrasted to their legislated destruction, the fear, or dread, of the Jews is said to have ‘fallen’ upon many of the Gentiles.

Therefore, it is an emphasized irony that what led to the fulfillment of Haman’s figurative ‘fall’ was a literal ‘falling’ of Haman upon the couch where Esther was seated during that fateful funeral luncheon (7:8). In Haman’s attempt to beg for his life, he apparently threw himself physically and metaphorically at the mercy of the queen, whom he believed held the power to assuage the king’s anger. This physical falling in the proximity of Queen Esther proved to be the death knell for Haman. Edwin Yamauchi indicates that it was contrary to Persian harem protocol to be alone with any woman of the king’s harem. Thus, rather than staying to plead for his life, and being left alone with Esther, Haman should have followed Ahasuerus out of her presence. Even in the king’s presence, there was a permissible distance one must maintain. Thus, when the king reentered the banquet place and discovered Haman falling upon the same couch as

⁹Grossman, *Esther*, 154.

Esther, Haman's fate was sealed.¹⁰ Moreover, the king's quandary over whether it was reasonable to punish Haman for the edict that the king had been party to was resolved. Haman had hung himself on another offense; his violation of harem protocol was treasonous against the king.¹¹

The king, seeing what was certainly a violation of propriety, even having a hint of physical assault, expressed a shock that amplified his previous anger. The narrator reports that as this statement was made by the king, the servants covered Haman's face. While there is a lack of consensus on what exactly was meant by the author here, the best explanation is that there was a Persian custom of covering the face of one that the king was angry with, so that the king would not have to look upon the face of that individual.¹² Whatever the meaning here, it is clear that Haman's destiny has met with the predicted fall of his counselors.

Haman is hung on Mordecai's gallows. In the proverbial turn of tables, Haman was served the meal that he had prepared for Mordecai. The gallows that Haman had commissioned in advance of obtaining permission to hang Mordecai had yet to be used. In being commanded to honor Mordecai with the honor Haman had designed for himself, he never had been given the opportunity to make his own request to have Mordecai hanged prior to this present banquet. Now those gallows would be put to use in Haman's own execution.

¹⁰Jobes, *Esther*, 165. Jobes quotes Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), 262.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 166.

¹²Grossman, *Esther*, 165. While some doubt this could be the case, given that the king had not yet pronounced Haman's fate, if anger was the determining factor, then Ahasuerus' anger had already been expressed, making this explanation likely. Grossman indicates that there is also a literary connection by this action, to Haman's earlier covering of his head due to his shame at honoring his enemy, Mordecai. *Ibid.*, 165-66.

Harbonah, a eunuch of the king who was present at the banquet, informed Ahasuerus that Haman had just prepared the massive gallows in hopes of hanging Mordecai who, Harbonah reminded the king, “spoke good on behalf of the king” (7:9). This would have been the first that the king had heard of Haman’s plot against Mordecai, as Haman’s annihilation edict only included Mordecai, but did not specify him, which was part of Haman’s deceptiveness. There was no additional shock or indignation reported, only the king’s decisive command to have Haman hung on the gallows prepared for Mordecai (7:9-10). What is reported is the impact that Haman’s execution had in subsiding the anger of the king.

Contesting Haman’s Estate (8:1-10:3)

In our own nation and day, it is not uncommon for the heirs to a deceased person’s estate, or other interested parties, to contest the decedent’s will. This contest, or challenge, would represent objections to the predetermined disbursement of any properties, also the execution of interests, for the individual who had died. Any valid objection would necessarily meet certain legal requirements in order to be upheld.

While we may be less knowledgeable about estate planning and rules in ancient Persia, Herodotus indicates that there were recorded instances of the property of traitors reverting back to the crown.¹³ In the case of Haman, hanged as a traitor, possession of his extensive wealth (5:11) reverted back to Ahasuerus, who gifted Haman’s estate to Esther (8:1). What became of Haman’s estate, his family, as well as the plans Haman had set in motion were the concern of the narrator at this point. While Haman’s life had been extinguished, his decree of Jewish annihilation was still very much in force.

¹³Jobes, *Esther*, 177.

