

# BIBLE COMPANION COMMENTARY: ESTHER

## ESTHER

### PREFACE

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*Duncan Heaster*

## ESTHER CHAPTER 1

*Esther 1:1 Now it happened in the days of Ahasuerus (this is Ahasuerus who reigned from India even to Ethiopia, over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces)-*

Persia was divided into 20 satrapies, so we have here the theme of exaggeration which is common in Esther. There are still 127 provinces in Esther 8:9 some years later, when historical records claim that Persia lost some of those provinces in those years. Likewise a banquet could hardly last for 184 days, six months, continually attended by so many local leaders. Historically it would seem that at this time he was fighting hard against the Greeks, Egyptians and others, and losing territory- so a celebration of his power was inappropriate, and surely it didn't last six months. Haman's offer of 10,000 talents of silver if the king lets him kill the Jews is unreal; as is his building a massive 50 cubit high gallows on which to hang Mordecai. I suggest we are being given an insight into how Middle Eastern peoples spoke in grossly exaggerated terms. Or we could see this as the Divinely inspired record being satirical, using caricature to poke fun at the apparent opulence of the kingdoms of this world. Just as the opulence of this world makes exaggerated claims. The same effect is produced by the irony of Haman assuming the king wants to honour him, and

having to parade Mordecai in glory; and being hung on the gallows he had built to hang Mordecai on. Through all this, God worked and achieved real and actual results. That's the lesson.

The LXX adds at this point: "In the second year of the reign of Artaxerxes the great king, on the first day of Nisan, Mardochaeus the son of Jarius, the son of Semeias, the son of Cisaus, of the tribe of Benjamine, a Jew dwelling in the city Susa, a great man, serving in the king's palace, saw a vision. Now he was of the captivity which Nabuchodonosor king of Babylon had carried captive from Jerusalem, with Jachonias the king of Judea. And this was his dream: Behold, voices and a noise, thunders and earthquake, tumult upon the earth. And, behold, two great serpents came forth, both ready for conflict, and there came from them a great voice, and by their voice every nation was prepared for battle, even to fight against the nation of the just. And, behold, a day of darkness and blackness, tribulation and anguish, affection and tumult upon the earth. And all the righteous nation was troubled, fearing their own afflictions; and they prepared to die, and cried to God: and from their cry there came as it were a great river from a little fountain, even much water. And light and the sun arose, and the lowly were exalted, and devoured the honorable. And Mardochaeus who had seen this vision and what God desired to do, having awoke, kept it in his heart, and desired by all means to interpret it, even till night. And Mardochaeus rested quiet in the palace with Gabatha and Tharrha the king's two chamberlains, eunuchs who guarded the palace. And he heard their reasoning and searched out their plans, and learnt that they were preparing to lay hands on king Artaxerxes: and he informed the king concerning them. And the king examined the two chamberlains, and they confessed, and were executed. And the king wrote these things for a memorial: also Mardochaeus wrote concerning these matters".

*Esther 1:2 that in those days, when the King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom which was in Shushan the palace-* The impression is given that he had recently ascended the throne and was seeking to demonstrate his power and authority. "Shushan" is the Hebrew word for "lily", which was iconically associated with the Jerusalem temple (s.w. 1 Kings 7:19,22,26; 2 Chron. 4:5). This sets the scene for the impression discussed on :7 that we have here a fake, imitation kingdom and temple of Yahweh.

*Esther 1:3 in the third year of his reign, he made a feast for all his princes and his servants; the powerful ones of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him-* The impression is given of a man with huge power "before him". And this powerful man is set to be manipulated by the invisible hand of God working through a nervous, not very spiritually strong Jewish refugee teenager.

*Esther 1:4 He displayed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty many days, even one hundred and eighty days-* This was the kind of thing Hezekiah did after his deliverance, giving all glory to himself rather than Yahweh and His Kingdom. Riches, glory, honour, majesty and Kingdom are words and ideas all associated with Yahweh's Kingdom, which is the ultimate Kingdom; and which will be displayed eternally and not for 180 days. Again this sets the scene for the impression discussed on :7 that we have here a fake, imitation kingdom of Yahweh; just as Rabshakeh described the kingdom of Assyria in identical language to the description of Yahweh's Kingdom, where Jews would dwell with confidence under their own vine and fig tree. The kingdoms of the world continue to present themselves to us as God's Kingdom, enjoyable now if we submit to them. It seems all

the more wrong for Mordecai to want Esther married to such a man and queen of such a blasphemous kingdom. And yet from his initial weakness, that man was made strong and even a Saviour of God's people. The book of Esther continually pokes fun at Ahasuerus. For it seems [depending upon which Persian king he is identified with] this feast either immediately preceded or followed his loss of significant battles and territory to the Greeks.

*Esther 1:5 When those days were fulfilled, the king made a seven day feast for all the people who were present in Shushan the palace, both great and small, in the court of the garden of the king's palace-* LXX adds in various different details: "Then, I say, the days of the marriage feast were completed, the king made a banquet to the nations who were present in the city six days, in the court of the king's house". This would imply that his queen was a new queen; and that he was kindly disposed towards foreigners. See on :11.

We enquire what is the connection with the other mention of the palace garden in Esther (Esther 1:5; 7:7). It was in the palace garden that Vashti had shamed the king at the banquet; and after Haman's plot is revealed, he goes alone to the same place, again after drinking wine and after a private banquet, presumably with the garden strangely empty now. Again he has been shamed and made to look foolish, this time by Haman. Considering the similarities, he would surely have reflected that now he has a good woman. And this would have made him yet more open to Esther's subsequent requests regarding her people.

*Esther 1:6 There were hangings of white, green and blue material, fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and marble pillars. The couches were of gold and silver, on a pavement of red, white, yellow and black marble-* The LXX brings out the similarities with the tabernacle and the pavement of emerald upon which Yahweh was manifest to Moses in Ex. 24:10 and which becomes the picture of the Heavenly throne room in Rev. 4:3: "On a pavement of emerald stone, and of pearl, and of Parian stone, and open-worked coverings variously flowered, having roses worked round about". The motif of flowers was likewise found in some of the tabernacle furnishings and equipment (Ex. 25:31 etc.). See on :7 for the significance of all this.

*Esther 1:7 They gave them ample drinks in golden vessels of various kinds, including the wine of the kingdom, according to the bounty of the king-*

The golden vessels beg for identification with those used by Belshazzar. Surely the hint is that they were the temple vessels taken from Yahweh's temple. Only some of them were returned under Cyrus as by the time of Darius in Ezra 6:5 there were still some more to be returned. This yet further highlights the glaring spiritual problem presented by a Jew wanting his daughter married to such a blasphemer. And it shows Esther's weakness in being at least willing to go along with the idea, rather than violently objecting as Vashti had done. The story of Vashti is surely included in order to highlight Esther's weakness in not objecting to being part of such immorality.

The focus is upon the alcohol solely, although such Persian feasts were famed for their food. Herodotus claims Ahasuerus was an alcoholic; he loses Vashti as a result of his own shameful alcoholic behaviour, and sits down to drink with Haman after signing the command for a pogrom of all the Jews, including his loyal servant Mordecai and his own wife. These golden cups may well have been those looted from the temple and used by Belshazzar. For Cyrus to order them sent back to Jerusalem

would be a fair statement of repentance by him. Again the impression is given as in :6 that this was a fake tabernacle and temple; see on :2,4,8,9,10,14. And yet even within that, the glory of God was being worked out by the God who is invisible in Esther, "God" never being mentioned in the Hebrew text. This was to teach that God was not inactive with the Jews in exile, although He was not visible as He had been in the time of the tabernacle and temple. And that is a lesson for us today.

*Esther 1:8 In accordance with the law-* This undefined reference to "the law" may be another hint as in :6,7 that we are being given here a picture of a fake tabernacle / temple system.

*The drinking was not compulsory; for so the king had instructed all the officials of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure-* The LXX changes the sense: "And this banquet was not according to the appointed law; but so the king would have it". This was to nudge him towards accepting that his law could be broken or amended, as it was to be later with the destruction of the Jews. But the AV sums up the apparent tension between drinking according to a law, but not needing to obey that law: "the drinking was according to the law; none did compel". "None did compel" could as well be translated "There was no restraint". As if the king's law allowed unrestrained drinking. The next sentence clarifies and confirms this: "for so the king had instructed all the officials of his house, that they should do according to every man's pleasure". The "law" or instruction was that each man could do as he wished with alcohol. It was a shambles, as the king's own drunken behaviour with his wife exemplified.

*Esther 1:9 Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house which belonged to King Ahasuerus-* "The royal house" is literally "the house of the kingdom", the term used for the temple in 2 Chron. 2:1,12. This extends the impression discussed on Esther 1:7 that we have here a fake, imitation temple of Yahweh. Vashti presents as a proto feminist; holding a women's meeting, and then refusing to obey her husband and publically shaming him. This possibly led the king to now desire a woman whom he perceived as totally submissive, unlike Vashti. Esther, we will suggest on Esther 2:3, was a young woman [possibly a teenager] who had been railroaded and used by Mordecai and who appears not at all confident in herself- unlike Vashti. And yet this would have psychologically made the king highly sensitive to her requests for anything- for we are left to imagine she as the cowed, submissive young woman never asked for anything. But when she did ask for something- for the salvation of the Jews- the king was psychologically likely to respond to her. All this was set up by God. According to Jewish tradition, Vashti was the daughter of Belshazzar, the last Babylonian ruler. The marriage was therefore political and lacked love, whereas Ahasuerus is said to have loved Esther. So he was being set up by God's higher hand to be influenced by her request for the Jews' salvation.

Although "God" is never mentioned in Esther and there are no dramatic miracles or Divine interventions, just as there may not be in our lives- the record clearly leaves us marvelling at how active God in fact is, for the salvation of His people. And that is the abiding relevance of the Esther story for us today. Indeed one root meaning of the Hebrew word "Esther", from the root STR, is 'hidden / concealed'. The Septuagint version of Esther contains various additions and mentions of "God" specifically; it seems to me that these additions were added to try to make the book more somehow

spiritual. Yet these attempts fail to perceive the *Deus ex machina*, the invisible hand of God.

Of the 167 verses in the book of Esther, around 120 mention "the king". He in fact is the largest character in the story. The book is all about this hugely powerful man being in fact powerless in the hands of Divine providence. This explains the juxtaposition of Vashti's disobedience (his powerlessness over her) with the description of his power over all the known world. The apparently huge and powerful issues and people in our lives can likewise be removed and controlled by God's hand, quite without visible miracles.

*Esther 1:10 On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carcass, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of Ahasuerus the king-* This may continue the theme of a fake imitation of the heavenly throne room, which has seven spirits (Angels?) standing before the throne of God. The names of at least four of these eunuchs are very similar to the names of the advisor princes in :14. They may well be the same people.

*Esther 1:11 To bring Vashti the queen before the king with the royal crown, to show the people and the princes her beauty; for she was beautiful-* The LXX confirms the impression of :5 LXX that Vashti was only now becoming queen: "to enthrone her, and crown her with the diadem". But we can also understand that he asked her to appear wearing only the royal crown- and this display her beauty. Remember that women in those times appeared veiled and heavily covered whenever in the presence of other men, thus screening their beauty. A command to show her beauty would therefore have involved the removal of such clothing.

*Esther 1:12 But the queen Vashti refused to come at the king's commandment by the eunuchs. Therefore the king was very angry, and his anger burned in him-* Seeing the king was drunk and he had this idea whilst he was drunk (:10), the intention was surely to have her strip or dance naked.

*Esther 1:13 Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times, (for it was the king's custom to consult those who knew law and judgement-* Her refusal probably broke no law; see on :15; Esther 3:5. Here the king finds himself trapped by his own laws; he obviously wanted to have her slain, but he could find no law which prescribed death. The only law relevant was the law which said the queen could be killed if she came to the king without an invitation. There was apparently no law regarding what would happen if she refused an invitation. God wanted to save that drunk man, with his hurt pride. And so He was nudging him to realize that his own laws were going to have to be broken if he really wanted to have his way; which meant that he was not in fact divine. For divine beings were imagined to be unchanging, and to never change their laws. This was going to be developed when later he wishes to change his law to destroy the Jews. God likewise works with us.

*Esther 1:14 and those next to him were Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom)-* The idea of some in the throne room who see the king's face is another of the suggestions listed on :7 which suggest we have here an imitation of the Heavenly throne room. These seven had right of free access to

the king. Even his queen could not approach him unless invited by him. Why this emphasis on all these names? Quite possibly it is satirical; to show that the greatest wisdom of man at this time was all being used by God's invisible hand. They knew the times, law and judgment (:13), but such secular knowledge was overridden by God's hand.

