

## Esther.<sup>1</sup> Rockville Bible Fellowship. 29 April 2020.

The subject for this evening is the story of 'Esther'. And our reading is taken from chapter 4 of the book which carries her name, commencing at verse 10 ...

Then Esther spoke to Hathach, and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say: "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that for any man or woman who goes into the inner court to the king, without being called, there is but one law – to be put to death, except any to whom the king holds out the golden sceptre, so that he may live. Yet I have not been called to go in to the king these thirty days".

And they told Mordecai what Esther had said.

Then Mordecai told them to answer Esther: "Do not think to yourself that you will escape in the king's palace any more than all the other Jews".

"For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?"<sup>2</sup>

Then Esther told them to answer Mordecai: "Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast likewise. And so I will go in to the king, even though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!"

So Mordecai went his way and did according to all that Esther had commanded him.

Last Wednesday, we looked together at the story of Ruth, as told in a much earlier book of the Old Testament. And, before we launch this evening into the story of Esther, I am going to take the time to point out some of the fascinating points of comparison and contrast between the recorded stories of these two young women, the only women whose names have been given to books in the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

First, both of the stories display clear cases of God working providentially behind the scenes, bringing His will and purpose to pass through seemingly coincidental happenings; by way of example only, in the one story, of Ruth *choosing* for herself the right 'part' of a certain field in which to glean,<sup>4</sup> and, in the other story, of Esther *being chosen* as the successful candidate in an empire-wide royal beauty contest.<sup>5</sup>

Second, early on in both accounts, the young women were located in countries in which they were complete strangers.<sup>6</sup>

Thirdly, when in those foreign lands, both young women found 'favour' in 'the eyes' or 'the sight' of men of high standing,<sup>7</sup> following which they were both urged by a shrewd older relative<sup>8</sup> to make a vitally important request to these influential men.<sup>9</sup>

Fourthly, both of the young women complied with the directions which they had been given,<sup>10</sup> and, in the event, both of their requests were granted.<sup>11</sup>

Fifthly, in both instances, the granting of these requests had the most profound and far-reaching implications,<sup>12</sup> in that they both played an essential part in preserving what is known as the 'messianic line' (a line which can be traced back to the Garden of Eden itself and which would terminate in the coming of the Messiah, our Lord Jesus) from extinction. The one (in the book of Ruth) did so by continuing that line when it seemed that it had come to a dead-end, and the other (in the book of Esther) did so by thwarting the attempt by Israel's enemies (and, no doubt, through and behind them, the sinister design of the great overlord of evil himself<sup>13</sup>) to wipe out that line completely.

Further, both stories very much hinge around events which took place during a critical night; in the case of Ruth, when the man of high standing woke up suddenly from his sleep at midnight,<sup>14</sup> and, in the case of Esther, when the man of high standing failed to get any sleep at all!<sup>15</sup>

And then each story focuses largely on a case of intermarriage between an Israelite and a Gentile, in the one instance, between Boaz and Ruth,<sup>16</sup> a 'young Moabite woman' as she is described,<sup>17</sup> and, in the other, between Esther and Ahasuerus,<sup>18</sup> a famous Persian king.<sup>19</sup>

And I was interested to discover that, to this day, these particular Old Testament stories are read publically by the Jews during two of their annual Feasts, the book of Ruth during their Feast of Pentecost, and the book of Esther during their Feast of Purim.<sup>20</sup>

And yet, for all that they have in common, the two stories differ significantly, in that:

The one (that of Ruth) is set sometime *before* Israel's *first* king (Saul) was anointed in Old Testament days,<sup>21</sup> whereas the other (that of Esther) is set sometime *long after* Israel's *last* king (Zedekiah)<sup>22</sup> was carried away, blinded and bound, to Babylon.

Ruth was a Gentile who married a Jew, whereas Esther was a Jewess who married a Gentile. Ruth chose to enter into her marriage, whereas Esther was given no choice about entering into hers.<sup>23</sup>

Ruth was a foreign widow, who, on her marriage to a Jew, became an important person in the land of Israel, whereas Esther was an Israelite orphan, who, on her marriage to a Gentile, became an important person in a foreign land – that of Persia.

The faith of Ruth enabled her to overcome a personal calamity, whereas the faith of Esther enabled her to overcome a national crisis.

And so, to Esther.

But first one or two comments on the historical context. Cyrus (so-called 'the Great') was the founder of the Persian empire, which included that of conquered Babylon. And, as something of an aside, according to the book which bears his name, Daniel the prophet<sup>24</sup> lived until at least the third year of the reign of Cyrus in 536 B.C.<sup>25</sup> But, at the time of Esther chapter 4 (from which we read a little earlier), it was some 62 years later,<sup>26</sup> and the king mentioned in our reading (Ahasuerus, or Xerxes as he was known to the Greeks<sup>27</sup>) was actually the fifth king of Persia.<sup>28</sup>

It was now the year 474 B.C., and the Jewish people faced one of the most serious crises of their entire history.<sup>29</sup> As a nation they were under sentence of death, and that by decree of the mighty king of Persia, which was by far the most powerful kingdom in the world at the time.<sup>30</sup> And this, inspired<sup>31</sup> by the king's most senior government official,<sup>32</sup> one Haman the Agagite.<sup>33</sup>

Haman's scheme to destroy the Jews had been made possible by his recent promotion to favour and power.<sup>34</sup> And this must have been particularly galling to Mordecai the Jew,<sup>35</sup> because, only a short time before, he had exposed a conspiracy to assassinate Ahasuerus.<sup>36</sup> After Mordecai saved the king's life, we expect *him* to be rewarded, but it is the dastardly villain Haman who is advanced to the top job.<sup>37</sup> I guess that Mordecai could be excused if he wished that he hadn't bothered!

Haman's plot had been directly occasioned by Mordecai's persistent refusal to bow to him,<sup>38</sup> even though this was the king's express command.<sup>39</sup>

This refusal stemmed not from any rudeness or lack of courtesy on Mordecai's part.<sup>40</sup> It was due rather to who Haman was. Haman was an Agagite;<sup>41</sup> that is, in all likelihood, he was of the royal line of the ancient nation of Amalek.<sup>42</sup> Amalek was that nation against which God, on oath, had declared warfare from generation to generation.<sup>43</sup> Of old, Israel had been commanded to 'remember' and 'not forget' what Amalek did when Israel had first come out of Egypt (seizing as they did the opportunity to attack those who were faint and weary), and to 'blot out the (very) memory of Amalek from under heaven' when they (Israel) entered the land.<sup>44</sup> But this Israel had failed conspicuously to do.<sup>45</sup>

But 'how then', Mordecai must have asked himself, 'can I show honour and respect to one with whom my God has sworn only perpetual enmity?'

We are told that, as a result of Mordecai's refusal, Haman 'disdained'<sup>46</sup> to kill him alone ('thought light of killing him alone'), but determined rather to bring about the destruction of the whole nation.<sup>47</sup> For Mordecai had openly declared that he was a Jew.<sup>48</sup>

The thoroughness of the planned assault is emphasised by the words of the letter, 'to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate'.<sup>49</sup> Although Mordecai's steadfast refusal to bow was the direct and immediate cause of Haman's malicious design, nevertheless it is highly likely that, in time, something of the sort would have happened anyway; as may well be suggested by the repeated description of Haman as 'the Jews' enemy'.<sup>50</sup>

The roots of the mutual hostility between the Jews and the Amalekites go back as far as Exodus 17, where Amalek was the first enemy to attack Israel after the exodus.<sup>51</sup> Now an Amalekite is the last enemy to attempt to attack them at the close of Old Testament history.

But, whether or not this attack would have come at some time without Mordecai's refusal to pay homage to Haman, it was now scheduled. And, at the end of chapter 3 and opening of chapter 4, the prospects for God's people looked bleak in the extreme. (i) They (the Jews) were in a state of great alarm,<sup>52</sup> (ii) Shushan<sup>53</sup> was in turmoil, consternation, confusion,<sup>54</sup> (iii) Haman was jubilant, (iv) Ahasuerus was more concerned about his wine than about his decree, and (v.) Esther was totally oblivious to the great danger in which she and her people then stood.<sup>55</sup> It seems that, as queen, she

was sheltered from all matters of state business, and was therefore ignorant of the existence of the decree which so troubled her people.<sup>56</sup>

Nothing, it seemed, could possibly save the people. The mighty king of Persia had given his authority for the writing of the edict (which could neither be changed nor revoked),<sup>57</sup> it had been sealed with his personal signet ring,<sup>58</sup> and sent by royal couriers throughout the whole length and breadth of the empire.<sup>59</sup> The precise date was fixed; the people named. Surely nothing (and nobody) could now save the nation of Israel from certain destruction. Or so it 'seemed'.

But ... but recent developments had certainly *not* taken the God of Israel by surprise! *He* had not been caught off guard. Far from it. For both Haman's plot and Ahasuerus's decree had been foreseen and prepared for.<sup>60</sup> In our reading, Mordecai made it clear that he was confident that, even if Esther refused to help and remained silent, 'relief and deliverance' would 'arise for the Jews from another place', from another quarter.<sup>61</sup> And I have no doubt that he was right.

For God was not baffled by the recent turn of events. Unlike the city of Shushan, the Lord wasn't 'thrown into confusion'<sup>62</sup> Mordecai surmised that Esther might well have come to the kingdom for just such a time; that is, that the Lord had raised her to her royal dignity to deal with this very crisis. But what Mordecai didn't realize when he said this was that his own contribution would also prove crucial to saving the day for Israel.<sup>63</sup>

But we know that the Lord had prepared for Israel's present predicament well in advance by locating both Mordecai and Esther in the right place at the right time, and in positions from which they could both later exert a powerful influence for good over the king.<sup>64</sup>

Specific preparations had begun over 120 years before, back when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had taken into captivity 'all the leaders ... all the mighty men of valour ... and all the craftsmen' of Judah<sup>65</sup> in the days of Jehoiachin, Judah's last-but-one king.<sup>66</sup> Included at that time had been the prophet Ezekiel,<sup>67</sup> who had so much to say about Israel's future glories. But (humanly speaking), if it had not been for another captive, Ezekiel's prophecies would have remained forever unfulfilled. That other captive's name was 'Kish'; he was the great grandfather of Mordecai.<sup>68</sup> But then we know that Nebuchadnezzar was, not only 'king of Babylon', but was God's 'servant'.<sup>69</sup>

When Esther's parents had died, Mordecai, her older cousin, had adopted her.<sup>70</sup>

And all of this would prove absolutely essential, as both were needed now, and that with close personal ties – so that, for example, Mordecai was able, through Esther's attendant, to notify Esther of the danger, and to counsel her to jeopardize her life on behalf of her people. How wonderful that, out of the vast empire of 127 provinces,<sup>71</sup> in God's providence both Mordecai and Esther were duly situated in Shushan, the palace or citadel'.<sup>72</sup>

But, with both Mordecai and Esther located in the right place, we now need to trace a chain of ten links within the book of Esther itself,<sup>73</sup> each link of which would prove equally necessary to checkmate Haman's malicious designs and to save the day for Israel.

First, there was the refusal of Queen Vashti to come to the feast held by Ahasuerus, when he summoned her.<sup>74</sup> We are left to guess *why* she disobeyed the king's command.<sup>75</sup> But, for us, the important point is *that* she refused to come, not *why* she did so.<sup>76</sup>

The second link was the counsel of Memucan, one of the king's seven chief rulers and special advisers.<sup>77</sup> In his eyes, it would hardly do for it to be said that Ahasuerus could rule over kingdoms from India to Ethiopia, but not over his own wife!<sup>78</sup> As Memucan saw it, for the king to turn a blind eye to Vashti's disobedience would create a very dangerous and far-reaching precedent, encouraging other ladies throughout the empire to rebel against their husbands,<sup>79</sup> and, of far greater importance to Memucan and his colleagues, encouraging the wives of the king's officials to do so ... and, I guess, probably to Memucan personally, the wife of one of those officials in particular!<sup>80</sup> Why, it didn't bear thinking about! So he advocated removing Vashti from the position of queen,<sup>81</sup> and he had his way.<sup>82</sup> And so, exit Vashti.<sup>83</sup>

You have to laugh: here is a king who sends forth a decree and letters, which, so it was hoped, would result in all the menfolk of his empire being able to *do* the very thing he had just proved himself *incapable of doing!*

And I note that, since this feast lasted only seven days, it was on the last day that Ahasuerus called for Vashti. That is, it was at the very last minute, so to speak, that she was removed to make way for Esther.