Transfer of Haman's Interests (8:1-14)

Consistent with Herodotus' historical accounts, King Ahasuerus seized and gifted Haman's estate to Esther (8:1). This implies that Haman's wife and sons were deemed complicit with the murderous intentions of Haman, forfeiting the rights to Haman's property. Just as Haman was "the enemy of the Jews" (8:1; also 3:1; 7:6; 9:10), so also his family was considered as well.

Inheriting Haman's property (8:1-3). Esther was given the house of her enemy, the enemy of her people (8:1). As Haman, himself, had indicated, this was substantial wealth that Esther received. The authority that had been vested to Haman by the king, as wielded by the king's signet ring, was given to Mordecai. And Esther placed Mordecai in charge of the former house of Haman.

This was possible now because Esther revealed to the king what Mordecai "was to her" (8:1). The reader recalls that Mordecai was like a father to Esther, being her cousin who had cared for her like a daughter when Esther's parents had died (2:7). This scene is the resolution of the secret that Esther had kept since the time of the royal beauty pageant, and by the command of Mordecai (2:10).

This scene is also an echo from the Joseph story, when Joseph presented his father Jacob before Pharaoh (Gen 47:7-12). Just as Joseph was allowed to settle and give his father possession in the land of Egypt (Gen 47:11), so also Esther was permitted to give her adopted father, Mordecai, possession in Persia by having set him over the estate of Haman (8:2).

Moreover, just as the author has described some of the events and actions of Mordecai with allusions to the Joseph story – the resistance of Mordecai day after day (2:4), like Joseph's with Potiphar's wife; the early honoring of Mordecai (5:11), similar to Joseph's exaltation in Egypt – now the comparison becomes more direct. Both here, in the king's transfer of his signet ring (8:2), and later in this same chapter, there will be a more direct correlation made of Mordecai with Joseph.

When Joseph had interpreted Pharaoh's dreams, and displayed the wisdom of God by proposing a course of action to their predicted events, Joseph was honored:

“You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my peoples shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you.” Pharaoh said to Joseph, “See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt.” Then Pharaoh too off his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph's hand, and clothed him in garments of fine linen and put the gold necklace around his neck. He made him ride in his second chariot; and they proclaimed before him, “Bow the knee!” And he set him over all the land of Egypt. (Gen 41:40-43)

Here now, in the passing of the Ahasuerus' signet ring to Mordecai, and shortly in the virtual conferring of royalty on Mordecai (8:15) as was done for Joseph, it becomes clear that the author understands, and intends to portray, Mordecai in Joseph-like terms.

The recognition that the author understands Mordecai in Joseph-like terms may add insight to an apologetic for Mordecai's having remained in exile. The reader of the Joseph story understands from Joseph's own words that Joseph had been carried into exile by the invisible hand of God, working through the evil of Joseph's brothers (Gen 50:20). And that for the preservation of God's people. But there is no such explanation for why Mordecai had remained in exile while other Jews had returned to the land. It is not a stretch, however, to conclude that the same God who worked through the evil of human instruments in Joseph's case, was working through a myriad of circumstances and details to keep Mordecai and Esther in Susa for such a time as this.

Canceling Haman's contracts (8:4-8). Just as today, when loved ones die, there are often financial considerations that must be settled, and some commitments and contracts must be canceled. Haman's execution had removed an enemy of the Jews, but his contract on the Jewish population of the Persian Empire was still in effect and its murderous intentions still loomed in the near future.

The narrator indicates that Esther pleaded with the king to overturn the legalized destruction of her people. As before, Esther tied her request to her husband's

favor and delight of herself (8:5), indicating to the king that she could not endure the destruction of her own people (8:6).

Because it was impossible to revoke a decree that had been authorized by the throne of Persia (8:8), Ahasuerus pointed to his having already eliminated Haman as proof of his favor (8:7). The king then agreed to authorize a new decree. With the implied authority of his signet ring, Ahasuerus urged Esther and Mordecai to write a competing decree, one that would give the Jews authority to defend themselves against the first decree.

An edict of defense (8:9-14). The same powers of the throne were made available to Mordecai, as was the case with Haman. The king's scribes came together under the direction of Mordecai (8:9) and wrote to "the Jews, the satraps, the governors, and the princes of the provinces which extended from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces." This was an identical audience to the first decree, with the important addition of "the Jews in every place." Again each province received the new edict in their own script and language. The edict of Mordecai was also written in script and language of the Jews. This time the edict was sent with the added speed that came from using "steeds sired by the royal stud." This would be comparable to saying that horses that were offspring of Secretariat, one of the greatest race horses of all time, were used to deliver this edict permitting self-defense.