*Esther 1:15 What shall we do to the queen Vashti according to law, because she has not done the bidding of the King Ahasuerus by the eunuchs?*- As explained on :13, "according to law" she couldn't be punished; for there was likely no law governing such a refusal.

*Esther 1:16 Memucan answered before the king and the princes, Vashti the queen has not done wrong to only the king, but also to all the princes, and to all the people who are in all the provinces of the King Ahasuerus-* If there was a law prescribing death in this case, it would have been cited. But there was none. See on :13. And so Memucan comforts the king that indeed they considered she had "done wrong" and labours the implications of what she had done.

*Esther 1:17 For this deed of the queen will become known to all women, causing them to show contempt for their husbands when it is reported, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she didn't come'*- The male assumption of female obedience was such that there was no law prescribing what should be done if a queen refused to come to a king's party. This was God beginning to nudge the king towards obedience and perception of His principles, and to resign his claims to be divine. We would likely not have bothered even trying to work with such a drunken megalomaniac. We would write him off as too hard a case. But God works so gently and persistently with all kinds of people, to lead them to repentance.

*Esther 1:18 Today, the princesses of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's deed will likewise tell all the king's princes. This will cause much contempt and wrath-* The execution of Vashti would have put an end to such fears. And the king surely wanted to do this; but he was trapped by his own legal system, just as he was to be later on when he makes the law to kill the Jews. He was going to end up killing his queen whom he loved, which he had earlier wanted to do to his former queen but couldn't. This paradox was to try to teach him the folly of his own laws and respect of them. It was to help him realize he was not divine, and God's invisible grace was more powerful than any legal system.

*Esther 1:19 If it please the king, let a royal commandment go from him and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, so that it cannot be altered, that Vashti may never again come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal estate to another who is better than she-* Kingship and power were thought to be expressed by making laws and not changing them. The God of Israel however does change His position on things, alters His purpose in accordance with human response (Jer. 18:8-10), and annulled His own eternal law. He does so unashamedly, in reflection of His sensitivity. The LXX has "and let him not alter it". The king could change his own laws but it would involve a loss of face and an admission he was not divine; for they thought that God cannot change in any way. Hence the refusal of

Darius to change his law about Daniel was not because he was unable to, but because he lacked humility.

"Better than she" alludes to the meaning of 'Vashti', 'the best'.

*Esther 1:20 When the king's decree which he shall make is published throughout all his kingdom (for it is great), all the wives will give their husbands honour, both great and small-* The reminder of the greatness of the kingdom was an appeal to his vanity. Their solution was actually very weak. It amounted to: 'If a woman refuses to dance naked before her husband's friends, then he can divorce her and take another wife'. This was fairly mild for the Persians; the death penalty wasn't in view. Through all this, God was working. Although the Name of God doesn't occur in the Hebrew text of Esther, the letters Y-H-V-H are found in various forms throughout the book as acrostics, and this is an example (Esther 1:20; 5:4,13; 7:5,7). Acrostics work both with the first letters of words forming the YHWH Name, or with the last letters of the words likewise. Thus the first letters of the words in the sentence "David Understands Nothing Concerning Andy Norris" spells 'Duncan'. Duncan is in fact stamped upon an apparently random statement about David and Andy Norris. Likewise 'Duncan' is stamped on the line "When a diabetic can menu read", taking the last letters of each word backwards. But when we look at those places where this is done in the Hebrew text of Esther, there seems no particular purpose for the Yahweh Name being alluded to there. And that is the point- in the apparently Godless narrative of human life, God's Name, God, is stamped at apparently random points. To remind us that He is very much there, and is not a God afar off. We note that when YHWH is spelt forwards, with the first letters of words forming the YHWH Name, the speaker is an Jew; and when it is spelt with the last letters of the words, the speaker is a Gentile. These things were clearly intentional and designed. But this hiding of God in the text reflects how God was hiding His face from His people because of their sins and refusal to return to Him, and the association with idolatry which Mordecai and Esther demonstrated by their names and Esther's hiding of her Jewish religion. Dt. 31:18 comes to mind: "On that day I will surely hide my face on account of all the evil they have done by turning to other gods".

*Esther 1:21 This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did according to the word of Memucan-* Again the king is being nudged towards realizing that he is not sovereign and all wise and powerful, as he was addressed. He did the word of an adviser, who came up with a plan he didn't conceive; and the lesson was repeated to him in Esther 2:4. He was being prepared to agree to do the words of Esther and Mordecai later. And God likewise works with people today, using one situation or experience to prepare them for another.

*Esther 1:22 for he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to its writing, and to every people in their language, that every man should rule his own house, and that it should be published in the language of each people-* This idea is alluded to in 1 Tim. 3:5, where a brother is supposed to "rule his own house" spiritually. And yet in the same letter (1 Tim. 5:14) a woman is supposed to rule the household (Gk.); perhaps subverting the expectation of male rulership in practical matters, and yet saying in 1 Tim. 3:5 that the cultural expectation that a man should "rule the household" be reinterpreted in spiritual terms.

## ESTHER CHAPTER 2

*Esther 2:1 After these things, when the wrath of King Ahasuerus was pacified, he remembered Vashti and what she had done, and what was decreed against her-* The LXX reverses this: "he no more mentioned Astin, bearing in mind what she had said, and how he had condemned her". This is perhaps painting a picture of the king as generally living for the moment and forgetting the past and its implications. It would explain why he agrees to Haman's request in an irresponsible manner, forgetting that his servant Mordecai was a Jew. And it fits with his forgetting of how Mordecai had saved him from assassination, and he had forgotten to reward him.

*Esther 2:2 Then the king's servants who served him said, Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king-* As explained on :1, he had forgotten the whole issue with Vashti, perhaps because he was drunk for many days whilst it was all going on (Esther 1:10). He likely had many wives and concubines and may literally have forgotten about the whole business. He is now as it were reminded by his servants of his publicized intention to replace Vashti, as if he needed to get on with it. The long period of time in the program for finding a replacement for her (:12), five years after Vashti was fired (:16), would suggest that he had many wives and was not seeking as it were a singular wife; it was just one of his wives who was being replaced by another.

*Esther 2:3 Let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the beautiful young virgins to the citadel of Susa, to the women's house, to the custody of Hegai the king's eunuch, keeper of the women. Let cosmetics be given them-* This house of the women and "keeper of the women" would suggest that Vashti was far from his only wife / queen and he had a special harem of women. The prospect of being chosen was hardly appealing, surely. There was at least a four year gap between Vashti being demoted [or executed] and the new queen being chosen (Esther 1:3 cp. 2:16). It seems for much of this time, the king was away fighting Greece. The number of nights he spent in Susa was perhaps no more than say 800. And did he have sex every night? We could guess that around 500 girls were used. If they weren't chosen after their one night with the king, they entered the house of the concubines, not allowed to ever marry again, probably never having children of their own, and condemned to living together with a few hundred other loser women who had likewise failed to impress. Both Artaxerxes and Darius III are said to have had such harems of 360 concubines. The job of Hegai was to pander to the king's sexual preferences. He would have been little more than a pimp for the king. And the excessively proud king was a man who when drunk asked his wife to strip for the guests [for women were always veiled in public, and so to display her beauty would have meant removing her modest public clothing]. His princes / advisors all had to become eunuchs, i.e. he had had them castrated (see on Esther 1:10). And he had a law that if his wife came to see him uninvited, he might have her beheaded. Esther would be secluded from the outside world, to the extent that she didn't even know of Haman's decree and had to communicate with Mordecai through Hatach her servant. Being Queen of Persia was an awful life for the woman. It would be every good father's worst nightmare for his daughter to be sucked into such a situation with such a man, let alone in all the ritzy idolatrous pomp of a Gentile court- which was perhaps abusing Yahweh's temple vessels in their orgies. Clearly the king was an alcoholic (see on Esther 1:7); not a great choice for a son in law. He had major anger issues;

Herodotus gives many examples, like him commanding his soldiers to whip the sea because a storm had destroyed a bridge. And yet Mordecai we can assume pushes Esther forward, knowing all this. For virgins were kept at home and all discussion about their marriage was strictly through the father. We are mistaken to imagine pretty young women serving behind shop counters or going around in life displaying their beauty and being noticed. That's not how it was; virgins were kept veiled and at home. This wasn't life on a council estate. The appeal for candidates to be Queen would have been responded to by fathers, not the girls. Mordecai lived in Shushan and the girls were brought to Shushan- and it seems we are meant to understand that he pushed her forward into the contest, even though the candidates were specifically not to be from Shushan. There were 30 - 50 million people in the Persian empire, and candidates were being sought for the role of queen, not simply a sex object. So the idea of beauty contests being held throughout the empire is mythical. Men in power put their daughters forward. And this was set up as a sex show, not a beauty pageant. She only had at best a 1:500 chance of being chosen. Quite possibly she was given the name "Esther" after becoming queen, a form of Astarte, goddess of sex. She was trained for her one night chance by Hegai, sexual advisor to the candidates. The whole thing is of the flesh and not spiritual. And Mordecai paces outside the palace so anxious Esther win the contest. There were massive chances of her being left a miserable, rejected, childless, kept woman, losing her freedom in the house of the concubines. Mordecai presents as extremely weak in wanting to risk Esther for this. He hardly presents as loving her. He should surely have known anyway that marriage to a Gentile pagan and sex outside of marriage was sinful, let alone sex of this nature- a man sleeping with hundreds of women, the vast majority of whom he knew he wouldn't marry. And yet through this great act of weakness, coupled with his stubborn cultural insistence on displaying his traditional Judaism by not bowing to Haman, God brought about His peoples' salvation, through such weak vessels. And this is the abiding wonder of it all. The weak Mordecai is presented in Esther 9,10 as the equivalent of a Joseph or Daniel, exalted to greatness amongst the Gentiles; from which position he brought blessing to God's people. And yet he and Esther had refused the calls to return to the land under Cyrus, and instead had remained in the pagan pomp of Persia. But God worked through even that, and the story was to spiritually encourage the many other Jews who were in Mordecai and Esther's position.

*Esther 2:4 and let the maiden who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti. The thing pleased the king, and he did so-* Again the king is being nudged towards realizing that he is not sovereign and all wise and powerful, as he was addressed. He did the word of an adviser, who came up with a plan he didn't conceive; and this is a repeat of the lesson given to him in Esther 1:21 when again he is obedient to the words of others. He was being prepared to agree to do the words of Esther and Mordecai later. And God likewise works with people today, using one situation or experience to prepare them for another.

*Esther 2:5 There was a certain Jew in the citadel of Susa, whose name was Mordecai, son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish a Benjamite-* Mordecai is a take on 'Marduk', whose temple had been rebuilt by Cyrus. Instead of responding to the decree of Cyrus for Jews to return home, Mordecai had instead gone with the flow of assimilating to Cyrus' religion. So much of later Isaiah is taken up with mockery and criticism of the Babylonian gods and the Marduk cult. The book of Esther, with Mordecai as the joint

hero, named as he was after Marduk, demonstrates how caught up were the Jews with the Babylonian gods. Ezekiel repeatedly reveals the idolatry of the captives. Isaiah was therefore an appeal for the Jews to quit the Marduk cult and believe in the radical prophecies about the overthrow of Babylon. We know from Ez. 8, Jer. 44 and Zech. 5 that many Jews had accepted the idols of their Babylonian conquerors, rather like Ahaz did after his defeat by Assyria (2 Kings 16:10). The spirit of ridiculing the idolatry of Babylon whilst living in it, waiting the call to leave, is so relevant to modern Christians working, living and waiting in latter day Babylon. Mordecai was a descendant of the family of Saul; he isn't presented as a particularly spiritual man to start with. The fact he worked in the palace also indicates that, seeing he would have to go along with much paganism to do his job. If the LXX is correct, he sacrificed his own intended wife because he loved the idea of having power and prestige more than he did his wife. Again, not a very spiritual impression.

The Biblical character Shimei was the one who cursed David and supported his overthrow. The Shimei mentioned here was either the same person, or someone named in his honour. Immediately we don't get a positive spiritual impression of Mordecai's ancestry- nor Esther's, who was related to the same line. "Kish" likewise suggests Saul's father. Haman was an Agagite, and Saul had had war and victory against the Agagites. So again we see how from the get go, the higher hand of God was involved, repeating history.

