

THE MOVEMENT AND MESSAGE OF ESTHER. Esther 4:14

The movement and message of the book of Esther center around the interplay of a cast of characters who immediately attract our attention and interest as they are present and active at an ancient Persian court. One of these characters is Ahasuerus, an Oriental king, another queen Esther, the star of the story, then Haman, the villain, and Mordecai, the hero. Such characters as modest queen Vashti, and Zereb, the discerning wife of Haman, appear and quickly play their roles, and pass off the stage. In and thru and above all is the God of heaven, unnamed throughout the book, yet ever present and active, standing "within the shadow, keeping watch above His own."

1. Ahasuerus.

We turn our eyes to king Ahasuerus on the throne of his kingdom as he gives a royal banquet to all the nobles and dignitaries of his kingdom, and as he makes a feast unto all the people, great and small, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. "Banqueting in wine was a major feature of life at this Persian court. In fact in the short book of Esther which vividly describes this life the word "banquet" or its cognates is found twenty times, while it is found only twenty times in the remaining thirty-eight books of the Old Testament.

Ahasuerus has been identified with Xerxes, king of Persia, whose vast fleet was defeated at Salamis in 480 B.C. Secular history says that he had the Hellespont scorched because it presumed to be stormy and break his bridges. According to Herodotus it was in 483 B.C. that he held at Susa a great assembly to plan the Grecian war. This was evidently the time of this royal feasting here described.

Ahasuerus was a ruler of despotic power. He ruled from India even unto Ethiopia. He was absolute and totalitarian to the nth degree. His word was the law of the Medes and Persians which changed not.

He was a king of amazing wealth. In his palace were pillars of marble, couches of gold and silver, and many vessels of gold. The wealth of some of the monarchs of the Middle East to this day is almost unbelievable. ~~That voluptuous ruler of Arabia who died only recently was a man of fabulous wealth, and reminded us of the rich fool of Christ's parable.~~

Ahasuerus was evidently a heavy drinker, a vivid illustration of the truth that "wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging, and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise."

He was also a man of exalted pride. At his royal feast "he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom, and the honor of his excellent majesty many days." At the feast for the general public, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded that his queen Vashti be brought into the carousal "to show the peoples and the princes her beauty; for she was fair to look upon." Her modest and firm refusal filled him with wrath, and led to her divorce and deposition as queen.

One more look at the king reveals him as a man easily influenced; first, by the wise men whose advice he followed in dismissing queen Vashti, second, by the king's servants who proposed a selection of a substitute from among the fair maidens of the kingdom. Then he easily agreed to the evil suggestion of his favorite minister, Haman, and decreed the destruction of the whole Jewish people in his kingdom, and carelessly turned over the whole matter to Haman. Later he was influenced by queen Esther to kill Haman, and to save the Jews.

While Ahasuerus was a man distinctly evil, he was used as an instrument of God for working out His purposes. "The king's heart is in the hands of the Lord as the watercourses: he turneth it whithersoever He will."

2. Esther.

The Hebrew name, Esther, means "star", which is suggestive of the part she played in this inspired dramatic story. She was a star actress. After being told who Esther was, namely, an orphaned Jewess, who was adopted by her cousin, Mordecai,

she is described as "fair and beautiful", the same expression well describing Bathsheba, mother of Solomon. King Ahasuerus seemed to have an eye for beautiful women. There is a Hebrew tradition that places Esther among the three most beautiful women who ever lived. She was winner at the beauty contest at Shushan, the palace.

This young Jewess was obedient and teachable. She had the marks of having been well-trained by Mordecai. This was evident and most valuable in times of crises when "Esther did the commandment of Mordecai, like as when she was brought up with him." "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it."

Esther was popular and influential. She pleased the keeper of the women at the king's palace, and obtained kindness of him. The record says that she "obtained favor in the sight of all them that looked upon her." "And the king loved Esther above all the women and she obtained favor and kindness in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head." Her popularity and influence with the king was used in a most commendable way to intercede successfully with him for the deliverance of the Jewish people, whereas her influence for the bloody and wholesale destruction of the Jews' enemies is questionable. A beautiful, popular, and influential young woman has a wonderful opportunity and tremendous responsibility to use her influence in the right direction. "To whom much is given, much shall be required."

Like her fellow-countryman, Nehemiah, Esther was both cautious and courageous. She was cautious in her approach to the king. At the same time at the right moment she made bold to say to him courageously: "Let my life be given me at my petition and my people at my request; for we are sold, I and my people to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish— And she besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman, the Agagite, and the device he had devised against the Jews."

Esther was patriotic and religious, her patriotism being more in evidence than her religion. She was exceedingly grieved because of the decree of the king for the destruction of the Jews. Love for her people was put ahead of her own self-preservation as she faced the peril of appearing before the king without being called. Whereas this patriotism was wonderfully used for the saving of her people, it was evidently perverted into a revengeful spirit towards the enemies of the Jews, a spirit hard to justify according to the standards of sacred scripture.

The religion of Esther is not prominently set forth in this book. The most evident mark of it was her sense of need as she faced the king to persuade him to save her people, and as she called for what may have been a three days religious fast. In the Apocrypha is recorded a prayer said to have been made by Esther at this time. Perhaps one reason for the comparative silence of the book about her personal religion may have been that in this land of the captivity the true religion of Israel was not only unpopular, but like in many countries behind the iron curtain today, had also been driven underground. It was for such a time as this that Esther had come to the kingdom.