This edict of defense gave Jews throughout the empire permission to gather and defend themselves. Mordecai's people were given the authority "to destroy, to kill, and the annihilate" those who sought to harm them. Language identical to Haman's edict was used, along with the inclusion of children and women. And, like Haman's edict, the Jews were free to plunder their spoil (8:11).

The Rise of Mordecai and the Jews (8:15-9:19)

Following the authorized issuance of the edict of defense (8:9-14), the narrator reflected on the exaltation of Mordecai as well as the rise of the Jews throughout the Persian Empire. Along with the use of allusions to Joseph in the author's description of Mordecai's exaltation, there is also use of language reminiscent of what God promised to do for the Jews in the entrance of Canaan.

Elevation of Mordecai (8:15). Mordecai's elevation was reported in a way that reflected back to his earlier honoring by Haman. In this case, however, it was not for a day, nor for an example – “Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor” (6:9, 11). The elevation of Mordecai was now to be more permanent, and, as a replacement Haman, the very man who had tried to eliminate Mordecai.

Again, Mordecai's elevation was cast in Joseph-like terms. If the reader compared what was written here with the way in which Joseph was installed as Prime Minister of Egypt, the similarities would be striking. By describing Mordecai's elevation in language similar to Joseph's, the author was helping the audience to draw the conclusion that the same God who had used Joseph to preserve Israel in exile was the unmentioned explanation for Mordecai's elevation, as well as the subsequent preservation of the Jews in this later instance.

Where one reads the direct statements of Pharaoh elevating Joseph to a position of virtual royalty (“You shall be over my house, and according to your command all my people shall do homage; only in the throne I will be greater than you” Gen 41:40), such explicit statements are omitted in Mordecai's elevation. Yet, the corresponding indication of Mordecai's royal status is implied by the “royal robes of blue and white, with a large crown of gold” (9:15). Beyond that difference, we find similarities in the linen garments given to both, as well as the public response. Beyond all of this, we observe that both individuals issued legislation carrying the authority of their king.

Elevation of the Jews (8:16-9:19). At this point, the narrator’s emphasis was on the change in circumstances for the Jews. There was a lifting of the weight of fear brought about by the impending annihilation. The Jews now had a voice with the king, looking out for their interests. This brought a spirit of celebration (8:16-17).

More importantly, and even strangely, the author indicated that there arose over the land a “dread of the Jews” (17). This is best explained as a supernatural spirit of fear in regards to the Jews, their authority to defend themselves, and the sense of some “mysterious grace”¹⁴ that provided them a perception of invincibility. The author very likely intended the phrase “dread of” (־דַּוָּר) to connect to God’s promised protection long before, when God brought the Israelites into the land: “This day I will begin to put the dread of you upon the peoples everywhere under the heavens, who, when they hear the report of you, will tremble and be in anguish because of you” (Deut 2:25, 11:25).

The dread which the author described, persuaded “many among the peoples of the land” to become Jews (8:17). The word which is translated “became Jews” (בָּיָדֵינוּ) appears only here in the Old Testament, and the meaning is debated.¹⁵ Yet, the circumstances here in Esther are similar to the earlier exodus account featuring Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho. The idea of ‘dread’ that in Esther led to Jewish conversion can be explained by Rahab’s words,

I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. When we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath. Now therefore, please swear to me by the Lord, since I have dealt kindly with you, that you also will deal kindly with my father’s household, and give me a pledge of truth, and spare my father and my mother and my brothers and my sisters, with all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death. (Josh 2:9-13)

¹⁴Levenson, *Esther*, 117.

¹⁵Jobes, *Esther*, 179.

Rahab became more than a recipient of the Jews' mercy, she also became a Jew, being associated with the covenant people of God and included in the genealogy of the Messiah by marriage.¹⁶ Similarly, the author was communicating an elevation of the Jews, due to the 'dread of the Jews,' that led many Gentiles throughout the land to seek refuge from the competing edict, by becoming Jews (8:17).