*Esther 2:6 who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives who had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away-* Note the triple repetition of "carried away". This is to set up the similarity but spiritual contrast with Daniel who is described in the same way. "Who had been carried away" grammatically has a relative pronoun that should refer to Mordecai, not Kish. If Mordecai was one of the captives carried away, this means he was either a very old man, or the "Ahasuerus" of the story is a name for one of the early kings of Persia during the exile. We note that those taken captive with Jeconiah were the ruling classes (2 Kings 24:15). Possibly the reference of "Who had been carried away" is to Kish, making him a fourth generation exile. But the logical reference is to Mordecai himself. At this time, he is established in the kingdom, and the exiled Jews are wealthy. So we are now some way into the exile. If he had been carried away captive, this would make him an old man, and his intention to raise the virgin Esther as his wife (:7 LXX) presents him as somewhat perverted. And yet it was this dysfunctional family that God chose to use to save His people. Not an Ezra or Nehemiah, but a man like Mordecai. And it is he who out of left field, in spiritual terms, is so highly exalted. Esther 2:5 introduces him as "a man, a Judean" ('ish Yehudi). This very phrase is found in Zech. 8:23: "In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue shall take hold of the robe of a man, a Judean ('ish Yehudi), saying, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'". And that happened in that "many peoples (nations) from the land declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them" (Esther 8:17).

*Esther 2:7 He brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle's daughter; for she had neither father nor mother-* "Myrtle" ['Hadassah'] is a plant native to Persia and not Palestine, suggesting her assimilation; and the group of myrtle trees in Zech. 1:8,10,11 appears to represent Persia. She doesn't have a name that references Yahweh or in fact anything directly spiritual. The myrtle was associated by the prophets with Judah's return from exile (Is. 41:19,20; 55:13; Zech. 1:8-11; Neh. 8:15).

The fact Esther didn't return, and her life's work didn't result in her people returning but rather remaining in exile... rather suggests that she failed to live up to her potential. Esther, "Star", is another reference to Marduk (see on :5); or "Esther" could be a form of 'Ishtar', goddess of sex, and the title given to the woman who won the sex contest. "Uncle's daughter" is an interpretation; the idea is, a relative. Some versions give "cousin", and Marduk [=Mordecai] and Ishtar [= Esther] were cousins. Yet "Esther", Ishtar / Astarte, the queen of sex, was I suggest the title given to Hadassah when she won the sex context to become the queen. If indeed she was Mordecai's cousin, we again see the invisible hand of God at work. Especially considering that she apparently hid from the king her relationship to Mordecai. She is hardly presented as a spiritually minded young woman, but as a Jewess who had totally assimilated into Persia.

*The maiden was fair and beautiful; and when her father and mother were dead, Mordecai took her for his own daughter-*

"Daughter" is 'bat' and "house" is 'bet'. This confusion and unclarity in the Hebrew led the LXX to assume 'bet', and that this means he took her with the intention to be his wife. LXX "And he had a foster child, daughter of Aminadab his father's brother, and her name was Esther; and when her parents were dead, he brought her up for a wife for himself". This would be rather similar to how Uriah raised Bathsheba (according to Nathan's parable of the man with the lamb) to become his wife, and she did so. Seeing Mordecai hadn't yet married Esther, she would have been very young, perhaps still in her mid teens. That God should use such a youngster is typical of how He uses the meek and weak for His great purposes. And quite possibly if Mordecai had been taken into exile, he was now very old. "Took her" usually refers to a man taking a wife. It has been claimed that "'Hadassah' is the Aramaized form of Akkadian *hadashshatu*, 'bride', a common epithet of Ishtar". In this case, naming the orphan "bride" spoke of what Mordecai intended doing with her. Raising an orphan girl in order to marry her... doesn't speak well of him really. Quite possibly he is presented as a nonce. And yet the book of Esther has more to say about Mordecai than about Esther, and concludes speaking extensively of his glory- whilst Esther isn't mentioned. He certainly came a very long way spiritually- and very quickly. We notice twice that Esther was "taken"- by Mordecai, as his daughter; and into the harem (Esther 2:7,8). Esther's passivity will be changed by the hand of providence into her being a proactive worker on her own initiative for the salvation of God's people.

*Esther 2:8 So it happened that when the king's commandment and his decree was heard, and when many maidens were gathered together to the citadel of Susa, to the custody of Hegai, Esther was taken into the king's house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women-* Hegai and his college of women was not simply a safe place for the women to stay. It was effectively a college for sex workers. And Esther willingly entered it, on Mordecai's arrangement. The whole intention was to produce women who could fulfil the king's various desires.

*Esther 2:9 The maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness from him. He quickly gave her cosmetics and her portions of food-* "Pleased him" is literally, found grace in his eyes- the same language used of Joseph finding grace before Potiphar (Gen. 39:4). And there are many such similarities. But in many ways the similarities break down, because Esther wasn't Joseph. Thus Pharaoh gave his signet ring to Joseph, but in the Esther story, the king gives it to Haman (Gen. 41:42; Esther 3:10). She is contrasted

with young Daniel, who in this situation refused to eat such food. She is presented as spiritually weak.

*And the seven choice maidens who were to be given her out of the king's house. He moved her and her maidens to the best place in the women's house-* These maidens were likely to be used in the sex show she was being trained to put on. Hegai clearly had a big influence upon who was finally accepted. He knew the king's taste in women as it was his job to pander to it and arrange fulfilment for him. His instinctive liking of Esther amongst the many competitors was therefore providentially arranged.

*Esther 2:10 Esther had not made known her people nor her relatives, because Mordecai had instructed her that she should not make it known-* God's people were intended to be a light to the Gentile world (Ex. 19:6). And marriage to Gentiles and sex outside of marriage was wrong according to God's law. This was surely an indication of spiritual weakness; and yet God worked through it, just as He may use marriage *out of* the faith to bring someone *to* the faith. She stands in stark contrast to Daniel and his friends who risked death for the sake of keeping the Jewish law (Dan. 1:8-16; 6:8-10), and yet similar to Jonah who in his weakness did not tell / make know his people to the sailors (Jonah 1:8 s.w.)- and at that point, he was representative of a spiritually weak Judah in exile.

*Esther 2:11 Mordecai walked every day in front of the court of the women's house, to find out how Esther was doing, and what would become of her-* He paced up and down in agitation. Mordecai really wanted his plan to succeed, but for the wrong reasons. But God chose to work through it, rather than turn away from a poorly motivated man and his weak daughter.

*Esther 2:12 Each young woman's turn came to go in to King Ahasuerus after her purification for twelve months (for so were the days of their purification accomplished, six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with sweet fragrances and with preparations for beautifying women)-* The ultimate opulence of the court scene in chapter 1 is matched by the king sleeping with hundreds of virgins, who had each been preparing for their night with him for a whole year. Herodotus claimed that a Persian king could only marry a queen from one of the seven Persian royal families; that was typical of most monarchs in whatever empire or nation. And so this appeal for the most sexual women to be gathered to him to marry was a departure from tradition. Driven by his extreme hedonism. The fragrances mentioned here are those already noted in the Bible for their use in a specifically sexual and immoral context (Prov. 7:17; Song 1:13; 5:5,13), and this obviously raises questions as to whether Esther was morally right to go along with this. The long period of time in the program for finding a replacement for her (:2) was possibly because he was away fighting the Greeks; but it might also suggest that he had many wives and was not seeking as it were a singular wife; it was just one of his wives who was being replaced by another. 'Going in to the king' surely is the familiar euphemism for the sexual act. To be willing to do this with a Gentile outside of marriage is surely an indication of spiritual weakness.

*Esther 2:13 The young woman then came to the king like this: whatever she desired was given her to go with her out of the women's house to the king's house-* This doesn't just refer to whatever cosmetics or clothing she desired. She had been given seven female assistants. The idea was that she would conceive and put on a sex show

for the king; for the idea was that she was to do what Vashti had refused to do. But see on :15. The Gentile Vashti thereby appears as more moral and ethical than the Jewish Esther, as we find so often in Biblical history.

*Esther 2:14 In the evening she went, and on the next day she returned into the second women's house, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who kept the concubines. She came in to the king no more, unless the king delighted in her, and she was called by name-* That Esther 'went in' to the king in the evening and then returned in the morning, having spent the night with the king, to the separate dwelling, of women with whom the king had slept and who were no longer virgins, indicates clearly enough that she slept with him. She knew this was to be the procedure and that statistically he was unlikely to 'marry' her seeing there were many such competitors. To participate in this, let alone with the enthusiasm for it which Mordecai showed, was clearly sinful and a betrayal of all the moral principles Israel were supposed to be committed to. If Vashti had refused to be sexually immoral on pain of death, Esther surely could have done likewise.

*Esther 2:15 Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for his daughter, came to go in to the king, she required nothing but what Hegai the king's eunuch, the keeper of the women, advised. Esther obtained favour in the sight of all those who looked at her-* I suggested on :13 that she had been given the seven other young women in order to prepare a sex show for the king. But it could appear that she didn't take them with her, and only used the cosmetics and clothing provided. Perhaps it was this unusual departure from the norm which focused the king's attention singularly upon her. So perhaps she too was being taught that her even slight attention to some level of morality was being blessed. However we notice her obedience to Hegai, her trainer and handler. This totally contrasts with Daniel and his friends, whose example was surely known to Esther. They too had a handler and trainer, another eunuch; but they refused what they were given. She contrasts weakly and poorly with Daniel.

*Esther 2:16 So Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus into his royal house in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign-* "The royal house" is literally "the house of the kingdom", the term used for the temple in 2 Chron. 2:1,12. This extends the impression discussed on Esther 1:7 that we have here a fake, imitation temple of Yahweh. This was about five years after the Vashti incident; see on :2.

*Esther 2:17 The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she obtained favour and kindness in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown on her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti-* This was also from God; He worked on the tastes and perceptions of the king so that he favoured Esther. For all such attraction is subjective and deeply personal. But God worked through this. For four years, the king had been sleeping with beautiful virgins, trained by the pimp Hegai to sexually gratify him. He therefore hardly knew what it was to truly "love" a woman. We can read this as meaning that he didn't truly love her. Or, we see something abnormal here- something from the God who is never specifically mentioned. A man who had had all this sexual experience for the previous four years... actually loved one woman, Esther. And God was going to work through that, to the salvation of His people.

*Esther 2:18 Then the king made a great feast for all his princes and his servants, even Esther's feast; and he proclaimed a holiday in the provinces, and gave gifts according to the king's bounty-* "Holiday" is literally "release"- from taxation, or from military service, or from both, for a specified period. The invisible hand of God was working to make Esther popular with the Persian people.

*Esther 2:19 When the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting in the king's gate-* It would seem that the gathering of virgins to the king for him to choose a queen was a regular occurrence. The houses for the girls were already built and the system of preparing them was already organized. But it could be that there was an attempt to replace Esther with the puppet of some other group. Esther had won the conquest because (under God's hand) the king preferred her. But there were likely other men and interest groups like Mordecai who wanted their daughters to be chosen. The repetition of Mordecai being "In the king's gate" in :21 would suggest that it was because of his position there that he uncovered the assassination plot. And this would have solidified his position, when perhaps it was under threat from other pretenders who were aware that Esther was his daughter, even though the king seems unaware of it. Or we could read this as his appointment to sit in the king's gate; and the implication might be that Esther was somehow behind it. The second gathering of the virgins was perhaps to witness Esther's coronation. They would all have been seething with jealousy and frustration.

*Esther 2:20 Esther had not yet made known her relatives nor her people, as Mordecai had commanded her; for Esther obeyed Mordecai, like she did when she was brought up by him-* LXX "and Esther changed not her manner of life" may suggest she did not have any spiritual transformation whilst in the palace. She was still a spiritually weak young woman who rose up to the situation. She presents as always obedient- and likewise obedient to whatever Hegai told her to wear and what sex to do, the night she went in to the king. It is only the need of her people that was the call for her to individuate, and suddenly initiate a plan to save her people. And we see such growth, not only spiritually but also of persons, as they mature under the guidance of God's invisible hand.

It is observable that many believers start their walk with the Lord by keeping their commitment to Him somewhat secret. Yet we are a city set on a hill, a candle lit by the Lord to give light to others. Salvation requires us to "declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord'" (Rom. 10:9). There must be public confession. And so the Lord often works through providence to create situations where a believer has to 'come out'. Esther is a classic case of this, and we see it in the spiritual paths of many Muslim background believers. Mordecai quite possibly justified his command to Esther by reflecting that Moses had likewise concealed his Hebrew ethnicity until he was 40 years old, when he likewise served in the court of a Gentile despot. And yet those years weren't Moses at his best, and again, God providentially orchestrated situations so that Moses too had to come out as Hebrew, and save his people.

*Esther 2:21 In those days, while Mordecai was sitting in the king's gate, two of the king's eunuchs who were doorkeepers, Bigthan and Teresh, were angry, and sought to lay hands on the King Ahasuerus-* LXX claims they were angry because Mordecai had been promoted.

*Esther 2:22 This thing became known to Mordecai, who informed Esther the queen; and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name-* This was clearly the invisible hand of God working to set up Esther and Mordecai positively in the king's eyes.

*Esther 2:23 When this matter was investigated, and it was found to be so, they were both hanged on a tree; and it was written in the book of the chronicles in the king's presence-* And yet the king seems to have forgotten about Mordecai, who was well known as a Jew, because he signs the decree for killing all the Jews without thinking about that. He comes over as a superficial man with no interest in the past or its consequences. And yet God was working to nudge even such a person towards Him.