3. Haman.

The villain in the Esther story is Haman, called in the scripture record the Jews' enemy, and in other writings the Judas of the Old Testament. It is hard to tell why he was advanced by the king to a seat above all the princes. The same question may be raised about some men in high places today. His promotion and position were too much for his caliber. He reminds us of the lines, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity." He was full of wrath when Mordecai refused to bow down to him and do him reverence.

His vanity was accompanied by a terrible cruelty which led him to seek to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus. After he had procured this bloody decree, thru offering a sum of money more than two-thirds the whole annual revenue of the empire, the record continues to say, "And the king and Haman sat down to drink." What a picture of the companionship of vanity, cruelty, and drunkenness!

Pride and envy must be added to the list of Haman's vices. Listen to him as he recounts to his friends and his wife "the glory of his riches, the multitude of his children, his advancement by the king, and that he alone was the invited guest to feast with Esther and the king. "Yet all of this availeth me nothing", says the proud man, "so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the gate." Then his wife and friends made the cruel suggestion, which pleased Haman, and which he readily followed, namely, to have a gallows made, that

Mordecai be hanged thereon. This plot was quickly thwarted and reversed. "On that night could not the king sleep." God was present in the palace though his name was absent from this book. The records of the service of Mordecai were read to the king, who called for Mordecai to be most highly honored. Haman was the available man who had to array him in royal apparel, cause him to ride thru the city and to proclaim before him, "Thus shall it be done unto the man whom the king delighteth to honor." Haman had begun to fall and his complete fall was imminent. At the banquet with the queen who exposed the whole wicked plot Haman was afraid, and pled for his life. But the king said, "Hang him thereon." Then we have the climactic statement, "So they hanged Haman on the gallows that had been prepared for Mordecai." "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

As we see the interplay of the character of Haman in this story we are reminded of the words in the prayer of the psalmist: "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee; the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain."

4. Mordecai.

Early in the "Esther story there appears another leading character who comes out as hero at the end. He is a certain Jew of the captivity, named Mordecai. Two words may characterize this man, namely, loyalty and greatness.

He was loyal to his relative, "Esther, training her up in the way she should go, guarding her at the palace grounds, advising her at the time of crisis, and inspiring her with a sense of mission as he said, "And who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Then he was both obedient and companionable to Esther the queen.

He was also loyal to the king. He was instrumental in saving the king's life.

He was loyal to his people, the Jews. Great was his distress over the decree for their destruction, and wise his advice to Esther to seek their deliverance.

While loyalty to God is not definitely expressed in the book of "Esther, we believe it to be a good and necessary inference. We assume that the book was written at a time when it was very dangerous to make any open profession of the worship of the Lord. True believers may have been behind the iron curtain. Even so Mordecai publicly and consistently refused to bow down and do reverence to Haman. Was not this from religious conviction that this reverence be given to God alone? We have seen similar conviction on the part of Korean Christians. And in his advice to Esther is there not a conviction of the over-ruling providence of God, "of his holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions?" It is interesting in this connection to observe that in the Apocrypha is recorded a prayer of Mordecai.

Not only was Mordecai loyal, but also great. In fact "great" is the word used most to describe him, particularly in the latter part of the book. "He went forth from the presence of the king with a great crown of gold——". "He was great in the king's house, and his fame went forth thruout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai waxed greater and greater." The feast of Purim which was instituted and celebrated by the Jews in remembrance of this deliverance of the Jews is referred to in secular history as "The Day of Mordecai." "The full account of the greatness of Mordecai wherunto the king advanced him, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of Media and Persia? For Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethren, seeking the good of the people, and speaking peace unto all his seed." This was nearly five hundred years before there was to be born of the seed of Abraham one whose name was to be called Jesus, for it was He who was to save his people from their sins."

5. Eternal Providence.

In the interplay of leading characters in the book of Esther such as Ahasuerus the king

the king, Esther the star, Haman the villain, and Mordecai the hero, is unfolded the movement of the book. In and thru and above all of this is the unnamed character, God. By His presence and activity there is unfolded to us the message of the book. The book is an illustration of the providence of God. It has been suggested that the theme of the book is found in Lowell's familiar poem:

"Careless seems the great Avenger; history's pages but record
One death grapple in the darkness 'twixt old systems and the word;
Truth forever on the scaffold; wrong forever on the throne—
Yet that scaffold sways the future, and behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own."

Some of the truths about the providence of God which are illustrated in the book of Esther, and called to our attention by Campbell Morgan are these: God's providence may be hidden, but it is at the same time active, and for a purpose. He uses apparently trivial things, such as the king's carousal, the introducing of Esther, the king's sleeplessness, the reading to the king of the record about Mordecai, all for God's purpose.

This providence is all inclusive—including all characters, events, banquets and edicts.

It is based on the perfect knowledge and righteousness of God, and at the same time is loyal to man's free will which is made contributory to Divine purpose.

To those recognizing the overruling activity of God come courage and confidence, to those rebelling come panic and punishment.

We cannot escape God. We may make Him a blasting force or a healing force, according to our attitude towards Him.

On the occasion
when before Daniel the prophet of God interpreted to Belshazzar the handwriting on the wall he said to him, "The God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified." Continuing the interpretation he said to him, "Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting." "In that night Belshazzar the Chaldean king was slain."

On the other hand, as the apostle Paul "stood on the sunlit summit of the word of God," Romans chapter eight, being more than conqueror thru Jesus Christ who loved him, he uttered that supreme verse of the Bible on the providence of God as he said, "For we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them who are the called according to his purpose."

Shall the providence of God be for me for good or for evil, for comfort or for misery, for life or for death? The answer lies in my answer to the most supreme personal question, "What then shall I do unto Jesus who is called Christ?"