Elevation of the Jews over their enemies (9:1-19). At long last, the thirteenth day of Adar arrived. It was the day determined by Pur, or lot, and established by Haman as the day that the Jews would be destroyed, killed, and annihilated throughout the empire. It was that day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain mastery over them (9:1).

However, that same day was a day when "it was turned to the contrary so that the Jews themselves gained the mastery over those who hated them" (9:1). Due to the edict of defense that Mordecai wrote on behalf of the king, the Jews in every place gathered together to defend themselves. As a result of the supernatural 'dread of them,' none who hated the Jews could prevail against them (9:2). In particular, the 'dread of Mordecai' gave cause for all of the king's officials to fight on behalf of the Jews (9:3).

In Susa five hundred men were killed, along with the ten sons of Haman (9:6-10). In addition, Esther requested that the Jews be allowed to extend the edict of defense through the following day, while also hanging the bodies of the ten sons of Haman, killed that day. This hanging was very likely a display of retribution for those who would oppose Esther's people. Permitted by the king to do so, the sons of Haman were hanged (9:14), and three hundred more Jew-hating men were killed in Susa on the fourteenth of Adar (9:15).

As for the rest of the provinces, 75,000 enemies of the Jews were killed. The author clarified this number as consisting of those who were enemies, who hated the Jews, and who pursued the Jews, as it was in defense (9:16).

¹⁶John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 78.

No plunder. While the king had authorized the Jews to plunder the spoil of their enemies (8:11), for a reason that the reader is not informed of by the author, the Jews refused to do so. In fact, three times the author stated, without explaining the significance, that “they did not lay their hands on the plunder” (8:10, 15, 16). Timothy Beal explains what might have been obvious to an original Jewish audience,

This note appears somewhat peculiar and out of place until one considers it in relation to 1 Samuel 15. As discussed earlier, Haman is introduced as an Agagite, identifying him with Agag himself (God had said to “utterly destroy” everything). As a result, Saul was rejected as king over Israel. Here in Esther, where conflict between Mordecai and Haman parallels the conflict between Saul and Agag, the text makes clear in 9:10, and again at 9:15 and 9:16, that the Jews do not take any of the enemy plunder. And this despite the fact that in Esther there is no God commanding them not to take the plunder. In fact, the decree authorized by Mordecai in 8:11 calls for them to take it! As Magonet and others suggest, this insistence that they did not plunder the enemy appears to be an undoing of Saul’s (and the Israelites’) earlier mistake, and thereby a subtle redemption of the Saulite (Benjaminite) name.¹⁷

If Beal is correct, which I suspect he is, then what are we to conclude from the Jews having refused the plunder, from their desire to undo a past mistake that was driven by greed? I believe the author is telling us something important here. The Jews refused the plunder because of God’s deliverance. And these Jews who had experienced their God’s deliverance were able to reject the plunder of their enemies because God was their treasure. As Jesus stated, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:21).

Commemoration of Purim (9:20-32)

It has generally been concluded that the purpose of the book of Esther was to set forth a written account of the circumstances that led to the Feast of Purim. Naturally there were celebrations that first Adar when the purging of Jewish enemies took place. In Susa there was resting from the two-day purge on the fifteenth day of the month, as well as feasting and rejoicing (9:18). In the remainder of the empire the purge occurred on the

¹⁷Timothy K. Beal, *Esther*, Berit Olam (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 111-12.

thirteenth day of Adar, and the rest, feasting, and rejoicing occurred on the fourteenth (9:17, 19).

In order that the first Purim would be repeated from that time forward, the narrator indicates that Mordecai recorded the events of the story and sent them, along with instructions to celebrate the Purim Feast annually, on the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar (9:21). Each year the celebration should induce a spirit of generosity through the giving of food portions to those in one's close circle of relationships, and gifts to the poor (9:22).

Postscript on Mordecai (10:1-3)

To the reader, this brief tenth chapter of Esther seems odd and curious. To that end, Levenson suggests that the tribute, or taxation, referenced in this first verse was a resolution to an earlier remission of taxes at the time of Esther's coronation (2:18).¹⁸ Levenson continues with the suggestion that Mordecai brought wisdom to the king's administration by, in this case, suggesting taxation replace plundering as a means of raising kingdom revenues.¹⁹

The mention of Mordecai's greatness was set forth in the king's chronicles in order that Mordecai not be forgotten, nor his legacy of benevolence (10:2-3). Certainly within the book of Esther we have witnessed the power of such records in being able to recall and honor those who had worked for the good of the king and his interests (6:1-3). While the book is named for the Jewish woman who came to royalty for the time and circumstances that the book chronicles, the book ends with a spotlight upon Mordecai and his character and greatness.