### ESTHER CHAPTER 3

*Esther 3:1 After these things-* Between the seventh (Esther 2:16) and the twelfth (Esther 3:7) years of Xerxes' reign.

*King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes who were with him-*

"Hammedatha" is a female proper noun. Possibly the Jewish Queen Hammatal of 2 Kings 23:31; 24:18. And yet he was essentially an Agagite through his father. Unless we read "the captive" instead of "the Agagite". If this connection is valid, then we can better understand the jealousy between Mordecai and Haman.

The lifting up of Haman will end with his being lifted up on his own gallows. Time and again, the record pokes fun at the high and mighty of this world. Again we see the superficial nature of the king, to promote such a person to the greatest position of power. "Agagite" is a form of "Gog", and so he is set up as the representative of the latter day attempted persecutor of God's people. But Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* xi. 6. 5) and the Targum understand this to mean that Haman was descended from Agag, king of Amalek. But Mordecai was a descendant of Kish (Esther 2:5), and thus connected with Saul, who had conquered Agag. This would partly account for the natural personality clash between Haman and Mordecai. It would also mean that the people killed by the Jews towards the end of the story would likely have been Amalekites, and this would therefore have been a fulfilment of the prophecies about Yahweh's unceasing war with Amalek (Ex. 17:16) and Israel's final victory over them through Messiah (Num. 24:7 "higher than Agag"). We note the Biblical repetition of the curse against Amalek (Ex. 17:8-16; Num. 24:7; Dt. 25:17-19; 1 Sam. 15; 1 Chron. 4:42). King Saul took the spoil of Agag but failed to kill him; the Jews effectively result in Haman the Agagite's death, but refuse to take the spoil.

Mordecai is a form of Marduk, and Esther a form of Ishtar. "Haman" is a form of the god Humban. But the irony is that in Persian mythology, Marduk and Ishtar overcome Humban; and Marduk becomes the greatest of the gods in the pantheon, just as Mordecai was highly exalted. Time and again we conclude, "You just can't make this stuff up". There was clearly a higher hand at work- that of the one and only true God.

And yet we may well ask at this point, Why was Haman exalted and not Mordecai? Had Esther spoken up for her Jewishness and stated her relationship with Mordecai, surely he would have been exalted at this time? Because the family of the queen were typically exalted, which was exactly why Mordecai wanted Esther to become queen. Her failure led to the exaltation of Haman, and yet that exaltation led

to his pride and fall- and thereby the salvation and security of God's people. Again and again we marvel at how God works through human weakness. Thus some personality types thrive on opposition, and opposition to the spreading of the Gospel [from within or without God's people] often leads to the further spreading of it. The exaltation of Haman rather than Mordecai set Mordecai up to have the jealousy and personality complex against Haman which led to him refusing to bow to him. And this in turn led to the planned pogrom and then the salvation and exaltation of the Jews. It's truly amazing how God works.

*Esther 3:2 All the king's servants who were in the king's gate bowed down, and paid homage to Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai didn't bow down or pay him homage-* Although I have painted Mordecai as spiritually weak, he remained devoted to his insistent belief in Yahweh as the only God. And yet we get the impression that he harnessed this religious belief to augment his side of a personality clash with Haman- as we see so often in church life. However, the exiles had been told to bow their neck under the yoke of their Babylonian captors (Jer. 27:8). Jeremiah had even made a yoke and made this an acted parable. The false prophet Hananiah had broken it and urged the Jews not to bow their neck beneath that yoke- and he was slain as a result. Mordecai presents as being on the side of Hananiah. As a first generation exile, Mordecai was well aware of this prophecy and command. It was pride and pig headedness, according to Jeremiah's prophecies, that made him refuse. Not fierce loyalty to Israel's God. There was no specific Mosaic command that forbade bowing before a Gentile official. And the Persian kings did not consider themselves divine, unlike the Roman Caesars. "Abraham rose up, and bowed himself to the people of the land, even to the children of Heth" (Gen. 23:7). Esther herself bowed to the king and "fell down at his feet" (Esther 8:3). So this was not a case of refusing to bow down to another god. In fact, Mordecai's refusal to bow is typical of observable reality in many Christian groups- those not famed for their spirituality, apparently not highly committed to the Lord, will suddenly rise up and make a huge issue [even to their own cost] over a matter of church tradition or external appearance. Like the timings of a church meeting, colour of the chairs, the type of wine to be used for communion etc. There was a personality clash between Mordecai and Haman, spurred by perhaps Mordecai not getting the exaltation which Haman did.

*Esther 3:3 Then the king's servants who were in the king's gate said to Mordecai, Why do you disobey the king's commandment?-* This question may have been from inquisitive interest; they were surprised a Jew wouldn't bow down to a man. And yet there were many Jews in Shushan, as archeology also bears out; enough to kill hundreds of men as recorded later in Esther 9:15. They hadn't see any other Jew articulate their belief in this way- a tacit reflection upon the spiritual weakness of the Jews generally, highlighting all the more the sensitive conscience of Daniel. For it is so hard to uphold principles when our own brethren don't uphold them or consider them merely cosmetic issues. Not bowing down to men was however not specifically commanded in the Mosaic law, and there are accounts of Israelites bowing down to men (at least 12 occasions- Gen. 23:12; 27:29; 33:3; 37:7,8; 42:6; 43:26; Ruth 2:10; 1 Sam. 24:8; 1 Kings 1:16; 2 Sam. 14:4; 18:28 Bathsheba, Ahimaaz and the wise woman of Tekoa bowed to king David). It would be a reflection of a very sensitive conscience toward God to refuse to do so. Perhaps he reasoned that the Messianic king would be higher than Agag (Num. 24:7) or that Haman was setting himself as a divine figure. And yet Mordecai was clearly not such a high sensitized believer; the

very fact he worked in the palace was evidence enough. For whenever Daniel was promoted to power, he seems to have slipped out of the job and is only later recalled. This confirms my suggestion on :2 that Mordecai was using religious issues as part of a personality struggle with Haman. And we must beware we don't do the same. See on Esther 6:10.

*Esther 3:4 Now it came to pass, when they spoke daily to him and he didn't listen to them, that they told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's position would stand; for he had told them that he was a Jew-* Haman was apparently unaware Mordecai was a Jew; it was the servants who told him of this. Again we are left with the impression that Mordecai was not a particularly strong believer, and was using the issue of not bowing down to any apart from Yahweh as an excuse to legitimize his native despising of Haman. See on Esther 4:1. If he told Esther not to reveal her Jewishness, he likely had followed the same policy. Zeresh, Haman's wife, changes her position on Mordecai as soon as she realizes he is Jewish. It seems Mordecai said he was a Jew in a moment of frustration and anger... and this hot headed moment triggered the plans for the pogrom. Just as the king's drunken, hot headed demand that his wife appear naked before the drunk dinner guests led to him divorcing her and marrying Esther. Yet the hidden hand of God worked through these things. "They told Haman.... for he had told them that he was a Jew" uses the word "told" twice. The implication is surely that he told them he was a Jew, and they then immediately told Haman. All implying he had hidden his Jewishness from them all until this point.

*Esther 3:5 When Haman saw that Mordecai didn't bow down nor pay him homage, Haman was full of wrath-* Circumstances repeat in human lives, both within the same life and between persons. This was just the response of the king when Vashti refused to expose herself. Like the king, Haman wanted to have the disrespectful person murdered. But there was no law in place, apparently, which allowed him to do this. It was just assumed that all bowed down to the first minister, just as it was assumed that wives must obey their husbands, especially if he was the divine king. See on Esther 1:13.

*Esther 3:6 But he scorned the thought of laying hands on Mordecai alone, for they had made known to him Mordecai's people. Therefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews who were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even Mordecai's people-* Had Esther revealed her Jewishness, it's unlikely Haman would have thought up this massive pogrom. She kept her Jewishness secret, unlike Daniel who habitually prayed toward Jerusalem with his windows open. Again, her weakness in this was used by God, in order to set up all the anti-Jewish forces and destroy them. We have here an insight into the thought processes of Haman which only an inspired record could give. Haman thought for a moment of just destroying Haman, but scorned that thought, and instead went on to thinking of destroying all the Jews. Again we see how sin starts from within the human mind and not due to any possession by demons or a cosmic Satan figure. See on Esther 4:13.

*Esther 3:7 In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, and chose the twelfth month, which is the month Adar-* Some think that the idea is that every day they cast lots to see which month and day they should do it on, but the date given was about as far distant within the course of a year as

possible. There was therefore going to be maximum time for the Jews to defend themselves, and for the king to change his mind. As Ahasuerus felt bound by his own law and couldn't kill Vashti as he wanted to, so was Haman. He obviously wanted to execute the massacre as soon as possible; but he was disallowed from doing this by his own structures of superstitions and laws.

However a more natural reading is that in one session, they cast lots for every day ["from day to day" NEV] to see which day would come out positive. And they got negative until the very end- the 13th day of the 12th month, a year's time. For they did this on the 13th day of the first month. This run of negatives was surely to warn Haman that luck, or the gods, were against him. It's like flipping a coin 364 times and it always lands on the same side, when you have agreed that that side means "no". And you keep doing it until eventually you get a "yes". And they likely had the idea that 13 was an unlucky number. In this incident we see a typical theme of the book- what seems total chance, and chance directed towards evil, is in fact overruled by God for good. If LXX is correct, "So Haman went to his gods to learn the day of their death", the gods are shown to be fools and totally manipulated by Yahweh's higher hand. For the Jews were given maximum time to prepare for the pogrom. The whole incident shouts out to be connected with Prov. 16:33: "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord". The Lord simply had to be in this, the "every decision" over the 364 days when the lot said "no", had to be "from the Lord"- although it is not specifically stated.

*Esther 3:8 Haman said to King Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom, and their laws are different from other people's. They don't keep the king's laws. Therefore it is not for the king's profit to allow them to remain-* There is the implication that the king was so dim witted or befuddled by alcohol that he didn't even ask for the "people" to be defined, and just gave his signet ring to Haman to do as he wished. It could well be that he made these decisions whilst drunk (see on :15; Esther 7:2), and his personality was such that he didn't worry about the past but just lived for the present, with no thought to the implications of what he had done or agreed in the past. For surely he knew that Mordecai was a Jew (Esther 6:10) and that the Jews were in positions of power throughout the empire.

The restoration prophecies speak of how "all nations" are to be gathered to Zion; they are those who scattered Judah amongst the nations; not every literal nation. And who "scattered" Israel? The Hebrew word is used in Jer. 50:17 to describe how Babylon scattered Judah amongst the nations. And most significantly, the same word occurs again in Est. 3:8: "And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people *scattered abroad* and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom...". It is quite wrong for us to imagine Judah sitting quietly by the rivers of Babylon, all huddled together. They were scattered throughout all the many provinces / colonies of the Babylonian empire. This was why Cyrus' decree bidding the Jews return to rebuild Jerusalem had to be published "throughout all his kingdom" (Ezra 1:1), and Jews living "in any place" of that kingdom were included in the invitation. It was Babylon who had "parted my land" by dividing it up amongst the various 'Samaritan' peoples who were transported there from other conquered territories. And their being in Babylon is paralleled with being scattered to the four corners of the world as it was known to them: "Ho, ho, come forth, and flee from the land of the north, saith the LORD: for I have spread you abroad as the four winds of the heaven, says the LORD. Deliver yourself, O Zion, that dwells with the daughter of Babylon"

(Zech. 2:6-7). And consider Zech. 7:14: "But I scattered them with a whirlwind among all the nations whom they knew not. Thus the land was desolate after them [i.e. this concerns the Babylonian invasion], that no man passed through nor returned". Indeed, Zech. 8:7,8 speaks of the restoration as coming from both West and East of Israel, implying that the Babylonians had sold some of the Jews as slaves in Greece and north Africa.

*Esther 3:9 If it pleases the king, let it be written that they be destroyed; and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who are in charge of the king's business, to bring it into the king's treasuries-* Meaning apparently that he would pay this if he had permission to plunder the Jews (Esther 4:7). This meant they had acquired significant wealth; and this was doubtless why most of them didn't return to the land under Cyrus, and thereby precluded the reestablishment of God's Kingdom which was then possible. They therefore chose their little kingdom rather than the things of God's kingdom. And this is the problem with wealth. The huge financial offer was perhaps attractive for the king because of the need to prepare for the upcoming war with Greece which was then looming. Herodotus claimed that the total revenue of the Persian Empire under Darius had been 14,560 talents; so this offer suggests the enormous wealth of the Jews, attained so relatively quickly since arriving as exiles.