And so to the third link, the later advice of the king's court officials<sup>84</sup> that he then sought a replacement wife.<sup>85</sup> Previously, Memucan had advised Ahasuerus to replace Vashti with 'another who

is better than she',<sup>86</sup> and yet this was not actioned for three years.<sup>87</sup> And we might wonder why it was so long before the king 'remembered' Vashti and that which had happened. It does seem a long time for a king to be without a queen.

But scholars generally identify Ahasuerus with Xerxes, the son of Darius. And they tell us that this period coincides exactly with the time when Xerxes was engaged in his ill-fated campaign against Greece, alluded to by the prophet Daniel.<sup>88</sup>

The fourth link consisted of Esther's success in the royal beauty contest.<sup>89</sup> Clearly, Esther had a huge God-given advantage, her natural good-looks, for she was beautiful both in form and in face; she had, that is, a shapely figure, and was lovely to look at.<sup>90</sup>

It is made clear that she was selected as a contestant by government officials – that neither she nor Mordecai had any choice in the matter. Nor was it her doing that she won 'grace and favour' in the sight of Ahasuerus, and that he chose to make her his queen in the place of Vashti.<sup>91</sup> Although *now* Mordecai could see that all this might well have happened for the very purpose of thwarting Haman's dastardly scheme.<sup>92</sup>

We do not know the number of the selected contestants, but, given that these had been sought in all 127 provinces of the king's kingdom, it is not unlikely, as one Jewish writer speculated, that there were several hundred.<sup>93</sup> But, in spite of all the stiff competition, it was Esther who found favour in the sight of the most powerful and wealthy man of the day.<sup>94</sup>

But, separate to this, it was necessary for Mordecai himself to be fitted to exert influence for good over Ahasuerus at the appropriate time. And this (which forms our fifth link) was largely achieved by his timely discovery and exposure of a plot hatched by two eunuchs,<sup>95</sup> whose job it was to guard the entrance to the king's personal apartment.<sup>96</sup> News of this planned assassination 'just happened' to leak out to Mordecai, of all people in the world! That the plot represented a real danger is confirmed by the fact that Ahasuerus was murdered less than ten years later<sup>97</sup> by the captain of his bodyguard and one of his eunuchs.<sup>98</sup>

Careful investigations soon established the guilt of the two men. So, exit two eunuchs.<sup>99</sup> How important then proved the line of communication which existed between Mordecai and Esther. For neither would have been of any use without the other. And, without revealing anything of her close blood relationship to Mordecai, Esther was careful to see that Mordecai was given full credit for saving the king's life.

And yet, by some inexcusable oversight, Mordecai received absolutely no reward,<sup>100</sup> and it must have been sickening to him to see Haman soon promoted to the highest office in the kingdom by the very man whose life he had recently saved. But, if *the king* let Mordecai down badly, *the King of Kings* knew what He was doing. As always, His timing was perfect.<sup>101</sup>

And the same line of communication between Mordecai and Esther became desperately important again later when Hathach, Esther's servant, was sent to relay another plot. But, on that occasion, it was not the king's life which was in danger, but the queen's! And that of all her people.

And so, to link number 6.

It is fascinating to observe how the Lord over-ruled both the nature and the timing of Haman's chosen method to wipe out the Jewish people.

First, Haman sought a decree which authorised *all who wished* to 'attack' them,<sup>102</sup> with the incentive that the attackers would be free to pocket a considerable portion of the spoil for themselves.<sup>103</sup> This was a most cunning move, because many of the Jews in Persia had done very well for themselves there, which is why they had stayed there, and had declined the offer of Cyrus for them to return to their land.<sup>104</sup> And now their very prosperity was to be the bait to ensure their destruction.<sup>105</sup> Clever!

But, as the apostle Paul assured the Corinthians, 'it is written, "He (God) catches the wise in their craftiness",<sup>106</sup> and later events were to show that Haman had been too-clever-by-half for his own good. For the very method he chose left open one all-important way of escape.

We are told more than once that the laws of the Medes and Persians could not be repealed, even by the king.<sup>107</sup>

And so, had Haman sought and secured a decree which commanded the Persian military to attack and destroy the Jews, there would have been no way for the Jews to be delivered. For Ahasuerus could hardly have later authorised the Jews to fight against his own forces. But, because the decree took the form only of a royal permission granted to the Jews' *foes*, and not a command to the king's *forces*, it left the door open for the king to follow up with a second decree, which granted equal

sanction for the Jews to defend themselves, thereby neutralising the first decree. Indeed, since the first law didn't *require* anybody to carry out the genocide,<sup>108</sup> nobody could be blamed for later failing to obey it.

A second important factor about the planned attack was its timing. Haman's edict was written on the thirteenth of Nisan,<sup>109</sup> a date no doubt deliberately chosen by Haman, so that the news would break on the Jewish people the next day, which was the first day of the feast of Passover.<sup>110</sup> To Haman, a holiday commemorating Israel's past deliverance would be an ideal occasion to publish plans for the nation's destruction.<sup>111</sup>

But Haman was clearly a superstitious man, and he wouldn't dream of embarking on such an important venture without first ensuring that the day selected for the slaughter<sup>112</sup> would be an auspicious day. And so Haman, resorting to the art of astrology, cast 'Pur'<sup>113</sup> (an ancient Akkadian word for 'lots'<sup>114</sup>) to determine the precise day on which the slaughter should take place.<sup>115</sup>

And this 'favourable' day fell on the 13<sup>th</sup> of the month Adar.<sup>116</sup> True, this was a full eleven months distant, in the last possible month of the year,<sup>117</sup> but Haman could afford to wait. Indeed, I suspect he may have relished the prospect of seeing Mordecai squirm with self-recrimination for all of those eleven months, on account of the fate he had brought upon his people.

And yet we can hardly miss seeing God's overruling in all of this. For the interval between (i) the passing and proclamation of the decree and (ii) its timed execution provided Esther and Mordecai with ample time for the necessary steps to be taken to save their nation.

Although the royal messenger service was extremely fast,<sup>118</sup> there were 127 provinces to be reached, stretching from India to North Africa.<sup>119</sup> As it turned out, two months and ten days elapsed between the first and the second decrees,<sup>120</sup> and, had Haman fixed on an earlier date for the execution of the Jews, there might well have been insufficient time for the second set of messengers to reach the farthest points of the empire to avert the massacre there.<sup>121</sup>

But the God of Israel knew all about that. And the claim made in Proverbs 16 clearly held as true in Persia as it did in Israel; 'The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord'.<sup>122</sup> Truly, so too did the words which the Lord had once put into the mouth of Balaam, 'there is no enchantment against Jacob, no divination against Israel'.<sup>123</sup>

Link number seven was forged when the king extended his golden sceptre to Esther.<sup>124</sup>

Through her attendant, Esther had pointed out to Mordecai, not only that it was common knowledge that it was a most unhealthy thing for any man or woman to enter the king's inner court without an invitation,<sup>125</sup> but that it was highly unlikely that she was going to be summoned soon, for she hadn't been called for a whole month. This in itself was ground for serious misgivings. Ancient secular writers portray Ahasuerus as a vain and sensual monarch,<sup>126</sup> and his passions and affections may well have been transferred elsewhere. There were certainly no guarantees in this business, as ex-queen Vashti could tell you.

On top of which, the Jewish writer Josephus claimed that men stood around the royal throne armed with axes to deal with any intruders.<sup>127</sup> The message was crystal clear; if you didn't get *the sceptre*, you got *the axe!* And that would *really* spoil your day!<sup>128</sup>

When I read Mordecai's words to Esther, 'who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for just such a time as this?', I am reminded of some words of the famous British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, which my wife Linda and I came across at his birthplace (Blenheim Palace) over ten years ago.<sup>129</sup> Referring to the time when King George VI made him Prime Minister in May 1940, at what Mr Churchill described as 'the outset of this mighty battle', he wrote: '*I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial.*'<sup>130</sup>

I guess that, if Queen Esther accepted Mordecai's assessment of the situation, she might have said those very words, 'that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial'.

But, as things developed, there was one obvious difference. Because, for all his best efforts, Mr Churchill could do nothing to save some six million Jews from Hitler and the horrors of the Holocaust. Whereas Esther was the instrument God chiefly used to save the whole Jewish nation of her day from Haman and the decree he had so carefully drafted.<sup>131</sup>

But we mustn't underestimate the courage which inspired Esther to say, 'I will go in to the king ... and if I perish, I perish'.<sup>132</sup>

For, whereas Queen Vashti had suffered the loss of her *crown* for *not coming* to the king when she *had been called*, Queen Esther was willing to risk the loss of her *head* for *coming* to the king when she *had not been called!*<sup>133</sup>

But first, she instructed Mordecai<sup>134</sup> to organise a three-day fast<sup>135</sup> by the Jews in Shushan'.<sup>136</sup> And, given that fasting was often associated with prayer to God in times of great distress,<sup>137</sup> Esther's three-day 'fast' was also doubtless accompanied by earnest prayer and a sense of utter dependence upon God.

Interestingly, Esther would have been fasting at the very time when the Passover lamb was to be slaughtered, roasted and eaten. In many ways, it is ironic that she should be fasting when her nation's calendar called for feasting.

Just possibly, she had in mind the means of victory employed by Moses and Joshua over Amalek many centuries before, when those out of sight<sup>138</sup> supported the one who performed the public part, and, in prevailing with God, secured the success of the one in the front line.<sup>139</sup> If so, in effect Esther was asking the Jews in Shushan to hold up *her* hands while she did battle with the Amalekite.<sup>140</sup>

No doubt she was greatly relieved to find that, just as she had at their first meeting,<sup>141</sup> so again she obtained favour in the sight of the king.<sup>142</sup> For Ahasuerus then extended to her the all-important golden sceptre, which guaranteed her safety.<sup>143</sup>

Our eighth link comprises the agreement of the king to attend two banquets prepared by Esther.

I don't know if *Esther* was taken aback by the generosity of the king's offer (couched in a well-known Oriental idiom of exaggeration, not to be understood at all literally<sup>144</sup>). But we may well be taken aback by her reply, simply inviting him and Haman to a banquet which she had already prepared for them.<sup>145</sup> And that means, of course, that, Esther must have been preparing this particular banquet while she and her maids had been fasting!

And then, no doubt to our surprise, at this first banquet, she goes no further than to invite her two distinguished guests to a second.<sup>146</sup>

Many possible explanations have been suggested as to why Esther postponed presenting her petition.<sup>147</sup>

Personally, I favour the view that she patiently, wisely and deliberately did as she did, (i) partly to excite, and then to maintain, the king's interest, and (ii) partly to convey to him that her petition concerned a matter of the utmost importance, and that she wasn't presenting it out of some rash, emotional impulse.<sup>148</sup>

And, although she wasn't to know it, much was to hang on the deferring of her request, in that it was the night before she did make it that the king was to suffer an all-important sleepless night. But *that* is part of link number nine.

And, before we reach that, we need to note that, whereas Esther pleased Ahasuerus, Mordecai *displeased* Haman. For, although Haman had left the first banquet merry in heart, intoxicated with pride, there was one big fly in his ointment – Mordecai ... who totally soured Haman's joy of the moment<sup>149</sup> by refusing even to acknowledge him when he passed through the king's gate,<sup>150</sup> let alone bowing down to him and paying him homage as he had refused previously.<sup>151</sup>

And Haman was easily persuaded by his wife and friends not to wait eleven months to see Mordecai perish, but to erect a 'high-rise' gallows or stake immediately, and to seek authority from Ahasuerus first thing the next morning to have Mordecai executed on it.<sup>152</sup>

Which does bring us to link number nine; namely, Ahasuerus's sleepless night.<sup>153</sup> And everything hinges around this crucial night, when the Lord, who Himself neither slumbers nor sleeps,<sup>154</sup> began to turn the tables,<sup>155</sup> and to bring to nothing all of Haman's schemes and intentions.