¹⁸Levenson, *Esther*, 132.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

Conclusion

Esther's willingness to identify with her people and seek God's wisdom and intervention set into motion God's providential work to reverse the circumstances threatening his people and his promises. Those who come to Esther's story knowing the promises of God that have preceded Mordecai and Esther are delighted, yet not surprised to sense the invisible hand of the unmentioned God working behind the scenes.

“For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you,” declares the Lord, “and I will restore your fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,” declares the Lord, “and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.” (Jer 29:11-14)

CHAPTER 9

THE END IS BETTER THAN THE BEGINNING

Solomon the Preacher, the son of David, asserted that “the end of a matter is better than its beginning; patience of spirit is better than haughtiness of spirit” (Eccles. 7:8). Both assertions are proven correct in the story of Esther. Two Jewish individuals went from a beginning of obscurity to an ending of greatness among their people (Esth. 10:3). Esther patiently sought the Lord, allowing him to work for her good; Haman’s pride led to his undoing.

God’s Presence through His Promises

In a sense, we have looked at the trees of the forest, each chapter representing elements of the overarching narrative of Esther’s and Mordecai’s story. It will be helpful now, to gain some altitude and the appreciation of God’s promises that represent his presence, and hope, the green canopy of the drama.

God’s Promise of the Seed of the Woman

Our God is a promise keeper. God promised Adam and his wife that on the day they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they would surely die (Gen 2:17). And die they did – their eyes were opened and they began the fallen pursuit of covering from one another and hiding from God. Yet God, in an amazing display of grace that brought hope, made a promise. God would bring forth a seed from the woman that ultimately would destroy the serpent. That promise became one important, if not the most important, theme of Scripture. The seed promise would be traced through Noah to Abraham and his descendant Jacob. Of Jacob’s twelve sons, the promise of the Redeemer

seed fell to Judah, whose line would ultimately produce King David. A descendant of David's would one day occupy an eternal throne, one that would vanquish the serpent and his offspring.

While the reader learns in Esther's story that the laws passed by the king of Persia are irrevocable, the same is the case with God's promise of the seed. And so, when the threat of Jewish annihilation is introduced into the narrative of Esther, there should have been for the reader living prior to Messiah's coming, the conviction that "deliverance will arise for the Jews" (4:14). In fact, this promise became the harbinger of Haman's ultimate fall (6:13).¹

God's Presence through His Promise of Judgment

In the early stages of the Esther narrative, we are introduced to a Gentile kingdom that holds the reins of power over the majority of the known world, the Jewish people included. The narrator uses language and statements regarding the king and the wealth of that Persian Empire, especially the manifestation of affluence at the citadel of Susa, to subtly connect the Jewish reader back to the reign of Solomon. This connection served mostly to set up a contrast between the wisdom of the Persian King Ahasuerus, and the wisdom of Solomon. Much of what is portrayed in the first two chapters of the story dovetailed with the curses God had promised to visit upon Israel for persistent idolatry and unfaithfulness.

God's Presence through Recurring Patterns of Influence in Gentile Kingdoms

In the midst of that picture of God's judgment, the reader recalls that God had

¹Admittedly, some would take the reference to "seed of the Jews" in 6:13 to be more of a statement of ethnic resilience rather than an oblique reference to the seed promise. However, it is also logical to consider that Haman's intention to exterminate the Jews would threaten the seed promise. Thus, to do so was to side off against the God who had promised.

promised the period of exile to last seventy years, a period that had now expired. God had proven himself faithful to work through the Gentile powers to begin to restore his people to the land. Being introduced to Esther and Mordecai, Jews who remained in exile, the reader wonders about the reason why they and other Jews had not returned to the land of Israel. And, as Esther is conscripted into the national beauty pageant that would produce the next queen, it is difficult to discern if Esther's circumstances are a blessing, a curse, or a mixed bag. But, the author uses language that connects the reader to God's favor resting upon his people in exile. This builds a suspicion within the reader familiar with earlier Scripture that God might be working behind the scenes to effect the end result – Esther becomes queen of Persia. Elements of Esther's story already begin to connect the discerning reader to God's work long before to give individuals such as Joseph and Moses key roles of influence in Gentile kingdoms for the deliverance of God's people.