The word for "destroy" has a very wide meaning. It is used of expulsion or fleeing. The words for "enslave" and "destroy" have only one small letter different; quite possibly Haman gave the impression he spoke of enslaving, not destroying. The king agreed to this, but he may have understood it as no more than the expulsion / deportation of an ethnic group from his empire. Perhaps Esther alludes to this when she later comments: "if we had been sold for bondservants and bondmaids, I would have held my peace" (Esther 7:4). The actual decree is far harsher- to destroy, kill and spoil. We see how the king presents as forgetful, self absorbed, distant, disinterested and so easily manipulated. When he finally realizes Haman has done this, he is therefore the more angry- transferring his anger with himself onto Haman. And again this was all in God's good plan for His people. Of course, had the Jews returned as commanded- they wouldn't have been in Persia and the whole situation with Haman need never to have occurred. And with 12 months notice, they ought to have made a deal with the Persian authorities and returned to Judah. For the king was apparently good with the idea of them being deported. Instead they remain and God has to save them, although with the spiritual cost of their becoming wealthy and popular, and thus even less likely to heed the call to return and reestablish the Kingdom.

"When this became known..." (Esther 9:25) suggests that the king was ignorant of the intention to destroy the Jews, until Esther pointed it out to him. This may just be a simplified form of the story. But if these words are a true reflection of how things really were, we are again left with the impression of a king with limited awareness of reality, who never actually read the decree Haman issued in his name to destroy the Jews and only realized what it implied some time later. Being an alcoholic could explain this; but so could super narcissism and perhaps a total focus upon international political and military matters.

*Esther 3:10 The king took his ring from his hand, and gave it to Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the Jews' enemy-* To give Haman authority to act in his name was surely unwise. Especially when it would not surely have been hard to perceive that Haman had his personal agendas for wanting the Jews destroyed, and

was a man obsessed. Again the king comes over as seriously lacking judgment, perhaps due to making these decisions when drunk (:15).

*Esther 3:11 The king said to Haman, The silver is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you-* This may be a reference to the assumption that the "silver" or wealth of executed persons went to the state; rather than saying Haman could keep it all for himself; for the intention was still to pay the money to the king's treasuries (Esther 4:7). But again this sounds like the wild kind of promise made when drunk (see on :15).

*Esther 3:12 Then the king's scribes were called in on the first month, on the thirteenth day of the month; and all that Haman commanded was written to the king's satraps and to the governors who were over every province, and to the princes of every people, to every province according to its writing, and to every people in their language. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus, and it was sealed with the king's ring-*

The decree to kill the Jews was given on the 13th day of the first month, the night before Passover, when the Jews would have been reciting the narrative of their deliverance from Egypt. Again we see the hidden hand of God- for this ought to have reminded the Jews of their Passover deliverance. Just as we read nothing of "God" nor prayer in Esther [forgetting the LXX additions], so too the connection with Passover is not made explicit. Possibly the Jews weren't keeping it anyway; and effectively, they replaced it with Purim, a feast not commanded by God. And perhaps they consciously did this, because they kept Purim on the 14th day of the 12th month whereas Passover was on the 14th day of the first month. And they command that Purim is to be kept "for ever" (Esther 9:19), in the very language used of the Passover (Ex. 12: 24-27). We must read their instigation of Purim in the context of Zechariah and Haggai criticizing the returned exiles for establishing at least three other feasts, whilst not keeping God's commands properly if at all. It was a way to escape their obligations to their God, through creating their own set of legalistic traditions.

"The thirteenth having been found to be a lucky day for the massacre itself, Haman may have thought it advisable to choose the same day of the first month for entering upon the preparation for it". The word for "princes" is a technical terms referring to the chiefs of the various conquered peoples.

*Esther 3:13 Letters were sent by couriers into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, and to plunder their possessions-*

There are connections between characters within Biblical history, just as there are between our lives and theirs, and between the lives of believers. This is so clear in the Bible that we are to accept this as a Divine principle, and look for these connections with other believers. This is in reality the basis of fellowship between believers. We have a worked example here. The situation is very similar, and allusive to, Jezebel sending letters in the king's name, ordering Naboth's death: "She wrote letters in Ahab's name and signed them with his seal, and sent the letters to the elders and to the nobles who were in his city" (1 Kings 21:8). The allusion presents the king as the weak and manipulated Ahab, despite all his power. He was weak and manipulated ultimately by God's hand, and the show of power with which the Esther story opens is thus subverted. Just as is all human show of strength. Just as Ahab returned home

miserable because he couldn't have Naboth's vineyard, to be encouraged by his wife to destroy Naboth and grab his property, so the wife of Haman acts identically (Esther 5:14 cp. 1 Kings 21:7).

The LXX claims to report a copy of the letter: "And the message was sent by posts throughout the kingdom of Artaxerxes, to destroy utterly the race of the Jews on the first day of the twelfth month, which is Adar, and to plunder their goods. And the following is the copy of the letter; The great king Artaxerxes writes thus to the rulers and inferior governors of a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India even to Ethiopia, who hold authority under him. Ruling over many nations and having obtained dominion over the whole world, I was minded (not elated by the confidence of power, but ever conducting myself with great moderation and gentleness) to make the lives of my subjects continually tranquil, desiring both to maintain the kingdom quiet and orderly to its utmost limits, and to restore the peace desired by all men. But when I had enquired of my counsellors how this should be brought to pass. Aman, who excels in soundness of judgment among us, and has been manifestly well inclined without wavering and with unshaken fidelity, and had obtained the second post in the kingdom, informed us that a certain ill-disposed people is mixed up with all the tribes throughout the world, opposed in their law to every other nation, and continually neglecting the commands of the king, so that the united government blamelessly administered by us is not quietly established. Having then conceived that this nation alone of all others is continually set in opposition to every man, introducing as a change a foreign code of laws, and injuriously plotting to accomplish the worst of evils against our interests, and against the happy establishment of the monarchy; we signified to you in the letter written by Aman, who is set over the public affairs and is our second governor, to destroy them all utterly with their wives and children by the swords of the enemies, without pitying or sparing any, on the fourteenth day of the twelfth month Adar, of the present year; that the people aforetime and now ill-disposed to us having been violently consigned to death in one day, may hereafter secure to us continually a well constituted and quiet state of affairs".

*Esther 3:14 A copy of the letter, that the decree should be given out in every province, was published to all the peoples, that they should be prepared against that day- LXX "all the nations", looking ahead to the day when "all nations" will be gathered against the Jews. The stress upon all provinces and languages (:12) is a reflection of how widely the Jews had been scattered in the previous 70 years.*

*Esther 3:15 The couriers went forth in haste by the king's commandment, and the decree was given out in the citadel of Susa. The king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Shushan was perplexed-* The haste was no doubt ordered by Haman because he feared the king might change his mind. if the king was an alcoholic, this would explain his apparent memory loss and acting as if he was unaware of the consequences of his past actions and decisions.

## ESTHER CHAPTER 4

*Esther 4:1 Now when Mordecai found out all that was done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and wailed loudly and a bitterly-* Mordecai's sinful personality clash with Haman now

forced him to 'come out' as a Jew, and this shows God's hand in leading His people forward. He wished to now come out openly as a Jew. He doubtless realized that so much suffering was going to come on God's people because of his refusal to bow to Haman, due to his personality clash with him (see on Esther 3). And this in itself was good for him spiritually- for he openly identified himself now with God's people, instead of teaching Esther not to do so, and not being known to Haman as a Jew initially (Esther 3:4). His wailing is recorded in the LXX: "A nation that has done no wrong is going to be destroyed". If this is indeed so, he was far from understanding the persistent prophetic message- that Judah had indeed done wrong and were therefore in exile, and were worthy of complete destruction.

The cry of Mordecai is a direct quote from that of Esau when he realizes that his blessings have been taken away and he has been rejected: "When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried with a loud and a bitter cry" (Gen. 27:34). I have pointed out elsewhere that it was God's intention to slay the Jews in dispersion, unless they repented and returned to their land. And it seems that through Haman, He is now going to do this. And so the connection between Mordecai's cry and the cry of rejected, cursed Esau is absolutely on point relevant. The fact Judah are saved from this is therefore a case of extreme grace from God. Likewise, Amalek- apparently represented by Haman the Agag man, king of Amalek- is descended from Esau (Gen. 36:11-16). Yet it is Haman the descendant of Esau who is judged- by Mordecai's plot, a man who also has the characteristics of Esau. The destruction of Haman at Mordecai's hand was therefore by grace alone. It was Esau vs. Esau. Note too how Haman "disdained to lay his hands on Mordecai alone" (Esther 6:3), making Mordecai the one "disdained". But this Hebrew verb appears in this form in only one other place in the Bible; when we read that "Esau disdained the birthright" (Gen. 25:34). Again there is the connection between the rejected Esau and Mordecai.

*Esther 4:2 He came even before the king's gate; for no one was allowed inside the king's gate clothed with sackcloth-* He was hoping to thereby be noticed and the message relayed somehow to Esther, with whom he didn't have constant contact. He wanted her to "come out" and do as he was doing. The final phrase of :2 and the first phrase of :3 in Hebrew contains words where every seventh letter spells 'El Shaddai'. Another example of God being stamped onto the record- in this case, at the apparent nadir of Judah's fortune. Even then, God was subtly stamped as still present.

I suggest that Mordecai had kept his Jewishness hidden. For it would make no sense to tell Esther to hide her Jewishness if he had not previously hidden his. We reflect too how later, Vashti changes her attitude about Mordecai the moment she learns Mordecai is Jewishness. Mordecai could well have reasoned that he would not call upon Esther to 'come out' and appeal to the king, because as his adopted daughter [rather than a blood descendant] she could have argued she was not in fact Jewish. But instead he makes a public scene outside Esther's window, as it were, forcing her to 'come out' as Jewish. Because he believes that only she could save him from Haman, seeing that he reasons in :14 that 'God' might save the Jewish people, but [by implication] He would not save the non-observant Mordecai and Esther. Only Esther's charming of the king could secure that. And so he as it were dumps her in it, by advertising so publically his connection with her.

*Esther 4:3 In every province, wherever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, weeping and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes-* This may well be the language of repentance. God's

plan had been that the exiles would repent and then return to restore the Kingdom. But they generally didn't return, preferring the kingdom of Babylon and their own wealth to that of Yahweh. This persecution was the sending of "hunters" to chase them back, and bring them to repentance (Jer. 16:16). And they did repent- but when their destruction was averted by the prayer and repentance of a minority, they returned to their old position. Which is why the book of Esther finishes rather sadly, with the Jews again wealthy and even more prosperous and established within their local societies, and thereby even less likely to return to the land.

*Esther 4:4 Esther's maidens and her eunuchs came and told her this, and the queen was exceedingly grieved. She sent clothing to Mordecai, to replace his sackcloth; but he didn't receive it-* She thus began to openly identify herself with Mordecai and the Jews, although at this point she had not heard about the decree; for it was known that Mordecai was a Jew, and now she is moved to identify with him. This first response from her was then developed by God until she totally "came out" in self-identification as a Jewess. She did what was not worldly-wise, because of her grief for people. God likewise gives us opportunities to make small responses to Him, He develops our consciences until we are then given larger opportunities to respond. She could of course have disowned any knowledge of Mordecai or stressed she was only his adopted daughter. There are many such stories from the holocaust of secular Jews doing just this. But we must ask how we would have responded; how emotionally do we feel connected to the rest of God's people?

*Esther 4:5 Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, whom he had appointed to attend her, and commanded him to go to Mordecai, to find out what this was, and why it was-* As noted on :4, Esther at this point didn't know about the decree; but she had been moved to identify with the Jews by deciding to openly care for Mordecai and thus identify herself with him. And God was going to move her further along the path of "coming out" for Him.

*Esther 4:6 So Hathach went out to Mordecai, to the city square which was before the king's gate-* See on :10.

*Esther 4:7 Mordecai told him of all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews-* Meaning apparently that he would pay this if he had permission to plunder the Jews (Esther 3:9). This meant they had acquired significant wealth; and this was doubtless why most of them didn't return to the land under Cyrus, and thereby precluded the reestablishment of God's Kingdom which was then possible. They therefore chose their little kingdom rather than the things of God's kingdom. And this is the problem with wealth. The huge financial offer was perhaps attractive for the king because of the need to prepare for the upcoming war with Greece which was then looming.

*Esther 4:8 He also gave him the copy of the writing of the decree that was given out in Shushan to destroy them, to show it to Esther, and to declare it to her, and to urge her to go in to the king to make supplication to him, to make request before him for her people-* These are the Hebrew words for Daniel 'making supplication' and 'making request' before God (Dan. 9:3), whereas here Mordecai urges Esther to do this before

the human king. Again, as with eating the food of captivity, Daniel is presented as far spiritually superior to Mordecai and Esther.