And this He did by depriving the mighty king of Persia of a night's slumber.<sup>156</sup>

And, surprise, surprise, just like his father King Darius before him,<sup>157</sup> Ahasuerus didn't call for his musicians, but, in his case, called for a book to be read to him.<sup>158</sup>

Talk about coincidence! Surely, it was *more than* a million-to-one chance that the mighty monarch of Persia should be listening at the dead of night to the one item in all the chronicles of his kingdom which concerned the very man whose execution was being planned for the next morning.

And it is hard not to laugh at the self-seeking vanity of Haman as he talks at cross purposes with the king, and ends up bestowing the greatest honour he can imagine on the very man he planned to kill?

As a result, within a few hours the tide had turned, and Mordecai was highly 'honoured'<sup>159</sup> while Haman was mourning,<sup>160</sup> now compelled to bow down to the man who had refused to bow down to him.

We are not told whether Esther knew of these events when she summoned Ahasuerus and Haman to the second banquet, where she calmly re-counted her people's predicament to Ahasuerus, who, having previously lost one wife, probably had no ambition to lose another!<sup>161</sup> This is followed by the brief record of Ahasuerus's wrath and of Haman's unexpected and sudden fate.<sup>162</sup>

And so, whereas in chapter 6,<sup>163</sup> Mordecai was exalted in the very way that Haman had planned for himself,<sup>164</sup> in chapter 7, Haman was executed in the very way he had planned for Mordecai.<sup>165</sup> And so, to apply one of Shakespeare's graphic phrases, Haman was 'hoist with his own petard'.<sup>166</sup>

But, although Haman was now dead, and it was most unlikely that anybody would have dared touch Esther personally, yet the sentence of death still hung over her people.<sup>167</sup> And so, following the king's appointment of Mordecai in Haman's place,<sup>168</sup> Ahasuerus left Mordecai<sup>169</sup> and Esther to sort out with his civil servants a legal way of rendering the first decree harmless,<sup>170</sup> which they successfully did.<sup>171</sup>

For the second decree not only effectively neutralized the first, but, because it was the more recent of the two, it served to unnerve their foes.

And (our tenth link), on account of Mordecai's exalted position (now second in authority to Ahasuerus alone<sup>172</sup>), it tipped the scales very much in favour of the Jews, for officials throughout the empire felt obliged to ensure that the Persian forces 'helped the Jews'.<sup>173</sup>

Surely, it isn't difficult for us to detect the hand of a more formidable foe than Haman, that of the great 'enemy'<sup>174</sup> at work behind many of the scenes. For, although Haman was labelled 'the adversary',<sup>175</sup> in reality he was but the unwitting tool of the mighty monarch of evil, of the great 'adversary' of God's people.<sup>176</sup>

I suspect that most of you are familiar with some at least of the devil's previous attempts either to cut off or to corrupt the line of the Seed of woman, of the Messiah.<sup>177</sup> And the book of Esther records Satan's last known attempt in the Old Testament to frustrate God's purpose of salvation for the world.<sup>178</sup>

But if Satan was at work behind the scenes, so too was the Lord. Indeed, as has been well said, 'God not only moves behind the scenes; He moves the scenes He is behind'.<sup>179</sup>

It is well known that the name of God does not occur in the book<sup>180</sup> (any more than it does in the Song of Songs). Yet although His name is not there, *He* most certainly was. For, whereas at all times, He remained out of His people's sight, *they were never out of His!* And, without violating human free will in any way, the 'unmentioned God' was always in control.<sup>181</sup>

And so, in summary, the story of Esther demonstrates that our God is not only *invisible* ... but that He is *invincible*! And we can trust Him.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> A suggested outline of the book (from A. Tomasino, *‘Esther: Evangelical Exegetical Commentary’*):

- ‘ A) Introduction: The glory of Xerxes(1:1–2)
- B) The two feasts of the king (1:3–22)
- C) Esther’s triumph over her rivals (2:1–18)
- D) Mordecai foils the plot against the king (2:19–23)
- E) Conflict between Haman and Mordecai is initiated (3:1–6)
- F) Haman appears to request the death of the Jews (3:7–15)
- G) Mordecai and Esther conspire against the plot (4:1–17)
- H) Esther appears before the king unbidden (5:1–8)
- G’) Haman and Zeresh conspire against Mordecai (5:9–14)
- F’) Haman appears to request the death of Mordecai (6:1–14)
- E’) Conflict between Haman and Mordecai is concluded (7:1–10)
- D’) Mordecai foils the plot against the Jews (8:1–17)
- C’) The Jews triumph over their rivals (9:1–17)
- B’) The two feasts of the Jews (9:18–32)
- A’) Conclusion: The glory of Xerxes and Mordecai (10:1–3)

In this proposed structure, the “hinge” is identified as the episode where Esther sets in motion her plot to overturn Haman’s plot. It is precisely at this point that the Jews’ deliverance begins. Perhaps coincidentally, this scene also contains the verse identified by the Masoretes as the central verse of the book (5:7).

Additionally, scene D begins with the note that Esther had not revealed her kinship with Mordecai to the king (2:20); but at the beginning of D’, their relationship is revealed (8:1). Also, in both scenes, the villains are impaled (2:23; 8:7). Scenes G and G’ both begin with Mordecai at the king’s gate (4:2; 5:9). It appears that scene H marks the true crisis of the story. Esther is about to appear before the king without an invitation. If he decides to kill her, the story is finished. If he allows her to live, there is hope for the Jews. It is here that the reversal will truly begin’.

<sup>2</sup> Mordecai’s answer contains a reference to Esther’s previous objection: ‘All of the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know ...’. In response, Mordecai says in effect that even if ‘all the king’s servants’ know of this law, nevertheless ‘who knows’ if your path to the royal throne was not meant for the sole purpose of your intervention today.

<sup>3</sup> Compare ‘it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus’, Esther 1. 1, with ‘it came to pass in the days when the judges judged’, Ruth 1. 1, the only two occasions where such an expression commences a book of scripture. Neither book is directly quoted in the New Testament.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth 2. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Esther 2. 2-17.

<sup>6</sup> Ruth 1. 19; 2. 10; Esther 2. 5-7.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth 2. 10 with verse 1, and Esther 2. 17 with chapter 1 verse 1.

<sup>8</sup> A mother-in-law, and an older cousin, Esther 2. 7, respectively. (The word ‘daughter’ is used to describe both; Ruth 2. 2, 22; 3. 1, 16, 18 {cf. 1. 11, 12, 13}, and Esther 2. 7, 15.)

<sup>9</sup> Ruth 3. 2-4, 9, and Esther 4. 8-16; 7. 2-4.

<sup>10</sup> Ruth 3. 5; Esther 4. 15-16.

<sup>11</sup> Ruth 3. 11, 13; Esther 8. 3-8.

<sup>12</sup> Ruth 4. 10, 13, 17 with Matt. 1. 5, 16; Esther 9. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Rev. 12. 1-5.

<sup>14</sup> Ruth 3. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Esther 6. 1. ‘That same night the king could not get to sleep’, Good News Bible. Literally, ‘the king’s sleep fled’!

<sup>16</sup> Ruth 4. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth 2. 6 ESV.



<sup>18</sup> Esther 2. 17. The word 'wife' is not used of Esther, but 'it was usual with the eastern kings to put a crown or diadem on the heads of their wives at the time of marriage, and declare them queens', John Gill on Esther 2. 17, referring to 'Vid. Paschalius de Coronis, l. 10. c. 8. p. 689'. See also the references to 'husbands' and 'wives', Esther 1. 17, 20.

<sup>19</sup> A name better known in its ordinary Greek form of 'Xerxes', who reigned over Persia from 485 to 465 B.C..

<sup>20</sup> Another point which they have in common is that, although neither young woman is mentioned in Hebrews 11, both were marked by great faith and courage. 'Anti-Semites have always hated the book (of Esther), and the Nazis forbade its reading in the crematoria and the concentration camps. In the dark days before their deaths, Jewish inmates of Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka, and Bergen-Belsen wrote the Book of Esther from memory and read it in secret on Purim', Edwin M. Yamauchi, *The Archaeological Background of Esther*. Its esteem in the Jewish community is often estimated by quoting the well-known saying of Maimonides that, 'when the Prophets and the Writings pass away when the Messiah comes, only Esther and the Torah will remain'.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Sam. 10. 1.

<sup>22</sup> Technically, the king of Judah, 2 Kings 25. 7; a monarch with a wishbone but no backbone! The earthly sovereignty of the house of David was not restored again after the captivity; 'thus says the Lord God, "Remove the turban and take off the crown"', Ezek. 21. 26.

<sup>23</sup> See 'brought/taken', Esther 2. 8.

<sup>24</sup> Matt. 24. 15; Mark 13. 14.

<sup>25</sup> Dan. 10. 1. 'The third year of Cyrus' rule as king over Babylon was 536 B.C. Cyrus had begun ruling over Persia in 559 B.C., but Daniel's and the other biblical writers' interest in Cyrus was as ruler over Babylon, which he conquered in 539 B.C.', Thomas Constable, *Expository Notes*'.

<sup>26</sup> Esther 3. 7 specifies 'the twelfth year of king Ahasuerus', who began to reign in 486 B.C.; that is, the events of Esther 3-4 took place in 474 B.C.. The book of Esther begins in his third year, Esther 1. 3; i.e. in 483 B.C.

<sup>27</sup> R. D. Wilson, *A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament*, page 9, 'has shown conclusively that "Ahasuerus" is the Hebrew rendering of the Greek "Xerxes"', Eugene Merrill, 'Kingdom of Priests', page 498, footnote 2.

<sup>28</sup> See ... [http://www.crystalinks.com/Achaemenid\\_Empire.html](http://www.crystalinks.com/Achaemenid_Empire.html) ... for an excellent history of the Persian empire and kings (although, beware, the main website is mystic!)

<sup>29</sup> There is a gap of more than fifty years between Ezra chapter 6, which ends with events in the year 515 B.C., and chapter 7, which takes place in the year 458. The intervening period is skipped in Ezra's narrative, since no significant events occurred relative to the renewal of Israel's national life in the land, while the book of Esther gives a detailed record of all-important events *outside* of the land.

'There are three key dates given in the book of Esther that allow scholars to fill in the historical events recorded in extra-biblical history as background to the events of this book: the third year of Xerxes (1. 3), the seventh year of Xerxes (2. 16), and the twelfth year of Xerxes (3. 7). The first chronological marker indicates that the banquet at which Queen Vashti was deposed occurred in 483/482, after Xerxes had consolidated his power and was preparing to launch his invasion of Greece. The second marker reveals that Esther was made queen in 479/478, a year after Xerxes' return from Greece. The third marker dates the initiation of Haman's plot against the Jews to 474, a little more than halfway through Xerxes reign'. See too W H Shea, *Esther and History*, accessible at [http://www.auss.info/auss\\_publication\\_file.php?pub\\_id=549&journal=1](http://www.auss.info/auss_publication_file.php?pub_id=549&journal=1), and by A R Millard *Reliability of the Hebrew Text*, accessible at [http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/jbl/1977\\_millard.pdf](http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/jbl/1977_millard.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> Yamauchi notes that archaeologists have excavated the gate where Mordecai sat (2. 19, etc.), the square before the gate (4. 6), and the royal palace at Susa (Shushan), and that the excavated structures correspond perfectly to the descriptions given in the book of Esther, even the secular French excavators acknowledged. Source: Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, page 300.

<sup>31</sup> Ahasuerus/Xerxes ... 'The silly monarch who would decorate a tree with the jewellery of a prince in reward for its fruitfulness, and flog and chain the Hellespont as a punishment for its tempestuousness, is not fit to be let out of the nursery. His consent to the diabolical proposal of his grand vizier for a massacre, without an atom of proof that the victims are guilty, exhibits a hopeless state of mental feebleness', W F Adeney, *The Expositor's Bible* on Esther 1, accessible at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/adeney/expositoreznehes.xxxiii.html>.