God's Presence through Reminders of Ancient Enmity

Just when it appeared that life in exile was secure for Esther and Mordecai, there arose a threat that had seemingly gone dormant, nearly forgotten. A man named Haman, a descendent of Agag, an Amalekite was promoted to the second highest place in the Persian Empire. Haman's promotion brought with it the obligation for all servants of the king, which included Mordecai, to bow down and honor Haman. While this point is often missed, Haman and his people, the Amalekites, were not only ancient enemies of the Jews, but enemies of God. This is pieced together by recalling that Agag's ancestors opposed Israel as they emerged from bondage in Egypt. In fact, the Amalekites were the first to oppose the vulnerable young nation, and because of this God declared them to be his own enemy. That reality serves to connect the reader with the idea that Haman and his people were not simply offspring of the Amalekites, but offspring of the Serpent (Gen 3:15).

Therefore, Mordecai's refusal to pay homage to Haman was not motivated by pride, but by loyalty to God. As a result, Haman determined to use his influence to destroy Mordecai and the Jews. That enemy of the Jews passed legislation authorizing the extermination of all Jews throughout the Persian Empire. And God's presence is discerned in the truthfulness of God's promise regarding a perpetual enmity between Jews and Amalekites (Exod 17:16), as well as the remembrance that God, himself, had pledged to oppose the Amalekites.

God's Presence through an Earlier Promise to Respond to Repentant Israel

When Mordecai appealed to Esther to use her influence to have Haman's edict of destruction canceled, Esther was resistant. The inviolability of the law and her uncertain standing with her husband, the king, brought only doubt to heart. That was when Mordecai appealed to sovereign hand of their God, mediated through the events that had led Esther to the throne, as their confidence against the enemy. Mordecai insinuated that God's presence had guided her to the throne, and perhaps for this crisis alone. Esther received Mordecai's admonishment and determined to risk her life on behalf of her people.

Esther humbled herself, and called her people to do the same, fasting over the next three days. That picture of humility and appealing to God caused the hope of God's presence to emanate from an earlier promise found in the prophets, that if God's people would humble themselves, then perhaps God might have mercy upon them and deliver them.

God's Presence through Esther's Approach and Appeal

Esther arose from her fasting on the third day, an action that connected whether purposely by Esther we do not know, to the hope of being healed after three days

(Hos 6:1). Esther did not simply clothe herself, but donned “royalty.” God’s presence is sensed in how Esther was willing to go sacrificially, and seemingly dependent upon God’s spiritual endowment in how to appeal for her people. Esther chose not to trust the reality of her circumstances that could result in death. Instead she chose to believe that the same God who had begun the work of putting Esther into a key place of influence, was the same God who could use her to appeal for the deliverance of the Jews. Thus, God’s presence loomed large in Esther’s conviction that God was already at work.

God’s Presence through Providential Circumstances

A sleepless night for the king, just happened to lead to a discovery that Mordecai the Jew had never been rewarded for his loyalty to the king. Haman just happened to walk into the courtyard with murderous intentions, but when asked to design a fitting honor, designed the way in which he would be forced to honor the very one he desired to have hanged. All of this testified to the unseen God being both present and at work in the small details of life to accomplish good for his people, those who call on his name.

God’s Presence through the Granting Influence and Victory to His People

With the words of truth coming from Gentile voices, God’s presence was elicited through the reminder of ultimate victory of the seed of the Jews (6:13). Moreover, in the resolution of the threat to God’s people God’s presence is evident in how an influence came over the inhabitants of the land whereby many became Jews, and those who persisted as enemies were impotent in the face of Jewish strength.

God’s presence was sensed in the Jews’ response to their victory. Where they had been granted permission by the king to plunder the possessions of their enemies, the text indicates with emphasis that the Jews did not do so. This willingness to forgo the spoils of their victory draws a contrast to the failure of their ancestors when Saul and his men kept the spoils of victory in violation of God’s command. This sacrifice by the Jews

of Esther and Mordecai's day seems to imply that God had become their treasure, by virtue of their deliverance. This may even be a picture of the circumcised heart, when one considers the repentance, deliverance, and newfound heart for God portrayed by the Jews.