Heb. 'ask for favour'. The passion and love of God leads Him time and again to apparently contradict Himself. He says that He will cast Judah out of their land, they would go to Babylon and serve other gods there, "where I will not show you favour" (Jer. 16:13). But actually Esther and her people were shown favour there [s.w. Esther 4:8; Esther 8:5]. She was to ask the king for favour, but clearly she was asking God for favour, even though they were unworthy of it. And God was gracious [s.w. 'show favour'] to those in exile (Is. 30:18,9; Am. 5:15; Mal. 1:9), and their deliverance from Haman is an example of it. But Jer. 16 goes on to state that God would not ever hide His eyes / face from the iniquity they had committed, i.e. the reason why they were in captivity (Jer. 16:17). But actually He did do just that- He hid His eyes from the sin of Judah and the sin of the exiles (Is. 65:16); the hiding of His face from them was in fact not permanent but for a brief moment (Is. 54:8). God then outlines a plan- He will recompense their sin double, and this would lead them back to Him (Jer. 16:18). This double recompense was perhaps at the hands of the Babylonians in Judah the first time, and the second time was intended to be when the sword followed them into captivity, at the hands of Haman. But God graciously relented, despite Judah's impenitence. But this was to be an unrepeatable, once-for-all program that would "cause them to know My hand... and they shall now that My name is The Lord" (Jer. 16:21). This double recompensing of Judah's sin happened in the exile in Babylon (Is. 40:2), and therefore the joyful news was proclaimed to Zion in Is. 40 that now the Messianic Kingdom could begin. But there wasn't much interest nor response to the call to return to Judah in order to share in it. The exile didn't cause God's people to repent nor to know His Name. It wasn't the once-for-all program which He intended. Now none of this makes God out to be somehow not serious or unreliable. Rather is it all an indication of His passion and how deeply He wishes His plans of redemption for us to work out. He's not ashamed to as it were humiliate Himself, lay Himself open to petty critics, in His passion for us. Thus God was so [apparently] sure that the exile would bring about Judah's repentance and return to Him: "Your lovers shall go into captivity: *surely* then shall you be ashamed and confounded for all your wickedness" (Jer. 22:22). But actually the very opposite happened. It's rather like "They will reverence my son" (Mt. 21:37)- when actually they crucified Him.

*Esther 4:9 Hathach came and told Esther the words of Mordecai-* LXX adds that Mordecai appealed to her to respond, "remembering, said he, the days of thy low estate, how thou wert nursed by my hand: because Aman who holds the next place to the king has spoken against us for death". Her own salvation by grace was to move her to save others; and this again is a timeless principle for us all.

*Esther 4:10 Then Esther spoke to Hathach and gave him a message to Mordecai-* All this communication through a messenger meant that surely the news of the Esther-Mordecai relationship and her intended actions would have not been secret and would have started to spread within the palace and further. We think of all the messages between David and Bathsheba by the hand of messengers. Mordecai perhaps made such a scene and then made communications with Esther precisely so that she now could not hide her Jewishness. He saw her as the only hope for reversing the decree. He is ensuring that she is now identified as a Jewess. This is why he will reason that even if all Israel are spared, he and therefore she will for sure be slain unless she does something to change the situation. He was now using her to save his own skin. He

could have hoped, as did many in the Holocaust, that somehow she would survive where she was, since she had concealed her Jewishness so far. Whatever his motives, Mordecai forces Esther to come out as one of God's people.

*Esther 4:11 All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that whoever, whether man or woman, comes to the king into the inner court without being invited, there is one law for him, that he be put to death; except those to whom the king might hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live. I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days-* Not having been called to come in to her husband for 30 days gives us another insight into the miserable lot Esther had as queen. This lack of invitation would have made her wonder whether she had fallen out of favour with him; although he had many wives and concubines. "To come in to the king" could possibly allude to the sexual act; and "thirty days" might suggest she was menstruating. There is a purposefully ambiguity in these things. Because we are being invited to imagine how it might have been, to enter thereby into her angst. She was initially unwilling to risk death in order to save her people. She needed to be persuaded by the later reflection of Mordecai that she would be found out as a Jewess and also be slain herself; and that God would indeed deliver His people but her refusal to cooperate with His plan would result in her death anyway (:13,14). We see again her development; from selfish self-preservation to a wider sense of responsibility for her entire people. And in broad outline terms, this is something we are all to pass through. See on Esther 6:4; 8:3.

This response was effectively a "no" from Esther to Mordecai. Previously she had always obeyed him; now she is led towards individuation.

*Esther 4:12 They told to Mordecai Esther's words-* See on :10.

*Esther 4:13 Then Mordecai asked them to return answer to Esther, Don't think to yourself that you will escape in the king's house any more than all the Jews-* As noted on Esther 3:6, we have here an insight into the thought processes of Esther which only an inspired record could give. The Bible continually emphasizes the importance of self-talk and how we think in our hearts. She was tempted to adopt a path of thought which was effectively saying that she would be the only Jew who would survive; and that was not going to happen. The 'house of the kingdom' of Babylon would not save her from death.

*Esther 4:14 For if you remain silent now, then relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Who knows if you haven't come to the kingdom for such a time as this?-* "Silent now" is AV "at this time"; the same words at the end of the verse, "a time as this". This was her time. "Who knows if...?" is surely rhetorical, as if to say, 'Anyone could surely realize / know that you became queen for this time'. I do wonder whether some people are born to achieve one thing at one time in God's purpose. This could be such a case. And yet "Who knows if?" has an answer: God. Again, God isn't mentioned, but Mordecai is brought to seeing and implying God's presence and knowledge. "Place" is Hebrew *maqom*, usually used of a holy place. He implies "God" but can't bring himself to say so in so many words. Mordecai speaks with authority, but he is only making assumptions; that if help came from another quarter, then Esther and her family, including Mordecai, would "perish" even if the other Jews didn't. And the source of that 'perishing' would be God's judgment, not Haman. Mordecai also seems

confident that deliverance would arise from "another place". "From another place" clearly means "God", but God is never mentioned in the book of Esther. Perhaps at the time Mordecai just had a distinct hunch that deliverance would come, but when he thought about who else, humanly, apart from Esther, could effect this deliverance... he would conclude that it would have to be God alone. So we see this otherwise secular, weak believer being provoked by circumstance to have a greater faith. Everyone in the story is being nudged towards greater faith and spirituality through the dysfunction of them all. This is the marvel of God's working. But the basis for Mordecai's confidence that "deliverance" would arise is because the same word was used by the prophets for how God's people would be "delivered" from the lands of their exile to return and reestablish His Kingdom in Zion (e.g. Ez. 34:10,12,27). Mordecai was taken into exile as a young man and would have heard or known these words of Ezekiel.

The text can legitimately be translated: "Will then relief and deliverance come to the Jews from another place? You and your father's house will perish". There is no "but..." in the original. This opens up the question of whether God automatically reassigns a task and possibility to another; or whether if we let the ball drop, His intention will not be realized. The lack of clarity is intentional. We are to appreciate the degree to which we matter. The Lord's parables speak of Him giving His wealth to His servants to trade with. How far His work prospers is over to them; for He has 'gone into a far country', He is far away in the sense that He has delegated to us authority to do His work on His behalf, and will review that work at His return.

But to return once more to the text. We can also read this as Mordecai saying that if Esther doesn't intercede, then the Jews generally will be saved from "another place". He seems not spiritual enough to say "God" in so many words. Although there was no other source of deliverance apart from Yahweh. But, he is confident that she and he will perish, even though God would save the Jews generally. He felt that for sure, Haman would ensure that he died, and he was sure that Haman would soon figure [if not already] that Esther was his relative- so she for sure would also be slain. Mordecai therefore doesn't have the faith to believe that God ["from another place"] will save him personally; salvation is indeed for God's people, He is the God of Israel, His promise to preserve Abraham's seed will come true; but not for me personally. I can't believe it for myself. We've all encountered this mentality, it is psychologically credible. And Mordecai may well imply that he knows that Esther likewise is not exactly much of a believer in Yahweh. So she also cannot expect any salvation from Him. And yet he considers that she might be able to save him, and herself, by a special appeal to her husband the king. By implication, this salvation would not be from God ["from another place"], but by dint of her feminine charms. He sees that perhaps it was meant to be that she had become queen, to save him and herself from death. 'It was meant to be' is hardly strong faith in God, but it at least veers that way. But nothing more. It is at least a recognition that there is at least something above the ordinary going on in human life.

There is the element of uncertainty in Mordecai's words. We as readers surely perceive that of course Esther had come to the throne for this time. But that is only a possibility for Mordecai. Again he presents as without full faith and limited spiritual perception. We would rather him exhort her about the clear hand of God in their lives, urging her in faith to make full use of where she had been placed by God. All this further reflects a selfish and weak spiritual streak in Mordecai. He presents as more concerned with his own salvation than that of his people. When Esther's personal

salvation is assured, she to her credit then begs the king to save her people. In a very short time, a day or so, she matures beyond her adopted father very quickly.

*Esther 4:15 Then Esther asked them to answer Mordecai-* LXX "Esther sent the man that came to her to Mordecai, saying"; see on :10.

*Esther 4:16 Go, gather together all the Jews who are present in Shushan and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day. I and my maidens will also fast the same way. Then I will go in to the king, which is against the law-*

Daniel's request to his friends to pray for him as he went before the king (Dan. 2:17,18), so that they should not die, contrasts with Esther asking her friends to simply fast for her- with no reference to God. Just as Daniel and his friends were greatly exalted, so were Esther and Mordecai.

Mordecai's sackcloth and ashes, and now a total fast without water ["do not drink" = Jonah 3:7 "shall not drink"], all recalls Nineveh's repentance and the altering of the Divine decree of destruction. Jonah was fairly recent history in Esther's time. We wonder whether consciously or unconsciously, she was influenced by this. "Who knows but that God may turn and relent... so that we do not perish" (Jonah 3:9 NJPS) may be the basis for Esther's similar fatalism mixed with faith, when she too uses the word "perish": "If I perish, I perish". Both Nineveh and the Jews had a period defined before they would be destroyed- 40 days for Nineveh, 12 months for the Jews in Persia. "Who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis" (Esther 4:13,14) recalls "Who knows but that God may turn and relent?" (Jonah 3:9). "When the news [the word] reached the king of Nineveh" (Jonah 3:6) parallels "When Mordecai learned all that had happened" (Esther 4:1) and the word reaching the Jews (Esther 4:3- the same Hebrew words are used). And yet the king of Nineveh cries out and fasts to God, openly repenting, urging others to do so. Mordecai apparently only laments the pain of Divine judgment. And he seeks Esther's help in getting out of that pain. For the prophets had said that Judah in captivity would suffer if they refused to repent. This was to be the curse for breaking the covenant.

The people would not only be sent into captivity, but God would send a sword to pursue them there: Lev. 26:33 "I will scatter you among the nations, and I will draw out the sword after you; and your land will be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste"; "I will scatter them also among the nations... and I will send the sword after them, until I have consumed them", (Jer. 9:16); "I will pursue after them with the sword, with the famine, and with the pestilence, and will deliver them to be tossed back and forth among all the kingdoms of the earth, to be an object of horror, and an astonishment, and a hissing, and a reproach, among all the nations where I have driven them" (Jer. 29:18). It was God's intention to destroy them in the lands where they were sent captive: "You will perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies will eat you up" (Lev. 26:38). Only a very small remnant of the captives would "escape the sword among the peoples, when you shall be scattered through the nations" (Ez. 6:8); "I will preserve a few men of them from the sword, from the famine, and from the pestilence; that they may declare all their abominations among the nations where they come" (Ez. 12:16). Yahweh will scatter you among the nations [cp. the Jews being present in all 127 provinces of the Persian empire] and you shall be left few in number among the nations where Yahweh shall lead you away" (Dt. 4:27); "Among these nations you shall find no ease and there shall be no rest for the sole of your foot. Yahweh will give you there a trembling heart and failing of eyes and pining of soul" (Dt. 28:65); "He would overthrow their seed among the nations, and scatter them in the gentile lands" (Ps. 106:27). The Psalms frequently appeal for

God's people to remember Him and declare His glory "among the nations", and "among the nations" is the language of the curse for breaking the covenant (Ps. 18:49; 44:11,14; 46:10; 57:9; 67:2; 79:10; 96:3,10; 106:47; 108:3; 110:6; 126:2). This is all some evidence that God intended to destroy the majority of Jews in exile who didn't return. He didn't carry this out- by grace alone. The Esther story is an example of His desperate attempt to get them to return, giving them 12 months from the edict of Haman so that they had time to go.