Contrast this quote from Yamauchi:

'Interestingly, in 1967 an important new text was discovered near Persepolis when a tractor struck a stone. The self-laudatory description of Xerxes found in the recently discovered inscription translated by Gharib reads :

*'(14–17) I am not hot-tempered...I hold firmly under control by my will. I am ruling over myself.*

*(17–23) The man who cooperates, according to his cooperation thus I protect, who does harm according to his damage thus I punish. It is not my desire that a man should do harm, nor is that my desire if he should do harm, he should not be punished.*

*(23–26) What a man says against a man, that does not convince me, until I hear the solemn testimony of both'.*

Source: Edwin M. Yamauchi, *The Archaeological Background of Esther*, page 104 in *Bibliotheca Sacra*, April-June 1980. Accessed at [http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bsac/1980\\_099\\_yamauchi.pdf](http://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/bsac/1980_099_yamauchi.pdf).

See also, 'A despot who, after his army had been hospitably entertained on its march to Greece, and an enormous sum offered towards defraying the expenses of the war, by Pythius the rich Lydian, could be betrayed into such fury by the request of the latter, that of his five sons who were in the army the eldest might be released, to be the comfort of his declining years, as to command this son to be hewn into two pieces, and to make his army pass between them (Herod. vii. c. 37-39; Seneca, de ira, vii. 17); a tyrant who could behead the builders of the bridge over the Hellespont, because a storm had destroyed the bridge, and command the sea to be scourged, and to be chained by sinking a few fetters (Herod. vii. 35); a debauchee who, after his return from Greece, sought to drive away his vexation at the shameful defeat he had undergone, by revelling in sensual pleasures (Herod. ix. 108f.); so frantic a tyrant was capable of all that is told us in the book of Esther of Ahasuerus', Keil and Delitzsch, 'Historical Character of the Book of Esther'.

<sup>32</sup> Haman is introduced at the moment when he has been exalted to the highest position under the king of Persia; he has just been made grand vizier. He is portrayed as the enemy of the Jews par excellence, as his epithet, "the enemy of the Jews", repeated at crucial junctures in the narrative, reveals (see 3. 10; 8. 1; 9. 10, 24). Haman starts with the truth (that the Jews are scattered and dispersed); goes on to a half-truth (that the Jews have different laws and customs); and ends with a lie (that the Jews do not observe imperial law), Esther 3. 8. Mordecai's loyalty to the king has already been demonstrated and will later be rewarded.

<sup>33</sup> The posts started off with all speed, 'being hastened by the king's commandment'; and the two men who had just planned a nation's extermination (as if they had just completed a good day's work, and deserved refreshment, 'sat down to drink', Esther 3. 15.

Xerxes might well have been uneasy about the request that he should approve this wholesale massacre on such slender grounds. And so Haman at once supports his petition by the offer of enormous monetary gains to follow. He will pay the amount if he has royal permission to plunder the Jews. In the circumstances, such an offer would prove almost irresistible.

<sup>34</sup> Esther 3. 1. See Esther 3. 9: 'I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who carry on the king's business, to put into the king's treasuries'. 'This is a stupendous amount of money. We know from history that it equals two-thirds of the annual budget of the Persian empire (cf. Herodotus, Histories 3.95). Obviously the king was interested in this kind of arrangement since his coffers had been drained by the Greek war. The amount of money shows the intensity of the hatred of Haman'. Bob Utley, *Free Bible Commentary*.

It is clear that the information which Mordecai obtained assured him that the king's treasuries were to receive much of the booty, Esther 4. 7. 'Haman having held out the prospect of a large sum as the result of exterminating the Jews, and the king having bestowed this upon Haman, the plundering of the Jews, thus permitted to all the inhabitants of the kingdom who should assist in exterminating them [Esther 3. 13], must be understood as implying, that they would have to deliver a portion of the booty thus obtained to Haman', *Keil and Delitzsch* on Esther 3. 13.

See Esther 3. 11: 'and the king said to Haman, "The silver is yours"; literally, 'the silver is given to you' (a Qal passive participle). 'It seems from the context that this is the beginning of an Oriental bargaining section (similar to Gen. 23), not simply the king saying to Haman to keep all the money (i.e., silver) yourself (cf. 3. 9; 4. 7). The king was allowing him to pay those who would destroy the Jews and turn in their property to the crown'. Bob Utley, *Free Bible Commentary*.

<sup>35</sup> 'External proof of the career of Mordecai has been found in an undated cuneiform text that mentions a certain Mordecai (Marduka) who was a high official at the Persian court of Shushan during the reign of Xerxes and even before that under Darius I. This text came from Borsippa and is the first reference to Mordecai outside the Bible',

<https://www.biblicaltraining.org/library/book-esther>.

Yamauchi comments about the person of Mordecai: 'The name appears in Aramaic letters, but most significant is the occurrence of the name Marduka, in a tablet from Borsippa in Mesopotamia. The tablet was first noted in the Amherst collection in England in 1904, but was not published until 1942 by Ungnad after it had been sold to the Berlin Museum. Marduka, is listed as a sipîr ("an accountant") who makes an inspection tour of Susa during the last years of Darius or early years of Xerxes. It is Ungnad's conviction that "it is improbable that there were two Mardukas serving as high officials in Susa". He therefore concludes that this individual is none other than Esther's uncle'. See J P Tanner, 'Esther', accessed at <http://paultanner.org/English%20Docs/OT%203/Notes/Sess31-Esther.pdf>. This conclusion has been widely accepted. According to Gordis it is 'the strongest support thus far for the historical character of the book ...'; Robert Gordis, *Megillat Esther: The Masoretic Text with Introduction*, page 6. But see the note of caution sounded by D J A Clines, *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays 1967-1998* Volume 1: In Quest of the Historical Mordecai, pages 436-443.

<sup>36</sup> Esther 2. 21-23.

<sup>37</sup> There is a certain irony in the contrast between Mordecai's informing on Bigthan and Teresh, and Haman's informing on the Jews in chapter 3.

<sup>38</sup> 'Herodotus (Hist. 1.134) writes that the Persians were very conscious of social class, and observed strict protocols: greeting equals with a kiss, but bowing and making obeisance before those of higher standing', A. Tomasino, *Esther: Evangelical Exegetical Commentary*.

<sup>39</sup> Esther 3. 2-6. Both Vashti and Mordecai act in defiance of an order of the king, inciting wrath against them (1. 12; 3. 5).

<sup>40</sup> Contrast Abraham bowing down to the sons of Heth, though they were of the cursed line of Canaan.

<sup>41</sup> Esther 3. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Num. 24. 7 (the writer uses an allusion to the literal significance of the word 'Agag', meaning 'high', to convey that the king of Israel would be 'higher than high'; a characteristic use of puns in biblical poetry). See also 1 Sam. 15. 1-7, 'Agag' being a title rather than a personal name. It is the dynastic name of the kings of Amalek, just as Pharaoh was used as a dynastic name for rulers in ancient Egypt. It is possible that Haman's promotion had been influenced by his royal blood.

Josephus (*Antiquities* xi. 6. 5) and the Targum understand the statement literally to mean that Haman was descended from Agag, king of Amalek. Mordecai and Haman are presented as hereditary enemies, the one the descendant of Kish, and thus connected with the first king of Israel, the other the descendant of Agag, Saul's conquered foe.

<sup>43</sup> Exod. 17. 16.

<sup>44</sup> Deut. 25. 17-19.

<sup>45</sup> This background explains Esther's request for Haman's ten sons to be hanged in disgrace and humiliation on the scaffold, Esther 9. 13-14. It was not spite or vindictiveness on her part. According to Esther 5. 14, Haman's wife and friends urged him to make an example of Mordecai by having a 75-foot-tall pole erected in Susa and impaling the impudent Mordecai in the sight of the entire city. Fifty cubits is equivalent to about seventy-five feet. In the U.S., the National Fire Protection Association defines a high-rise as being higher than 75 feet (23 meters), or about 7 stories. Most building engineers, inspectors, architects and similar professions define a high-rise as a building that is at least 75 feet (23 m) tall. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tower\\_block](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tower_block).

<sup>46</sup> 'Despised'; the word of Esther 1. 17.

<sup>47</sup> Esther 3. 6. Haman extends his decree of annihilation to all of the Jews, not satisfied with removing Mordecai from his position or even putting him to death. This recalls the first transgressor of a royal command in the narrative, Vashti – since the decree promulgated in the wake of her refusal likewise applies to all women and not only to her personally.

<sup>48</sup> Esther 3. 4. Contrast 2. 10, 20. Told to Haman, 3. 6.

<sup>49</sup> Esther 3. 13; 7. 4. It was exactly what Haman had written in his decree, which Mordecai had given to Esther, Esther 3. 13.8. 5.

<sup>50</sup> Esther 3. 10; 8. 1; 9. 10, 24. Cf. 7. 6, where the second word means one who oppresses, afflicts, cause anguish.

<sup>51</sup> A point noted in the parable of Balaam: 'Amalek is the first of the nations', Num. 24. 20; 'Amalek is called the beginning of the nations, not "as belonging to the most distinguished and foremost of the nations in age, power, and celebrity" (Knobel), - for in all these respects this Bedouin tribe, which descended from a grandson of Esau, was surpassed by many other nations, - but as the first heathen nation which opened the conflict of the heathen nations against Israel as the people of God', *Keil and Delitzsch*.

In the synagogue, on the Sabbath preceding Purim, Shabbat Zakhor, Deut. 25. 17–19, and 1 Samuel 15 are read. On the morning of Purim, the reading is Exod. 17. 8–16, the record of the battle between Israel and Amalek.

<sup>52</sup> Esther 4. 3, 'there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing: many lay in sackcloth and ashes'.

<sup>53</sup> 'Susa: once the capital of Elam and then conquered by Cyrus in 539 B.C.E., Susa was chosen by Darius I (521–485) as the site of the main administrative capital of the Persian empire and the king's winter residence (or spring residence; cf. Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.6.22). In the Greek sources, Susa is the only reported destiny of Greek embassies and, in the eyes of the Greeks, is the hub of the Persian empire. Being the administrative centre of the empire, orders went out from Susa to the provinces and reports from the provinces came to Susa', *JPS Commentary*.

'Susa shared with Persepolis, Ecbatana and Ctesiphon the honours of being a royal city', article 'Susa' in *'The Biblical World'*, edited by C. F. Pfeiffer, Baker House.

<sup>54</sup> Esther 3. 15.

<sup>55</sup> In keeping with Jewish custom, Mordecai lamented publicly, in sackcloth and ashes, Esther 4. 1-3.

<sup>56</sup> Israel had been caught totally unawares, having lived in peace and prosperity under the Persians.

Note :

(i). The extent of the contemplated massacre. The Jews were scattered throughout all the provinces of the empire; and to all the provinces the letters commanding to slay them were transmitted by the posts, hastened by the king's commandment.

(ii). The universality of the contemplated massacre. 'Both young and old, little children and women', were to be slain.

(iii). The simultaneousness of the contemplated massacre. The bloody work was to be done in one day — the thirteenth day of the twelfth month.

*The Pulpit Commentary: Homiletics on Esther 3. 13.*

<sup>57</sup> Esther 1. 19; 8. 8; cf. Dan 6. 8, 12, 15.

<sup>58</sup> Esther 3. 12.

<sup>59</sup> Esther 3. 13.

<sup>60</sup> 'The Babylonian Talmud refers to "Preceding the affliction with its cure"', Rav Yonatan Grossman, *Megillat Esther (Timeframe and Chronology)*, accessed at <http://etzion.org.il/vbm/english/archive/ester/02ester.htm>.

<sup>61</sup> Esther 4. 14.

<sup>62</sup> Esther 3. 15. And He stood ready to meet the challenge.

<sup>63</sup> Esther 8. 1, 2, 9; 9. 3. The Jews had a great advantage in that Mordecai was installed in the highest office in the kingdom, and all the provincial rulers stood in fear of him.

<sup>64</sup> And so checkmate Haman's evil designs.

<sup>65</sup> 2 Kings 24. 10-16.