God's presence was demonstrated, as well, in how Mordecai was celebrated in a way that was similar to Joseph's exaltation in Egypt many years before. God was clearly assigned credit for Joseph's exaltation, and by describing Mordecai's elevation in strikingly similar tones, the author expects the reader to understand the unacknowledged presence of God in Mordecai's rise to power and fame.

Shadows of Christ in Esther

No consideration of Esther would be complete without some consideration of how the Esther drama points to Jesus. As stated in an earlier study in this series, one certainly wonders if Esther's story was referenced as Jesus opened the Scriptures to the two travelers to Emmaus (Luke 24:27). We will not exhaust the possibilities here, nor explore any of them in depth.

Esther's Christ-like Work

Esther, like Moses before her, was willing to leave the relative comfort and security of the palace in order to humble herself, identify with her people, and entrust herself to God, even to the point of death. As the apostle Paul would write of Jesus, that he willingly left the glories of heaven to humble himself to the point of death, even death on the cross (Phil 2:6-8).

Esther's affliction occurred at the time of the Passover, though there is no particular indication that the Passover was celebrated in those days of exile. Nevertheless, the author makes intentional reference to the time of Haman's edict and the following response of Esther and other Jews to be in the shadows of the Passover.

The affliction that Esther submitted to, and called others to as well, was for a period of three days and three nights. This period of affliction connected to other key Christo-telic narratives, such as the sacrifice of Isaac, and the travail of Jonah, as well as the humbling and healing of Hosea 6:1.

Following Esther's three day fast, the text indicates that she 'put on royalty' (5:1). When she went into the presence of the king on behalf of her people, she was received with the king's scepter. This seems to be a shadow of Christ, entering into glory on behalf of his people, being accepted by his blood, even now interceding on behalf of his people (Heb 9:11, 14, 7:25).

When Esther completed her work of intercession, she became the heir of Haman's estate, and she entrusted it into the administration of Mordecai. So also, Christ, the heir of all things, makes those who are his people fellow heirs and administrators of all that is his (Matt 19:28; Rom 8:17).

Finally, when Mordecai's edict of self-defense was issued, and a day had been appointed for the judgment upon the enemies of the Jews, the fear of the Jews came over many, drawing them to become Jews – an expression of faith in the God of the Jews. This was similar to earlier conversions, such as Rahab (Josh 2) and Ruth (Ruth 1). In a similar way, as the gospel is proclaimed, which includes a pronouncement of judgment upon those who resist Christ, there is conversion in some cases, the expression of faith in the God of the Jews who is the Jewish Messiah, the Messiah of all. Like the Jews of Persia rejecting the spoils of plunder, so the follower of Christ, because of so great a salvation, find Christ and his reward to be the treasure that enables a rejection of worldly plunder.

Conclusion

The God who went unmentioned in the book of Esther, often is marginalized and excluded today in society. We are not told, nor has anyone definitively answered the question of why. Because of this reality, the book of Esther provides encouragement for

the believer of today. Because of Jesus' finished work, all of God's promises are 'Amen' (2 Cor 1:20). Therefore, because God is the same yesterday, today and forever (Heb 13:8), when we are prone to feel that God is far from us, that God has forgotten or cast us off because of our own failures, we must acknowledge God's presence through his promises.

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ABSTRACT

SEEING GOD'S PRESENCE THROUGH HIS PROMISES: A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF GOD'S PRESENCE IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

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The purpose of this project is to provide examples of sermons from the book of Esther based upon a biblical theological perspective. The first chapter defines biblical theology and its value to the church, and then describes the sermon series that follows in subsequent chapters. Following that introductory chapter, seven sermons are developed, each one essentially addressing a chapter of the book of Esther, with the last of the seven being a treatment of the final four chapters as the resolution to the story. Each sermon aims to demonstrate that God's promises, as well as his redemptive work in an earlier period of exile, serve as the lens through which the author understands and tells Esther's story. As a result of the interpretive perspective of the author, God's presence is discerned by how his past promises explain Esther's unfolding drama, even as God remains unmentioned. Correspondingly, this project proposes that God's presence is seen through his promises in the book of Esther.

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