Just as the Gentile Vashti presents as more sexually moral than Esther, the king of Nineveh and his people present as more spiritual than Mordecai and the Jews. Mordecai mourns not from repentance but from lament at the prospect of loss of life. Nineveh repented (Jonah 3:4), but the same word is used of how the decree to kill the Jews is turned about (Esther 9:1). Nineveh's repentance was the basis of God turning back or re-thinking their judgment; He likewise turned back the judgment of the Jews but by grace and His gracious manipulation of Esther to that end. Again, as often in Esther, we are not left with a great picture of Esther's faith nor spirituality; but rather of God's sovereign grace. The whole Haman incident was a case of fishers and hunters being sent to make the Jews return to Judah. But the book of Esther shows they refused to take the prod, and yet in love and pity God saved them even from the pain of that prod when they refused it.

The decree to kill the Jews was issued on the 13th day of the month Nisan, the day before Passover. We can assume that the news spread immediately, and that the Jews in Shushan heard of it immediately (Esther 3:12,15). The dialogues between Esther and Mordecai therefore took place on the 13th or 14th of Nisan- Passover. Yet Esther commands a total fast from both food and water. This would have meant that those fasting would not have celebrated Passover. She realized, or was made to realize, that cultural, technical obedience to religious laws was overshadowed by the urgent need to intensely connect with God. Although she doesn't ask for prayer, surely that is the implication of her asking Jews to fast immediately and thus not keep Passover. To fast "for me" suggests the fasting was to be no mere lament, but to somehow empower her to success; and that implies appeal to a higher power. On the other hand, seeing the date for destruction was still 12 months off, she could have put God's law first and called for the fast [and approached the king] a few days later, after Passover. For after all, the person who didn't keep it was to be cut off from amongst God's people...

So far in the story, Esther has been the passive, obedient young woman. Now for the first time she takes the initiative. No longer does she wear and do what Hegai suggests to charm the king, nor dumbly follow Mordecai's script. As for so many, the need becomes the call... to find and be themselves, and to turn to God. Albeit in the spirit of there being no atheist on a plane that's going down. Fasting of itself implies an attempt to flag the attention of a higher power. This was not fasting as mere lament over a situation. It was to be done before Esther went in to the king- so clearly, the implication was that help was being sought from a Divine being. Although there is no mention of prayer, which usually accompanies such fasting in the Bible. It's as if the record is at pains to avoid any mention of prayer or God... it is intentional. Exactly in order to flag up the ways of providence. God is so present, but as it were God is hiding in plain sight. Indeed this omission of God and prayer is so strong, that we could posit that it is a Divinely inspired rework of some official chronicle of the Kings of Persia, mentioned in Esther 10:2. This would explain the references to "Jews" in the third person and the title "Mordecai the Jew". And also the way the

record focuses on events rather than motives. It would also make sense of the detailed listing of the king's advisors.

The text carefully omits any mention of prayer to God, perhaps because of His statement that He would hide His face from them in the captivity. She was being taught what the king had been taught in Esther 1:15 (see note there); that law could not save. She had to go outside the law for salvation, which meant a total casting of herself upon grace. She clearly feels her inadequacy; she feels the need for the fasting of others. And she is now unashamed to identify herself with the Jews, for this message was sent through a messenger (:15) which would have meant that her identification with the Jews was now going to be spread around everywhere. There was a large Jewish community in Shushan; able to kill 300 men (Esther 9:15).

*And if I perish, I perish*- The idea may be that she was going to perish anyway, if the decree wasn't changed. She had accepted Mordecai's warning about this in :13,14. And yet it is hard to avoid a sense of fatalism, using the same construction as in Gen. 43:14. She had faith and weakness at the same time, as we would likewise have had. Again we are left wondering whether she had faith, or was merely fatalistic. This is to help us enter deeper into her possible feelings and to identify with her.

Her fatalism rather than faith appears greater when we consider that the "if..." is more commonly translated "when", "where" or "how". "If..." in the sense of *possibility* isn't the usual meaning of this Hebrew word. It isn't the same word translated "if" in :14 "If you keep quiet...". The word suggests she felt she would perish either by going to the king uninvited, or in the pogrom. This saying of Esther is often referred to in Jewish thinking, as it is the basis of the Jewish principle of *galut*-choosing the least bad solution or outcome. It is hardly faith, but more a resigned fatalism. It was death or death, so she chose the death that had at least some chance of leading to life. Contrary to the image of Sunday School Christianity, or Shabbat school Judaism, this is not a case of heroic faith in God, nor of willingness to make some stellar self-sacrifice. And yet God worked through it; that's the point. It's rather a case of "out of weakness made strong", as Paul would put it. Indeed a relevant question could be: 'Would any person of whatever faith background have done anything other than what Esther did?'.

*Esther 4:17 So Mordecai went his way, and did according to all that Esther had commanded him-*

"Went his way" is literally 'passed over', i.e. over the river Ulai, on which Shushan was built, to the Jewish quarter. The allusion to the Ulai river is another point of unfavourable comparison with Daniel, who was apparently in prayer by the river Ulai, presumably because he also lived in the Jewish quarter where Mordecai lived, and was rewarded with a Divine vision: "I was in the citadel of Susa, which is in the province of Elam; and I saw in the vision, and I was by the river Ulai... I sought to understand it [presumably by praying]; and behold... I heard a man's voice between the banks of the Ulai which called, and said, Gabriel, make this man to understand the vision" (Dan. 8:2,15,16).

The need was the call, and now the once dumbly obedient, passive Esther is taking the initiative and has men doing what she tells them, rather than the other way around. We notice twice that Esther was "taken"- by Mordecai, as his daughter; and into the harem (Esther 2:7,8). Esther's passivity will be changed by the hand of providence into her being a proactive worker on her own initiative for the salvation of God's people. Again we see a breaking of the paradigm that a woman was always to be obedient to a man. LXX adds various exaggerated claims about Esther's

righteousness and prayers to God, e.g. "And having taken off her glorious apparel, she put on garments of distress and mourning; and instead of grand perfumes she filled her head with ashes and dung, and she greatly brought down her body, and she filled every place of her glad adorning with the torn curls of her hair".

## ESTHER CHAPTER 5

*Esther 5:1 Now it happened on the third day that Esther put on her royal clothing-* Perhaps because as stated in Esther 4:17 she had taken it off in order to mourn and cover herself in sackcloth.

*And stood in the inner court of the king's house, next to the king's house. The king sat on his royal throne in the royal house, next to the entrance of the house-* "The royal house" is literally "the house of the kingdom", the term used for the temple in 2 Chron. 2:1,12. This extends the impression discussed on Esther 1:7 that we have here a fake, imitation temple of Yahweh. Esther would surely have recalled how she had first entered the king's house, to sleep with him whilst in the contest for becoming Queen. She surely would have looked back and realized that was all of God, somehow, that she 'won' against amazing odds. And this would have been designed to encourage her that God could do the same again. For that is how life is structured.

*Esther 5:2 When the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, she obtained favour in his sight; and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther came near, and touched the top of the sceptre-* The record is as it were a video shot by the Divine cameraman. We see her standing there, see her fingers touching the very tip of the sceptre. And we get the feeling that the outcome finally will be good for her.

*Esther 5:3 Then the king asked her, What would you like, queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you even to the half of the kingdom-* Esther was breaking paradigms here; it was the king who always gave invitations, and not his wife. She effectively comes to dominate him, although in a very humble and nervous way, used by God.

An offer "to the half of the kingdom" was a serious offer, and the king makes it three times to Esther (Esther 5:3,6; 7:2). Hearing those words, she could have blurted out her request. Instead, she invites him to the banquet. Why did she not just state her request there and then, seeing he had given the green light to whatever she wanted and would find it hard to retract? We could argue she was cunning and thought a banquet setting, with him drunk, was the better way to go. The banquet is a "banquet of wine" (the wine is stressed in Esther 5:6; 7:2,7,8). He had previously made epic decisions whilst drunk, concerning Vashti and then in signing the pogrom decree for Haman. He was known for his rage and extreme emotionalism. And she knows that effectively rescinding that decree will be hard for him to do if sober and rational. Again we enquire, whether this is the way a faithful Jewish woman would think- to get your husband drunk in order to get them to do a favour for you. It is the behaviour of Lot's daughters, but surely it shouldn't have been the way of a believer in Yahweh. But still God works through it. Or we could see her as overcome by circumstance, not knowing how to respond to the unexpected open cheque he was offering her... and stuck with her plan. For she had already prepared the banquet (:4).

*Esther 5:4 Esther said, If it seems good to the king, let the king come with Haman today to the banquet that I have prepared for him-* It seems to me that she intended to ask for mercy for the Jews. But her nerve fails here, and she asks them to come to a banquet. And when they come, her nerve fails her again, and she asks them to come to another banquet. And God worked through that weakness. Because the final request was made the night after he had recalled how Mordecai had saved him. And the intrigue and suspense was built up, his attention was particularly focused upon this one of his many wives, who was demanding his attention two or three days running. I don't personally interpret Esther here as the cleverly calculating, amateur psychologist female. Rather do I see a nervous teenager who gets stage fright at the last minute, twice. And God worked through her nervousness. Perhaps after each failure to make the request, she beat herself up for her weakness. But God worked through it. This is His style, right up to this day. LXX "To-day is my great day"; probably the king didn't even know Esther's birthday, just as he didn't know her family or relationship to Mordecai (Esther 8:1). Maybe it wasn't her birthday, and she just blurted out whatever came into her mind. Through all this, God was working. Although the Name of God doesn't occur in the Hebrew text of Esther, the letters Y-H-V-H are found in various forms throughout the book as acrostics, and this is an example (Esther 1:20; 5:4,13; 7:5,7). The four Hebrew words in the phrase "may the king and Haman come today", yavo ha-melech v'haman ha-yom, begin with the letters which make up the Yahweh Name: 'yod – hey – vav – hey'. On one hand, Esther was scheming in a very human way, and hoping to get the king drunk so that he would more easily agree to her request. Yet God puts the stamp of His Name in that- not necessarily of His total approval of her methods.

We may well ask, Why did Esther invite Haman to the banquet? Perhaps because she knew he had the king's signet ring, and the reversal of the decree required that. Possibly because she was a shrewd psychologist who figured that the king would be angry with Haman if he were present. Maybe she believed that pride comes before a fall, and she rightly guessed that inviting Haman would make him proud (Prov. 16:18). But none of these reasons match the Divine hand in it all- that whatever reason, God made Haman faint from a panic attack and collapse on Esther's couch, looking to the king as if he had tried to rape her.

*Esther 5:5 Then the king said, Bring Haman quickly, so that it may be done as Esther has said. So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared-* The command to bring Haman "quickly" was because such invitations were usually given well in advance, and Esther was breaking all the paradigms by wanting everything quickly, throwing last minute parties. We see in this how she was now thinking fast and on her own initiative, outside the box- whereas previously she is presented as having been dumbly obedient to Mordecai and Hegai. We note from Esther 1:9 that Vashti made a separate feast for the women at the time of the king's great feast. Why is that detail included in the record? Possibly to remind us that the genders were segregated at such feasts / drinking parties. The way Esther invites two men to a private drinking feast with her is therefore paradigm breaking. She is really thinking outside the box, driven to initiative by the extremity of the situation. And so the need is the call in our lives and spiritual growth, time and again. Perhaps her insistence upon the private banquet, rather than grabbing the opportunity to get the king to give her anything, was because she was ambitious enough to actually want Haman killed.

And she knew that the drinking party was more likely to achieve that than asking the king for such a favour in a more rational and formal setting.

*Esther 5:6 The king said to Esther at the banquet of wine, What is your petition? It shall be granted you. What is your request? Even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed-* This apparently unlimited offer leads us to expect that Esther is now going to seize the moment and ask for the Jews not to be destroyed. The Biblical text often works like this, setting up expectations in the mind of the reader or hearer, and then presenting an unexpected outcome. We are all expecting now for her to make the request, and the next verse heightens that sense of expectation- and we are then the more involved in the plot when again, Esther doesn't make the request as she maybe intended to.

*Esther 5:7 Then Esther answered and said, My petition and my request is this-* The pause implied in the text heightens our sense of suspense as to whether she will find the strength to make her true request. And again her nerve fails and she rather dumbly asks for more time. Earlier, she had "asked" or 'requested' [s.w.] nothing from Hegai, but had just been dumbly obedient and submissive (Esther 2:15). The king's agents had "sought" or 'requested' brides for the king (Esther 2:2 s.w.) and she had agreed. Haman had asked or requested for the death of all Jews (Esther 3:6 s.w.). But now Esther is taking the initiative and asking / requesting the king- and she is recorded as doing so multiple times. For meetings with him, for the life of the Jews, and for further favours for the Jews. Again we see a previously passive person being moved by God to be proactive and work on her own initiative. For she had nobody to advise her at this point. Her requests for banquets and her actual requests for the Jews were not advised by anyone; she took the initiative. The need was the call, to quit passivity and become proactive for God's people and His cause.