<sup>66</sup> Called 'Jeconiah', 1 Chron. 3. 16; Esther 2. 6..

<sup>67</sup> 'This is evident from Ezek. 33. 21 where the prophet speaks of his captivity as occurring in the twelfth year before the time when the city of Jerusalem was destroyed, which came in 586 B.C. Again in 40. 1 he speaks of an event that occurred in the twenty-fifth year of his captivity, which he says was in the 'fourteenth year after that city was smitten. The captivity of 597 B.C. was the time when King Jehoiachin was taken, along with ten thousand captives (2 Kings 24. 11-16). Ezekiel indicates that his call to the prophetic ministry came in 'the fifth year of King Jehoiachin's captivity' (1. 2)', Leon J. Wood, *The Prophets of Israel*, page 355.

<sup>68</sup> Esther 2. 5-6.

<sup>69</sup> Jer. 25. 9; 27. 6; 43. 10.

<sup>70</sup> Esther 2. 7. 'The Hebrew term (BDB 187, KB 215) can have several familial references. Josephus and Jewish tradition assert that Mordecai was her uncle; the Old Latin and Vulgate texts have "niece" (cf. F. B. Huey, "Esther", Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 4, p. 806,807; NIDOTTE, vol. 1, p. 779, says it is "cousin" not "niece," but p. 923 says it is a possibility). The word has a wide semantic range'. Bob Utley, *Free Bible Commentary*. Yet see v. 15, 'Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai'!

<sup>71</sup> Esther 1. 1; 8. 9. The same mode and purpose of describing the extent of the empire is found in Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 8.8.1: 'That Cyrus's empire was the greatest and most glorious of all the kingdoms in Asia—of that it may be its own witness. For it was bounded on the east by the Indian Ocean, on the north by the Black Sea, on the west by Cyprus and Egypt, and on the south by Ethiopia', Adele Berlin, *JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*.

<sup>72</sup> Esther 3. 1.

<sup>73</sup> A chain of ten links in the book of Esther:

1. Queen Vashti refuses to attend the king's feast.
2. The king accepts the advice of Memucan to remove Vashti.
3. The king accepts the advice of his officials to replace Vashti.
4. Esther is chosen as the new queen.
5. Mordecai hears of, and reports, a plot against the king's life, but the king fails to reward Mordecai at the time.
6. The king's decree authorising the execution of the Jews takes the form of a permission only, and specifies a date 11 months later.
7. Esther is extended the golden sceptre by the king.
8. The king agrees to attend two banquets.
9. During a sleepless night, the king has read to him details of Mordecai's part in frustrating the previous assassination attempt – and, following the pleading of Esther, he later executes the Jews' enemy (Haman) and replaces him with Mordecai as his First Minister.
10. When the day comes for the king's two decrees to be put into operation, Mordecai's recent appointment swings the balance in favour of the Jews, who prevail over their enemies.

<sup>74</sup> 'It cannot escape the reader that there are a lot of parties in the story—ten altogether. The parties, first of all, provide the setting and the tone of the book, which is one of feasting and revelry. The parties also help to structure the scenes of the book. The book opens and closes with a series of banquets. At the beginning, Ahasuerus gives a banquet for the nobility from throughout the empire and then for the residents of Susa. This has its counterpart in the feasting of Purim at the end of the book, which is celebrated by the Jews throughout the empire on 14 Adar and by the Jews of Shushan on 15 Adar. In 1:9, Vashti gives a banquet for the women; in 2:18, Ahasuerus gives a banquet for Esther. Ahasuerus and Haman party to mark the occasion of Haman's decree (3:15) while the Jews party when Mordecai's counter-decree is published (8:17). At the centre of the plot are Esther's two banquets, the second being the climax of the story. Between these two banquets comes another climactic point—the reversal in which Haman must honour Mordecai. More than just a structuring device, the banquet is the setting at which all the major events occur: Vashti loses her queenship at a banquet, Esther is made queen at a banquet, and, most important of all, Esther saves her people at a banquet', Adele Berlin, *JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*.

'The banquet (or literally, "drinking occasion") is an appropriate image for a story set in the Persian Empire. The Persians were well known for their love of wine and strong drink. According to both Herodotus (Hist. 1.133) and Strabo (Geog. 15.3.20), the Persians decided the most important matters of state when they were drunk. (Herodotus adds that the decisions would be confirmed when they had sobered up.) Any decisions made when one was fully sober were considered suspect, and had to be reconsidered when inebriated. These charges have the tone of slander, but the fact that they were promulgated says much about the reputation of the Persians in this era ... the banquets of the opening and closing chapters are both issued by royal decrees: in chapter 1 by Xerxes, but in chapter 9 by Queen Esther and Mordecai. Also, the first banquet of chapter 1 is for the residents of all the provinces, while the second is for the residents of Susa; the first Purim banquet of chapter 9 is for the Jews spread throughout the empire, while the second Purim banquet was for the Jews of Susa', A. Tomasino, *Esther: Evangelical Exegetical Commentary*. King Ahasuerus held two banquets. The first one lasted 180 days and involved the regional rulers. The second lasted for seven days and included everyone.

<sup>75</sup> I have read that Persian queens were not to appear unveiled in public. But, on this occasion, Ahasuerus wished 'to show the people and princes her beauty', Esther 1. 11.

'It is possible that she objected to being paraded before a company of drunken princes, for we are told that 'the royal wine' was 'in abundance', and that, at the time 'the heart of the king was merry with wine'. (Esther 1. 7. Persian wine-drinking is described by Herodotus (1.133): 'They are extremely fond of wine, and they are not supposed to vomit or urinate when anyone else can see. Although they have to be careful about all that, it is usual for them to be drunk when they are debating the most important issues. However, any decision they reach is put to them again on the next day, when they are sober, by the head of the household where the debate takes place; if they still approve of it when they are sober, it is adopted, but otherwise they forget about it. And any issues they debate when sober are reconsidered by them when they are drunk'.

'The Septuagint adds "not" before "rule", because according to some interpretations the normal rule or custom was not followed ... The phrase *ha-shetiyah ka-dat 'ein 'ones* is then better translated "As for drinking according to the rule, no one enforced it"', Adele Berlin, *JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*. Vashti may have tried to preserve her dignity in the face of a group of drunken men who had lost theirs. Or she may simply have been enjoying a good time in the separate banquet which she had organised for the women, Esther 1. 9.

'Vashti's good judgment is hinted at in the analogy created in the text between her refusal to come before the king and Joseph's refusal to the proposition of Potiphar's wife: Vashti: "For she was of handsome appearance" (and therefore the king seeks to bring her) "But Queen Vashti refused" (and therefore she is banished from the palace). Yosef: "Yosef was of handsome form and beautiful appearance" (and therefore Potiphar's wife seeks to seduce him) "But he refused" - and therefore he is banished from Potiphar's house. Vashti may have surmised that such an order could only be issued in a drunken state; and perhaps she believed that after the king sobered up he would understand the tastelessness of his command, or forget about it altogether'.

<sup>76</sup> Since the feast lasts only seven days, Esther 1. 5, Ahasuerus is calling for her on the last day, Esther 1. 10. The fact that this important event, which leads to the next stage of the story, takes place at the last minute, serves to create the sense that 'by coincidence' at the very last minute, Vashti is removed and the way is paved for Esther.

For the king's wrath and anger compare 2. 1; 7. 7, 10. And see ...'Herodotus, clearly no fan of a king that invaded his country, reported that Ahasuerus had a very bad temper. Here is one story from his history ... 'As he marched out the army, Pythias the Lydian, dreading the heavenly omen and encouraged by the gifts given to him by Xerxes, came up to Xerxes and said, "Master, I wish to ask a favor of you, which would be a small favor for you to render, but would be a great favor for me to receive." Xerxes, thinking that he knew everything Pythias could ask for, answered that he would grant the favor and asked him to proclaim what it was he wished. "Master, it happens that I have five sons, and they are all bound to soldier for you against the Greeks. I pray you, king, that you have pity on one who has reached my age and that you set free one of my sons, even the oldest, from your army, so that he may provide for me and my possessions. Take the other four with you, and may you return having accomplished all you intended". Xerxes flew into a horrible rage and replied, "You villainous man, you have the effrontery, seeing me marching with my army against the Greeks, with my sons and brothers and relatives and friends, to remind me of your son, you, my slave, who should rather come with me with your entire household, including your wife! You may now be certain of this, that since the spirit lives in a man's ears, hearing good words it fills the body with delight, when it hears the opposite it swells up. When you at one time performed well and promised more, you had no reason to boast that you outperformed your king in benefits; and now that you have turned most shameless, you shall receive less than what you deserve. You and four of your sons are saved because of your hospitality; but one of your sons, the one you most desire to hold your arms around, will lose his life!" Having answered thus, he commanded those charged to accomplish this to find the eldest of Pythias's sons and cut him in half, and having cut him in two to set one half of his corpse on the right side of the road and the other on the left side, and between these the army moved forth', Richard Hooker, "*Herodotus: The Histories: Xerxes at the Hellespont (mid 5th Century BCE)*," Accessible at ...

[http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world\\_civ\\_reader/world\\_civ\\_reader\\_1/herodotus.html](http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~wldciv/world_civ_reader/world_civ_reader_1/herodotus.html).

<sup>77</sup> Esther 1. 14-20, with seven tongue-twisting names.

<sup>78</sup> The king was humiliated, for he had spent the last six months displaying the glory and sovereignty of his dominion. Now even his wife would not submit to his leadership.

Memucan diverts the issue from the matter of royal authority in a couple of ways. First, he seems to identify the core issue not as a matter of a subject who disobeys an order from the king, but of a wife disobeying her husband. Furthermore, he diverts the question from the personal insult to the king to one of the general good of the empire. The officials will suffer first, because their wives were probably dining with the queen when the order was given, and they actually witnessed Vashti's insubordination. But the matter will certainly not stop there, because word of the deed will spread throughout the entire empire. He elevates the king's marital problem into a national crisis. The advisors are not worried that Vashti's example will provoke other Persian subjects to disobey the king; they are afraid that all the Persian women will scorn their husbands.

<sup>79</sup> Esther 1. 17.

<sup>80</sup> Esther 1. 18. We can take it that Memucan was not a eunuch! Contrast Esther 1. 10 and 1. 14. They are more concerned about themselves than they are about the king. Memucan is trying to do some damage limitation, especially with his wife. He expects women to be so intimidated when they hear of Vashti's fate that they will fear being disobedient to their husbands.

<sup>81</sup> This should be done by royal decree, as a law of the Medes and Persians could not be revoked. Memucan and his colleagues feared that the king might later change his mind about Vashti, leaving them to face her wrath. Already in 1. 19 her title of "queen" has been removed. Before that she was 'Queen Vashti'; but here and in 2. 1 she is just plain 'Vashti'.

The Persians were noted for their excellent road system, which, according to Herodotus, was a Persian invention. It served as a communications network throughout the empire; in Herodotus's view, there was no faster way to send a message. See Herodotus 5.52–53; 8.98; and Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.6.17.

'A long tradition of interpretation sees this phrase and the following one as the wording of the edict that was sent throughout the empire. But, as many scholars have seen, such an edict is unenforceable, if not downright silly. Memucan advised that Vashti be removed from her royal position and that this be written into the laws of Persia. "Then will the judgment executed by Your Majesty resound throughout your realm . . . and all wives will treat their husbands with respect" (v. 20). The edict is that Vashti is to be removed; the effect of publicizing this edict will be that all wives will respect their husbands. In other words, public knowledge of the existence of the edict against Vashti will serve as a warning to all women who would act as Vashti acted. Dispatches were sent to every province in every language so that every man should wield authority in his home. Compare 3:14; 8:13; and even perhaps 9:21. In every case, after the report of the sending of a message throughout the empire, there occurs a phrase with the infinitive *lihyot* followed by a participle. This is never the content of the message; it is always the reason that the message is being publicized: "so that they might be ready for that day" (3:14); "so that the Jews might be ready for that day" (8:13); "so that they will observe the fourteenth day of the month of Adar" (9:21)'.  
'

<sup>82</sup> 'We cannot put aside the image of the king's ministers gathered around before noting that it repeats itself, in identical form, in another two places in the narrative: in the selection of Esther, and in the banishment of Haman. Let us compare the three situations:

Banishment of Vashti (1:12-21)

"The king was exceedingly angry, and his fury burned in him"

"Memukhan said before the king"

"The thing was good in the eyes of the king and the ministers, and the king did as Memucan had said"

Selection of Esther (2:1-4)

When the fury of King Ahasuerus was appeased"

"The king's young men who ministered to him said"

"The thing was good in the eyes of the king, and he did so"

Banishment of Haman (7:7-10):

"The king, in his fury, got up from the banquet of wine"

"Charvona, one of the chamberlains, said"

"The king said: Hang him upon it... and the king's fury was appeased"

Rav Yonatan Grossman, *Megillat Esther, The King's Judgment: Responsible or Ridiculous Rule?* ... accessible at

<https://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:1oESPtKrmYJ:etzion.org.il/vbm/english/archive/ester/04ester.htm+&cd=1&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=uk>.

<sup>83</sup> And, ironically, Vashti's punishment had the effect of preventing her from ever appearing before the king in the future, the very thing she had refused to do on this occasion.

<sup>84</sup> See Keil and Delitzsch on Esther 2. 1-4.

<sup>85</sup> Esther 2. 2-4. The courtiers were quick to drive Vashti out of the King's mind, in case she might return to power and their lives be endangered.

<sup>86</sup> Esther 1. 19. 'Vashti's royal power should be given to someone else, who is better than she. Literally: may the king give her royal power to her neighbour, who is better than she. The wording is very similar to that of 1 Samuel 15. 28 ('The Lord will take from you the royal power over Israel and give it to your neighbour, who is better than you'). Just as David will be a better king than Saul, Esther will be a better queen than Vashti. The similarity implicitly suggests that God is involved in the replacement of the queen. (The names of Mordecai's ancestors can be linked to King Saul, 1 Sam. 9. 1-3.

See [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0LAL/is\\_4\\_31/ai\\_94332361/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0LAL/is_4_31/ai_94332361/).

<sup>87</sup> Esther 1. 3; 2. 12, 16. There is an interesting parallel with the story of Joseph:

Proposal of Joseph's (Genesis 41. 34-37):

"Let Pharaoh act to *appoint officers over* the land  
And let them *gather* all the food of the good years that are imminent  
... under *the hand of* Pharaoh, and let them *keep* food in the cities  
And *the thing was good in* Pharaoh's eyes".

Proposal of Ahasuerus's attendants (Esther 2. 2-4):

"Let the king *appoint officers over* all the provinces of his kingdom  
And let them *gather* every virginal maiden of good appearance  
To *the hand of* Hegai, the king's chamberlain, *keeper* of the women  
And *the thing was good in* the king's eyes".

<sup>88</sup> In a vain attempt to avenge his father's earlier defeat at the battle of Marathon.

'Behold, there shall stand up yet three kings in Persia; and the fourth shall be far richer than they all: and when he is waxed strong through his riches, he shall stir up all against the realm of Greece', Dan. 11. 2. 'Scholars have long recognized that the name *𐎧𐎱𐎠𐎫* ('Āḥašwērōš, "Ahasuerus") is a Hebrew transliteration of the Old Persian name Khšayāršan, which was transliterated into Greek as *Ξέρξης* (Xerxēs), into Elamite as Ikšerša, and into Akkadian as Aḫšī'aršu. The Ahasuerus of the book of Esther is thus the king called Xerxes by the Greek historians. He is identified not just by his name, but also by the extent of his empire (1. 1), his great wealth (1. 2-8), and his long reign (3. 7; 10. 1-2). He completed the royal palace at Susa and aggrandized Persepolis. Ahasuerus is the Hebrew rendering of the Greek Xerxes', Eugene Merrill, *'Kingdom of Priests'*, page 498, footnote 2.

See too <http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2013/04/24/Thermopylae-and-the-Book-of-Esther.aspx>.

The third year of Xerxes' reign would correspond to 483 B.C. According to Herodotus (Hist. 7.8), that was the year that Xerxes assembled his war council to plan his campaign against the Greeks. Several scholars have suggested that the feasts described here could have been designed to raise support for the king's impending invasion of Athens. (But note 'the army of Persia and Media' in Esther 1. 3.) Secular historians tell us that, when he returned three years later, Ahasuerus tried to bury his disgrace in a life of pleasure.

<sup>89</sup> Esther 2. 8-17. A lofty one was put down, and a lowly one is exalted in chapters 1 and 2, just as, in reverse order, in chapters 6 and 7.

'Herodotus' statement that the queen could come only from the seven leading Persian families is often cited as an obstacle to accepting the biblical record of Esther as the queen. But as Wright perceptively notes, Herodotus is contradicted by the fact that Amestris was the daughter of an Otanes, who was not from one of these families. Darius also married outside these families', Edwin M. Yamauchi, *The Archaeological Background of Esther*.

<sup>90</sup> 'Fair of form and good to look at', Esther 2. 7 literally.

Mordecai has been criticised for allowing, perhaps even encouraging, his adopted daughter to seek marriage with a gentile, but there is no evidence that he did so. It is made clear that she was selected as a contestant by government officials; see 2. 3, 8. The expression 'she was taken (*laqash*) into the king's house' is used of Sarah, Gen. 12. 15. (Cf. 2 Sam. 11. 4 'took (*laqash*) her'.) If anything, Mordecai lamented the fact that she was taken; note his concern about 'what would become of her', 2. 11. There is no indication that Esther got to choose whether or not she wished to join the king's harem. Clearly she was just rounded up with the other women and brought to the palace. She made the best of a situation that was outside of her control.

<sup>91</sup> Esther 2. 17.

<sup>92</sup> Esther 4. 14. We note that Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred because Mordecai had charged her to maintain secrecy, Esther 2. 10, 20. She continued to do exactly as she had when brought up by Mordecai; her success and high position had not gone to her head. And it was as well she did obey Mordecai in this case. For this provided Haman with no advance warning of her relationship to the hated Mordecai, or the fact that he (Haman) was about to involve the queen of the kingdom in the king's own death decree.

<sup>93</sup> Esther 2. 3. Josephus (Antiq. 11. 6. 2) tells us that there were 400 young ladies. This is not unlikely since Plutarch (Artaxerxes, 27.5) mentions that Artaxerxes had 360 concubines.

<sup>94</sup> Esther 1. 4; Dan 11. 2. Five years elapsed between Esther becoming queen and the plot of Haman, Esther 2. 16; 3. 7. The four-year gap in the biblical text between the deposing of Vashti (1:3) and the crowning of Esther (2:16) after a purification period of twelve months (2. 12) matches the period in which Xerxes was away from Persia on his expedition against Greece.



- <sup>95</sup> They were not two of the King's 'chamberlains', as in AV and RV. The threshold which these eunuchs guarded was presumably the entrance to the King's private apartments. They were the most trusted watchmen; therefore, their treason was doubly dangerous.
- <sup>96</sup> Esther 2. 21-23. 'When amongst the many intrigues of that Eastern court a plot was set afoot to assassinate the king, news of it leaked out to Mordecai, of all people in the world, and thus he was able to establish a claim upon the king's favour', F. B. Hole. Just as Mordecai and Esther were used to foil a plot against the life of their king, so, in later chapters, they are used to foil a plot against the life of their nation.
- <sup>97</sup> In 465 B.C.
- <sup>98</sup> Xerxes lost his life through a conspiracy formed by Artabanus, the captain of his guard, and Aspamitras, a eunuch and a chamberlain. See Diodorus Siculus XI, 69; Ctesias, Persica, 29. Also see ...  
[http://www.crystalinks.com/Achaemenid\\_Empire.html](http://www.crystalinks.com/Achaemenid_Empire.html).
- <sup>99</sup> Being crucified or impaled, Esther 2. 23. This was the form of capital punishment inflicted upon political offenders in Persia (Herod. iii. 159, iv. 43).
- <sup>100</sup> Esther 2. 23. 'That Mordecai had gone unrewarded for saving the king's life was a reflection on the Persian king, for whom it was a point of honour to reward his benefactors (Herodotus III. 138, 140; V. 11; VIII. 85; IX. 207; Thucydides, Peloponnesian War, I. 138)', C A Moore, 'The Anchor Bible', vol. 7B, page 64.
- <sup>101</sup> The benefactor was strangely forgotten until the right moment. Cf. Joseph and the memory of the chief butler, Gen. 40. 23.
- <sup>102</sup> Esther 8. 11.
- <sup>103</sup> 'Haman having held out the prospect of a large sum as the result of exterminating the Jews, and the king having bestowed this upon Haman, the plundering of the Jews, thus permitted to all the inhabitants of the kingdom who should assist in exterminating them, must be understood as implying, that they would have to deliver a portion of the booty thus obtained to Haman', Keil and Delitzsch.
- <sup>104</sup> Ezra 2. 64 with Ezra 1. 2-3.
- <sup>105</sup> And we can take it that their natural enemies (the Amalekites, for example) would take advantage of the decree to annihilate them.
- <sup>106</sup> Job 5. 13; 1 Cor. 3. 11.
- <sup>107</sup> Esther 1. 19; 8. 8; cf. Dan 6. 8, 12, 15. It seems that Esther herself was unaware of this, Esther 8. 5.
- <sup>108</sup> Genocide is the murder of a whole group of people, especially a whole nation, race, or religious group.
- <sup>109</sup> Esther 3. 12.
- <sup>110</sup> Haman's decree went out on the eve of the slaughter of the Passover lambs. Esther 3. 7: 'In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman'. "Passover, the greatest celebration of deliverance of the Israelites, was celebrated on the fourteenth of Nisan. The edict was written on the thirteenth of Nisan, so it began to be distributed on the fourteenth. Thus, just as the Jews were celebrating deliverance from their great enemy of the past, the Egyptians, they were learning of a new plot from a new enemy", *The IVP Bible Background Commentary, Old Testament*, page 488.
- <sup>111</sup> 'A holiday commemorating the birth of the nation would be an ideal occasion to broadcast the news of the nation's forthcoming decease. But the timing of the casting of lots may have been chosen for another reason. For, according to the Babylonian religion, the gods met at the beginning of the year to decide men's fate', John Bendor-Samuel, *New International Bible Commentary*.
- <sup>112</sup> A 'pogrom' is an organized massacre of a particular ethnic group.
- <sup>113</sup> Esther 3. 7. The use of the lot among the Persians is mentioned by Herodotus (iii. 128) and by Xenophon (Cyrop. i. 6. 44, iv. 5. 55). It was done by means of a small stone die. The term *pur* occurs several times, but is not found in the Bible outside of Esther.

<sup>114</sup> The name 'Purim' was given to the annual feast (the details of which occupy no less than half a chapter of the book, Esther 9. 17-33) by which Israel has commemorated their victory over their enemies ever since. And so, whereas their first victory over Amalek had been commemorated by the building of an altar, Exod. 17. 15 (the altar being named 'Jehovah Nissi', 'The Lord is my Banner'), their last victory over Amalek was commemorated by the instituting of a feast.

<sup>115</sup> 'Interestingly, archaeologists have discovered at Shushan of all places a quadrangular dice, engraved with the numerals 1, 2, 5, 6. Marcel-Auguste Dieulafoy, who excavated at Susa, discovered quadrangular dice at Susa on which were engraved the numbers 1, 2, 5 and 6', Leon Wood, *Survey of Israel's History*, page 409, note 98. See also: 'Haman's method for fixing the date for the destruction of the Jews has been revealed by excavations at Susa (Shushan) by M. Dieulafoy, who actually recovered one of those quadrangular prisms engraved with the Numbers 1,2, 5, 6', Coffman's Commentaries on the Bible at Esther 3. 7, quoting from Merrill F. Unger, *Archeology and the Old Testament*, accessed at <https://www.studydrive.net/commentaries/bcc/-3.html>. The contemporary term for this prism was 'pur'; derived from an Assyrian word 'puru' meaning die or lot; see R K Harrison, *Introduction to Old Testament*, page 1095. The casting of Pur was thought to have great power, and, for this reason, the Jews' later deliverance was viewed as a notable victory over it, Esther 9. 24.

<sup>116</sup> The month's name itself was ominous; it was the month of 'the threshing floor'.

<sup>117</sup> Esther 3. 7, 12-13.

<sup>118</sup> Herodotus 5.52-53 estimated that it would take three months for a message to travel to all parts of the empire.

The Persian system of posts is thus described by Xenophon, who attributes its introduction to Cyrus: "Stables for horses are erected along the various lines of route, at such a distance one from another as a horse can accomplish in a day. All the stables are provided with a number of horses and grooms. There is a post-master to preside over each, who receives the despatches along with the tired men and horses, and sends them on by fresh horses and fresh riders. Sometimes there is no stoppage in the conveyance even at night; since a night courier takes up the work of the day courier, and continues it. It has been said that these posts outstrip the flight of birds, which is not altogether true; but beyond a doubt it is the most rapid of all methods of conveyance by land" ('Cyrop.', 8:6, § 17). No quite as fast as an email, but ... !

<sup>119</sup> Esther 1. 1.

<sup>120</sup> Esther 3. 12; 8. 9 , with a similar Hebrew construction. Esther 8. 9 is the longest verse in the Old Testament.

<sup>121</sup> Note that there was no 'haste' in Esther 8. 14, as there had been in Esther 3. 15.

<sup>122</sup> Prov. 16. 33.

<sup>123</sup> Num. 23. 16 (cf. v. 5), 23. The verse continues, 'now it shall be said of Jacob and Israel, "What has God wrought!"'

<sup>124</sup> Esther 5. 1-3. No doubt Ahasuerus realised that Esther must have been greatly troubled if she risked coming uninvited to the king. He extended the sceptre a second time, Esther 8. 4, but this was to be expected at that point.

<sup>125</sup> Esther 4. 11; cf. 2. 14. Any infringement of this law carried only one penalty ... execution.

<sup>126</sup> Xerxes 'dallied with the most beautiful women of the court, including the wives of his chief officials', Eugene Merrill, *The Kingdom of Priests*, page 499. See Herodotus, 'Histories', Book 9, Chapters 108-109 (accessible at [perseus.tufts.edu](http://perseus.tufts.edu).)

<sup>127</sup> Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book XI, Chapter 6, Paragraph 3: 'Now the king had made a law, that none of his own people should approach him unless he were called, when he sat upon his throne and men, with axes in their hands, stood round about his throne, in order to punish such as approached to him without being called. However, the king sat with a golden sceptre in his hand, which he held out when he had a mind to save any one of those that approached to him without being called, and he who touched it was free from danger'.

Men, with axes in their hands, stood round about his throne, but the king sat with a golden sceptre in his hand. If you didn't get the sceptre, you got the axe!

<sup>128</sup> Hathach had been instructed by Mordecai to present her with a copy of the decree and to inform her of Mordecai's 'command' that she go in, Esther 4. 8. When Esther informed Mordecai of the danger of doing so, Mordecai replied that it was actually more dangerous to refuse. Rank and position will avail nothing against so absolute an edict. The danger, he argues, is greater to Esther if she refuses to go. If she goes to the king, she has a chance of being spared and so save the Jews; if she refuses to go to the king, she will certainly die, even if the other Jews are saved. She certainly would have perished if she had not gone in to the king. The decrees of a Persian monarch were unalterable. Remember how Darius had been very displeased with himself, and set his heart on Daniel to deliver him, and laboured to the going down of the sun to deliver him. He doubtless sought to devise means of maintaining the law and yet evading its import. Into the den of lions Daniel, the king's favourite, was cast, and to the slaughter Esther, though queen, would have been taken when the time was come. Her silence ensures her death; the other course only risks it.

We can understand therefore why Esther wasn't ready to rush in. and, although, after she had been made queen, it remained Esther's practice (we are told) to obey 'Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him' (Esther 2. 10, 20. (the Hebrew of 4. 8 is the same as 2. 10.)). On this occasion, without actually saying 'no', she registered her firm objection. So when she did venture in, she did so with her eyes wide open. Mordecai's answer contains a veiled response to Esther's previous chiding: 'All of the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces *know* ...'." In response, Mordecai indicates that, even if 'all the king's servants' *know* of this law, nevertheless, 'who *knows*' if all of Esther's path to the royal throne was not meant for the sole purpose of her opportune action at that time.

<sup>129</sup> September 2009.

<sup>130</sup> It was nearly three o'clock in the early hours of May 11 1940 before Churchill went to bed. At that moment, he later recalled: 'I was conscious of a profound sense of relief. At last I had the authority to give directions over the whole scene. I felt as if I were walking with destiny, and that all my past life had been but a preparation for this hour and for this trial', Martin Gilbert, '*Winston S. Churchill: Finest Hour, 1939–1941*' (Volume VI; Part 1; Chapter 16, 'The Tenth of May 1940'); Kindle Edition, Location 6350.

<sup>131</sup> Esther 3. 12; 8. 5.

<sup>132</sup> Esther 4. 16. Cf. Gen. 43. 14.

<sup>133</sup> Queen Vashti refused to come when bidden to the king's banquet; Queen Esther comes unbidden to invite the king to her own banquet.

<sup>134</sup> Now Mordecai carries out Esther's commands.

I guess that we should probably have counselled Esther against fasting herself, reasoning that she would need to appear her best and most attractive. (Cf. 'When you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, of a sad face. For they disfigure (lit. 'corrupt', as vv. 19-20) their faces so that they may appear to men to fast', Matt. 6. 16.) <sup>135</sup> But not a word about the perfumes now. Not a word about the sweet odours to prepare herself for the presence of the king. To that she had earlier submitted; it was the king's order. But now, although she does not mention God, it is evident where her faith is. Yet, dressed in her official garb as queen.

<sup>136</sup> Esther 4. 16. Cf. Esther 4. 3, where the Jews fast at the news of Haman's edict.

<sup>137</sup> Though prayer is not mentioned, it was the usual accompaniment of fasting in the Old Testament, and the whole point of fasting was to render the prayer experience more effective. The reference to the Jews' fasting implies an effort to move God to act on their behalf. Indeed, what would be the point of fasting, if not to demonstrate sincerity before God? See Ezra 8. 23; Neh. 1. 4; Dan. 9. 3; Luke 2. 37; Acts 13. 3; 14. 23.

<sup>138</sup> Moses, Aaron and Hur.

<sup>139</sup> 'Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed', Exod. 17. 9-11.

<sup>140</sup> The "three days, night and day," are not to be reckoned as three times twenty-four hours, but to be understood of a fast which lasts till the third day after that on which it begins; for according to Esther 5.1, Esther goes to the king on the third day. Comp. the similar definition of time, Jonah 2. 1.

<sup>141</sup> Esther 2. 17.

<sup>142</sup> Esther 5. 2.

<sup>143</sup> Instantly he held out to her the golden sceptre, which demonstrated that her breach of etiquette was accepted; and, assuming that nothing but some urgent need would have induced her to imperil her life, he followed up his act of grace with an inquiry and a promise. Esther found most true the words of Proverbs 21, 'The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He will', Prov. 21. 1.

'This was the sign of acceptance at the Persian court (cf. Herodotus, 1. 99). This sceptre is depicted in several Persian wall paintings and carvings', Bob Utley, *Free Bible Commentary*.

<sup>144</sup> 'An Oriental idiom of exaggeration (cf. 5. 6; 7. 2; and Herodotus 9.109-11, as well as Herod's use of the same

idiom in Mark 6. 23)', Bob Utley, *Free Bible Commentary*. (Cf. the words of Balak, 'whatever you say to me I will do', Num. 22. 17.) Ahasuerus says this three times, Esther 5. 3, 6; 7. 2. Of course he didn't mean this literally, any more than Herod Antipas many years later. There too, as with Ahasuerus's second and third offers, it had been offered at a banquet as a result of the ruler being 'pleased' with a young woman, Mark 6. 22. In the case of Herod it was used as the opportunity to secure the death of God's prophet, here to secure the life of God's people.

<sup>145</sup> Esther 5. 4, on the third day; cf. 4. 15 and 5. 1. 'That I have prepared for him' ... the party is already prepared, so how can he refuse? Contrast 'which I will prepare for them', 5. 8.

<sup>146</sup> Esther 5. 7-8.

<sup>147</sup> Several suggested reasons for Esther postponing the presentation of her petition:

1. She may have hoped that an enjoyable banquet would dispose Ahasuerus to grant her request. But this doesn't explain her second invitation.

2. Herodotus, the Greek historian, claims that at a Persian banquet, "it is impossible to refuse any person's request." In other words, all other things being equal, it was reasonable to assume that – for etiquette's sake alone – Ahasuerus would then accede to her request. But, again, this doesn't explain her second invitation.

3. She may have preferred a more private place to make her request, But, yet again, this doesn't explain her second invitation.

4 That, when the moment came for her to speak her carefully prepared lines, she was too nervous or fearful. But this doesn't explain why, on the first occasion, she had already prepared the banquet to which she then issues her invitation.

5. That she was prompted by some vague and intuitive feeling that the time was not yet right.

<sup>148</sup> Note Esther 5. 8: 'let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do tomorrow *as the king hath said*'. That is, she is then able to present her request as nothing other than doing what the king himself had said.

<sup>149</sup> Although full of indignation, he restrained himself, Esther 5. 10. Otherwise he might have killed Mordecai there and then, and he would not then have lived to see the deliverance of his people.

<sup>150</sup> Esther 5. 9.

<sup>151</sup> Esther 3. 2. Mordecai earlier refused to bow to Haman, now he makes no motion at all to even acknowledge him.

<sup>152</sup> Esther 5. 14; 6. 4. At that early hour of the morning Haman, intoxicated with pride and full of the imagined success of his schemes, was standing in the court, seeking an audience of the king that he might get his permission to hang Mordecai on the gallows which he had prepared, Esther 6. 4.

<sup>153</sup> Esther 6. 1-3.

<sup>154</sup> Psa. 121. 4.

<sup>155</sup> That night it so 'happens' that the king cannot sleep, he 'happens' to call for the Persian official records, and of all the records, it 'happens' to be the account of Mordecai's action which saved his life which is read, and then Haman 'happens' to be in court early next morning.

<sup>156</sup> Literally, 'sleep fled from the king'. No matter how many sheep (or camels) he counted, he just could not go off. And so there he lies, the master of 127 provinces and yet not the master of 127 minutes sleep!

And why was this? Was he worried about something, as his father Darius had once been, Dan 6. 8?. Is his head buzzing with a thousand state problems? Has he eaten something which does not agree with him? We have no way of knowing. But what we do know is that 'that night' was the all-important night for Mordecai – and for the outworking of God's eternal purpose. And God is never late; cf. 1 Sam. 23. 26.

<sup>157</sup> Dan 6. 18 KJV.

<sup>158</sup> Cf. Ezra 4. 18, and the Behustran inscription of Darius I, which records that 'it was inscribed and read before me'. The original implies that the reading lasted for a considerable time. The object doubtless was that the continuous sound of another's voice might induce slumber. But which book? Specifically, the record of the chronicles of the kingdom. (Herodotus often referred to the Persian chronicles.) I can imagine more inspiring reading! But then which volume? The king rules 127 provinces. But the volume chosen concerned Shushan itself. But of what period? 'It was found written that Mordecai' ... the account of how Mordecai had discovered the assassination plot.

<sup>159</sup> It was natural that Haman, after the favour shown him on the preceding day, should assume that he himself must be the person in the king's mind. So he quickly volunteered what to him would be the greatest possible honour imaginable, Esther 6. 7-9. Having come to obtain permission to have Mordecai impaled (a sign of maximum dishonour), he ends up honouring Mordecai with the highest honour. Haman was waiting outside Xerxes' door, looking for permission to kill Mordecai, at the very moment when the king was pondering how to reward him. The descriptive words that Ahasuerus uses to identify Mordecai point to exactly those characteristics of Mordecai which had antagonized Haman. Haman hates all the Jews (chapter 3), and is further disturbed every time he sees Mordecai sitting in the king's gate (5. 9, 13). The king, unwittingly, was pouring salt on Haman's wounds. Haman must have been mortified!

Esther 6. 11-12 ... The last time Mordecai was in the city square (4. 6) he was dressed in mourning garb. What a change!

<sup>160</sup> Esther 6. 11-12. 'His friends evidently realized that unseen forces were maintaining the blessing that they had observed following the Jews ... They saw in Haman's humiliation before Mordecai, the powerful honoured Jew, an omen of even worse defeat to come. The tide had turned', Thomas Constable, *'Expository Notes'*. Ahasuerus patiently waited to obtain Esther's petition, but he forestalled Haman who came to present his, Esther 6. 6.

<sup>161</sup> If they had been sold as slaves, the situation could have been remedied later. But execution was going too far! Cf. the words of Esther 3. 13 and 7. 4; might the words have rung any bells with the king? Clearly Esther had memorized the exact words of the edict. She dropped her bombshell. Ahasuerus had already lost one queen on the advice of an advisor, and presumably he had no ambition to lose another.

<sup>162</sup> Ahasuerus was mainly influenced in this decision by Esther's impassioned pleas for her people, but also, no doubt, by the fact that he owed his very life to a man from that nation. Now we can understand why it was so important that Esther did not make her request before the king's sleepless night.

<sup>163</sup> As in chapter 6, the high point in chapter 7 is structured around a misperception. This time it is Ahasuerus who misunderstands Haman's gesture of pleading for his life before Esther for an attempt to seduce the queen. Haman must have been doubly shocked: first, by Esther's *true* accusation, and then by Ahasuerus's *false* one.

It was appropriate that the villain be punished for something he did not do. The king's misunderstanding is intentional. It gives the king a pretext to punish Haman, for Haman's real wrong, plotting to kill the Jews, had the king's full endorsement, and how could he fault Haman for something he himself had approved? The king understands full well that Haman has not fallen upon the divan with the intention of assaulting (literally, 'conquering') the queen, but it suits his purposes to present the situation that way.

The punishment of impalement for a sexual offense is mentioned by Herodotus (4.43). A certain Sataspes had raped a virgin, and for this offence King Xerxes ordered that he be impaled. Sataspes' mother pleaded for his life and suggested that he be assigned to sail around Libya instead. Xerxes accepted the suggestion, but when Sataspes failed to sail around Libya, Xerxes had him impaled.

<sup>164</sup> There was 'a series of three things: (1) a royal robe which had been worn by the king; (2) a royal horse which had been ridden by the king and on whose head was the symbol of the Persian crown; and (3) a royal procession, led by the most notable princes, through the streets on this horse with its bedecked rider and a great proclamation', Bob Utley, *Free Bible Commentary*.

<sup>165</sup> Haman's 'wicked device, which he had devised against the Jews, should return upon his own head; and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows', Esther 9. 25. ('Hanged on a tree', Esther 7. 10 literally. This is the same expression as is used in Deut. 21. 23 in both Hebrew and Greek; cf. Acts 5. 30; Gal. 3. 13. That is, Haman was impaled, he was nailed to it. There is no evidence that the Persians ever hanged someone. Of crucifixion, 'it seems that the Persians invented or first used this mode of execution', Kittel's TDNT, volume VII page 573.

'Haman and his sons were hung on high gallows. Many extra-biblical inscriptions and reliefs depict this form of disgraceful execution. According to Herodotus Darius I impaled three thousand Babylonians when he took the city of Babylon, an act which Darius himself recorded on his Behistun Inscription', Edwin M. Yamauchi, *'The Archaeological Background of Esther'*.

Harbonah, one of the eunuchs, informed the king about the gallows Haman made for Mordecai This could only have intensified the king's anger since Harbonah included the reference to Mordecai as the one who spoken good on the king's behalf. A most timely reminder for Ahasuerus that Haman knowingly planned the execution of the very man who had saved the king's life.

<sup>166</sup> Esther 7. 10. Shakespeare's phrase, 'hoist with his own petard', is an idiom that means 'to be harmed by one's own plan to harm someone else', 'to fall into one's own trap'. See Hamlet (III.iv.207): 'For tis the sport to have the engineer hoist with his own petard'. A petard is a small bomb used for blowing up gates and walls when breaching fortifications; <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petard>. 'He who digs a pit, in it he will fall, and he who rolls a stone, on him it will come back', Prov. 26. 27.

<sup>167</sup> Esther 8. 8-12. The personal triumph of Mordecai and Esther over Haman was partially resolved by Haman's execution, but could only be fully resolved by the triumph of all the Jews over all of their enemies. Although the king had set Mordecai and Esther over the house of Haman (8. 1-2), he had yet to reverse Haman's decree against the Jews, which remained in effect and could not legally be repealed. Esther therefore went boldly before the king a second time.

<sup>168</sup> We are told that Ahasuerus was now aware that the people in question were the Jews, Esther 8. 7. It seems that when the scheme had been put to him by Haman he had not realized this. He had been told only of 'a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws', Esther 3. 8. Ahasuerus now specifically referred to Mordecai as 'the Jew', Esther 6. 10 (possibly Mordecai's nationality had been recorded in the chronicles which were read to Ahasuerus the night before), giving no indication that he felt it in any way inconsistent to publicly honour a man who was under sentence of death! Yet that would have been a mockery. Clearly Haman had been careful to cleverly suppress the doomed nation's identity.

Esther 8. 1; 9. 4, 10. 2-3. At the beginning of the story, the king's fury led to the dismissal of his queen, and when his fury abated he needed a new queen. Now, his fury leads to the impalement of his highest official, and when his fury abates he will need a replacement for that official. In summary, two Gentile characters, Vashti and Haman, are deposed from their positions of power. Two Jewish characters, Esther and Mordecai, are exalted to those positions of power.

<sup>169</sup> Esther 7. 10; 8. 1.

<sup>170</sup> Esther herself does not seem to have appreciated that it was not possible even for the king to reverse his own laws, Esther 8. 5, 8.

<sup>171</sup> The second decree which they wrote royal sanction not only for the Jews to defend themselves on the set day, but for them to plunder the goods of their attackers, thereby levelling the playing field, Esther 8. 11; cf. 3. 13.

But we can hardly miss one point of detail. For although the second decree gave the Jews the legal right to spoil their foes, we read on three occasions that at no time did they do so, Esther 9. 10, 15, 16. Why not, we may ask? For their decision not to enrich themselves at the expense of their enemies could hardly have passed unnoticed in a culture where victors were expected to take the spoil. No doubt the answer lies back in 1 Samuel 15, where we read that Saul had been commanded by the Lord to smite the Amalekites and to 'utterly destroy' all that they had, 1 Sam. 15. 3. (This was a technical expression used to describe that which was utterly devoted and consecrated to God – as in the case of Jericho, Josh. 6. 17, 21; 7. 1; 8. 26.) Israel, that is, was to take no spoil from them.

But Saul rejected God's word to him, sparing both Agag and the best of the Amalekites' livestock, 1 Sam. 15. 9. We know that Mordecai and Esther were both descended from the same tribe as Saul, that of Benjamin, Esther 2. 5-7. And on this day of victory over the Amalekite, they were taking no chances; they were most careful to see that nobody made the same mistake as the earlier man from Benjamin had done. What a great testimony. Saul had taken spoil from the Amalekites even though he had been forbidden to do so; the Jews of Persia refused to take any spoil from their enemies even though they are entitled to do so.

<sup>172</sup> Esther 10. 3.

<sup>173</sup> Esther 9. 3. And, as a consequence, the expectation of their enemies was 'turned to the contrary', Esther 9. 1. Esther made one further, last request – that these remarkable events should be commemorated each year by the establishment of a special feast, called Purim, Esther 9. 18-32. The book nowhere claims that God commanded the observance of Purim.

'A Soviet Jew was recently asked by a Westerner what he thought would be the outcome if the USSR stepped up its anti-Semitic policies. "Oh, probably a feast!" Asked for an explanation, the Jewish man said, "Pharaoh tried to wipe out the Hebrews and the result was Passover; Haman tried to exterminate our people and the result was Purim; Antiochus Epiphanes tried to do us in, and the result was Hannukah!", William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, 'Unique Place in the Canon'.

In the synagogue, on the Sabbath preceding Purim, Shabbat Zakhor, Deut. 25. 17–19, and 1 Samuel 15 are read. On the morning of Purim, the reading is Exod. 17. 8–16, the battle between Israel and Amalek.

Contrast the occasion when Susa was bewildered (3. 15) and when Susa was rejoicing (8. 15b).

<sup>174</sup> Luke 10. 19.

<sup>175</sup> Esther 7. 6.

<sup>176</sup> 1 Pet. 5. 8; with Eph. 2. 2, 'the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience'. There can be no doubt that Satan was pulling the strings from behind the curtain.

<sup>177</sup> Some of Satan's efforts to destroy the 'Seed of the woman':

1. Cain's murder of Abel. Cain was Eve's first-born – whom Eve said that she 'had acquired from the Lord', Gen. 4. 1.

2. The corruption which led to the world-wide flood and to the near extinction of the human race, Gen. 6. 5-7.

3. The planned slaughter of all the Jewish male children in Egypt, Exod. 1. 13-16.

4. The attempt by Queen Athaliah of Judah to slay all the seed of David, 2 Chron. 22. 10.

But on this particular occasion in Esther, although the devil was well aware that the Messiah (destined to crush his head one day) would come of the seed of David, because there was now no king in Israel and he had lost all trace of that royal line, he had no choice but to adopt a 'blunderbuss' approach, and to let fly at the whole of the nation.

<sup>178</sup> Herod the Great will be the devil's tool for his first attempt in the New Testament. Rev. 12. 4 draws aside the curtains to reveal Satan as the real instigator at that time.

<sup>179</sup> 'God moves behind the scenes,  
And moves the scenes He is behind.  
In all things, in all ways,  
He knows, He loves, He cares'.

*Author unknown.*

We might well say, "God Behind the Seen!"

One writer (D J A Clines, *On the Way to the Postmodern: Old Testament Essays 1967-1998*, page 443) has said of the book of Esther that 'its story-line is a string of improbable coincidences'. Thankfully, the believer can see that all of these seemingly 'improbable coincidences' were rather carefully planned events shaped by the guiding hand of the 'unmentioned God'!

<sup>180</sup> This is all the more remarkable because the heathen monarch is referred to as 'the king' almost two hundred times in the Hebrew text. (ESV = 167; RV = 181; KJV = 182; Darby = 173; Hebrew = 196.)

It is sometimes claimed that in two places the first letters of four words in the text spell out the name of God (YHWH) and in two other places the last letters of four words spell out the same. Also that, the last letters of four words spell out the generic name of God "I am." The first acrostic is found in Esther 1. 20, the second in 5. 4, the third in 5.13, the fourth in 7. 7, and the fifth (the "I am" acrostic) is in 7. 5. These are all shown in Hebrew and English in Dr. Bullinger's *Companion Bible*, Appendix 60; accessed at ...

<https://levendwater.org/companion/append60.html>. The meaning of this is to show that God is always nearby, even though we may not see him in any obvious sense. Cf. W. Graham Scroggie, *Know Your Bible*, Vol. I, The Old Testament, page 96, and William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary*, Unique Place in the Canon.

But, as has been well pointed out, 'there are several difficulties with these proposed acrostics. First is the fact that only two of these occurrences are even spelled correctly, since the others depend on reading in reverse. Furthermore, the phrases in which the Name supposedly appears are not in any way significant, and in fact do not even form complete thoughts. Indeed, they even break up grammatical units. Also, the sequence of the letters Y-H-W-H at the beginning of words is not at all surprising, since these letters are the most common in the Hebrew Bible: *yodh*, as the prefix for the third masculine singular and third masculine plural imperfect forms of the verb, and the first letter of many proper names; *he*, as the definite article; and *waw*, as the conjunction "and". Quickly scanning the historical books of the OT reveals the Y-H-W-H "acrostic" also occurs in 1 Chron. 5. 12 and 1 Kings 10. 17–18, apparently by accident'.

<sup>181</sup> Although, one day, He will rule 'in Jerusalem', Isa. 24. 23, there and then, He over-ruled in Shushan, for the good of His people.