*Esther 5:8 If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I will prepare for them, and I will do tomorrow as the king has said-* This could be read as saying 'I do have a petition; but your attendance at my banquet tomorrow will mean that you have agreed to the petition I have in my heart, but which I'm not telling you right now'. This would perhaps be the best support for an argument that Esther calculated all this, rather than just getting stage fright each time she was asked to tell her petition. The ambiguity and difficulty of interpretation is intentional- to direct our thinking to her motivations, to get the reader into the mind of Esther. It could also be that she judged her husband not sufficiently drunk in order to press home her request. This doesn't exactly score very highly for her in spiritual terms. This is no Nehemiah desperately praying to God for favour in the eyes of the king as he makes a request for God's people. But the king was busy, as ruler of most of the known world. To devote two evenings one after the other to some mysterious domestic drinking party with his wife whom he had not asked to see him for the last month... was strange indeed. Esther had her request answered- he had attended her banquet. Then, surely, was the time to act. I suggest therefore that on balance, her idea of a second banquet was indeed from stage fright.

In all these things, we see the hand of God. What if Vashti had agreed to come in to the king? What if the king hadn't asked her to flaunt her beauty before his men? What if the king had married a standard Persian beauty queen, and not Esther? What if the king hadn't had a sleepless night? What if Mordecai hadn't overheard the plot to

kill the king? What if the king hadn't forgotten to reward Mordecai and had done as usual and rewarded him immediately? What if he hadn't have had a sleepless night? What if Mordecai had not fallen into a personality clash with Haman? What if Haman had drawn a lot to kill all the Jews more quickly? What if Esther hadn't had stage fright and begged the king to come to a second banquet? All this is of God, of His grace, of His higher hand.

*Esther 5:9 Then Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart, but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he didn't stand up nor move for him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai-* Here we have a profound insight into the processes going on within Haman's mind. This is far from a simple court tale. The record juxtaposes his prideful joy with the jealousy which then beclouds him as he sees Mordecai, dressed in sackcloth, refusing to stand up. The Esther record gives wonderful insight into the feelings and thought processes of the characters in a way in which contemporary literature of the time doesn't; the stories are full of unrealistic exaggerations, whereas the Bible focuses upon real situations and upon the state of the heart. And here we see the typical power of jealousy; a focus upon one man and his actions, eclipsing all other blessings.

Mordecai has gone beyond not bowing to Haman. He now will not even stand up in his presence. We wonder if this was related to his faith that Esther was going to somehow succeed in her entreaty. If so, we see the first beginnings of actual faith in him. The idea isn't that Haman simply noticed Mordecai in the gate area. To sit in the gate meant to have a position of authority, often associated with being a judge (Job 5:9; 31:21; Prov. 31:23; Ruth 4:1,11). It was Mordecai's senior position which irked Haman so much. Mordecai had presumably removed his mourning garments because it wasn't allowed to sit in the king's gate dressed like that (Esther 4:2). That just possibly might imply that he was living in hope that Esther's appeal would succeed. But I suggest more like he had to return to work, and so he had no option but to remove his mourning garments. In which case again we see the higher hand of God, making Mordecai act as if his mourning was over- because a resolution to the grief had been made possible. He may not have believed that, but the hand of providence made him act like it, to coax him towards faith. It's like finding yourself singing a hymn in church, the words of which are actually far beyond your personal faith at that point. But you reflect afterwards that actually, you sung those words to God.

Haman is twice described as being full of wrath against Mordecai (Esther 3:6; 5:9). Prov. 6:34 uses the same word in saying that jealousy is the wrath of a man. Haman was jealous of Mordecai, even though I suggested that Mordecai was jealous of Haman's promotion, believing he ought to have had it because his relative Esther was now queen. Haman had it all, but was still jealous. It's again that human trait of 'I need just one more thing'. Which we must recognise and avoid.

*Esther 5:10 Nevertheless Haman restrained himself, and went home. There, he sent and called for his friends and Zeresh his wife-* The impression is given that he wanted to murder Haman immediately, or at least ask the king to authorize it. But he waits for another day, because of the desire to do nothing without first seeking advice. And it was that day which altered the entire outcome. Again we see a man of great power, but bound by his own traditions and legal structures; just as was the king when Vashti refused to come and he wanted to kill her. The same occurred when he took counsel as to the date on which to murder the Jews. And the answer came out as in 11 months' time. The folly of human wisdom and counsel is a big theme in Esther and Daniel.

*Esther 5:11 Haman recounted to them the glory of his riches, the multitude of his children, all the things in which the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and servants of the king-* He had ten sons (Esther 9:7). Here again we see a connection with the situation in Esther 1, where the glory of Ahasuerus is presented and then he is manipulated and circumscribed by a woman and his own laws and culture.

*Esther 5:12 Haman also said, Yes, Esther the queen let no man come in with the king to the banquet that she had prepared but myself; and tomorrow I am also invited by her together with the king-* His overweening pride is being set up for a mighty fall; and this is typical of the Biblical record, to focus upon pride as the reason for judgment. What he was most proud of turned out to be the very point of his destruction.

*Esther 5:13 Yet all this avails me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate-* He kept seeing Mordecai, i.e., in his own mind. Just as people are conned by advertising to keep seeing images of things which then become 'must haves' for them. This is the power of jealousy; a focus upon one man and his actions, eclipsing all other blessings. He kept in his mind the image of this man "sitting" instead of standing up and bowing. It is such mental images which are the root of so much jealousy. See on Esther 7:7; 6:13. Through all this, God was working. Although the Name of God doesn't occur in the Hebrew text of Esther, the letters Y-H-V-H are found in various forms throughout the book as acrostics, and this is an example (Esther 1:20; 5:4,13; 7:5,7). In this verse 13, it is the final letters of the four Hebrew words which spell YHWH. The term "the king" occurs 190 times in Esther's 167 verses. So often, that we are surely being asked 'Who really is the king here?'. Because the earthly king was so clearly being manipulated by others, and above all by God. *The King* is clearly Yahweh. We note the similarities with Ahab and his wicked wife Jezebel's advice. He had everything but like Haman, he wanted just that one more thing. And his wife gave evil advice as to how to get it, which ultimately went wrong for him. The Hebrew for "friends" in Esther 5:10 is 'ahab'. Again and again we feel that 'you just can't make this stuff up'. We see how psychologically credible are the Biblical records; for the 'just that one more thing' mentality is deeply engrained in the unreformed human psyche.

*Esther 5:14 Then Zeresh his wife and all his friends said to him, Let a gallows be made fifty cubits high, and in the morning speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on it. Then go in merrily with the king to the banquet. This pleased Haman, so he had the gallows made-* Zeresh presents as the classic case of a wife who encourages her husband in an evil path for the glory of her family, and thus ends up destroying her family. The ten sons were killed but nothing is said of her death. We wonder if she committed suicide, or was left alive by God to spend the rest of her miserable life reflecting on her gross sin, perhaps like Delilah. All this is so true to observation of life situations today. There is no agreed meaning for her name, but one option is "Star of adoration", and we reflect that 'Esther' means 'star', alluding to Ishtar. She was likely jealous of Esther. She was her opposite number as it were, and wanted her husband to be exalted rather than Esther's relative Mordecai.

We also note the irony of how Esther opens with male concern at wives becoming too dominant. And yet as the story unfolds, we see Esther and Zeresh

taking charge of the situations. An unseen supernatural hand is clearly working out that irony- and it is the hand of God. This is one function of the irony within Esther. It is so intense that it becomes a pointer to an invisible, Divine hand at work.

The gallows was huge, 25 meters / 75 feet high. "According to Persian law the power of life and death resided in the king alone". So Haman was assuming that he could get Mordecai executed, even though there was apparently no legal apparatus for him to do so. Again we see a theme of Esther continued- that the characters are all forced to act outside of the law. This was surely to prepare the Jewish audience of the book to realize the limitations of Mosaic law, especially in the casuistic sense in which they liked to use it.

Daniel's prophecy that there would be a time of trouble for Israel, followed by a resurrection and judgment, may have had a potential fulfilment in Haman's persecution. The LXX of Esther 5 at this point includes her prayer to God, in which she says that Haman was seeking to hinder the work of the temple. This would explain why initially the Samaritans persuaded the Persians to make the work cease, but then (humanly inexplicably) another edict is given for it to resume. The people were delivered (Dan. 12:1), as they were by Michael the Angel manipulating Esther. But the resurrection, judgment and Kingdom didn't follow, because Israel weren't ready for it. Then those who turned many to righteousness- i.e. the priesthood, in the primary context- would be rewarded (Dan. 12:3). But Malachi and Haggai repeatedly criticized the priesthood at the time of the restoration for being selfish and not teaching Israel (Mal. 2:7). Daniel and Jeremiah were heartbroken that there had to be such a delay to the full fulfilment of the Messianic restoration of the Kingdom.

## ESTHER CHAPTER 6

*Esther 6:1 On that night, sleep fled from the king. He commanded the book of records of the chronicles to be brought, and they were read to the king-* We naturally wonder why the King was sleepless. Quite possibly it was because of the strange actions of his wife, taking the unheard of initiative of inviting him and Haman to a drinking party just with her- when women didn't drink with men, as Vashti's party for the women made clear. And we think of the "Lady's bar" in British pubs back in the day. Clearly she wanted a big favour but couldn't bring herself to ask him. And now she had invited him to yet another such party, promising to then make her request. What was it? And why was she so specific about Haman attending? And alone? It'd be enough to more than pique the curiosity of any husband.

Although the Name of God doesn't occur in the Hebrew text of Esther, the letters Y-H-V-H are found in various forms throughout the book, e.g. as acrostics (Esther 1:20; 5:4,13; 7:5,7), and several times in this chapter. The message is clearly that God was active, but in a subtle, hidden way. His insomnia was due to an unconscious sense that something wasn't right, that a payback hadn't been made, or that a payback against himself was now due. Grammatically, there seems a word missing here. Literally, his sleep was taken from him; but the grammar requires the definition of who took it from him. And that isn't stated. Some versions have supplied "God" or "the Lord", but this isn't in the original. The name of God never occurs in Esther. We are to understand only by implication that it was God. The book of records is that alluded to in Mal. 3:16, the "book of remembrance" kept before God concerning His servants.

A fair case can be made that when we read in Esther of simply "the king" rather than "King Ahasuerus", sometimes there is an intentional ambiguity as to whether King Ahasuerus is referenced, or Yahweh, the one true King. The Hebrew scroll of Esther read at Purim, the Megillah, is punctuated with decorative words stating "THE KING". As if the Jews saw the one true King, God, stamped throughout the book in some of the places when we read simply of "the king"- which is very often. And so here we read that "the king" couldn't sleep and so had his diary read to him. But Yahweh is presented as a king who does apparently sleep, and is, as it were, awakened by prayer. We think of Ps. 121:4: "Behold, the guardian of Israel will neither sleep nor slumber". Likewise Ps. 44:24: "Awake, why do you sleep, Lord?". God was as it were awoken from sleep by the prayers of His people. Although that is implied very indirectly, and not stated explicitly.

*Esther 6:2 It was found written that Mordecai had told of Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who were doorkeepers, who had tried to lay hands on the King Ahasuerus-* The fact the king had forgotten this reflects his superficial character, focusing only upon the present. But even such a person still has a conscience and a fear of judgment which keeps them awake at night.

*Esther 6:3 The king said, What honour and dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this? Then the king's servants who attended him said, Nothing has been done for him-* Again we get the impression that the king was forgetful, because he lived only for the immediate present and forgot his responsibilities and undertakings, perhaps resultant from his alcoholism. Likewise he had divorced Vashti and agreed to search for a replacement for her, but had to be reminded five years later to get on and do so. The recollection of having been saved by grace led him to naturally feel that he should do something positive for this man Mordecai. Any move against that man was not going to be well received by him. The entire situation is true to life and has the ring of psychological credibility to it- in contrast to the histories written at the time by uninspired writers.

*Esther 6:4 The king said, Who is in the court? Now Haman had come into the outer court of the king's house, to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows that he had prepared for him-* Hebrew, "for himself". Again we see the theme of ironic mocking of those in power, evidence of the Higher Hand and the total reversal of things. We learnt from Esther 4:11 that anyone entering the inner court without invitation was risking their life. Haman's bitterness and jealousy was enough to lead him to risk his life by entering into the court on his own initiative to ask the king to let him kill Mordecai. The proud, self confident Haman approaching the king on his own initiative is set up in parallel to the nervous, humble Esther doing the same- risking her life to save, rather than to destroy. "Who is in the court?" could be read as the king enquiring who was in the court who could practically arrange to reward Mordecai. But we can also read this [and the ambiguity is maybe purposeful] as meaning that he was aware someone had come into the court uninvited to talk to him. And he asks who this person is. And then ignores having a meeting with Haman but instead just tells him to reward Mordecai.

*Esther 6:5 The king's servants said to him, Behold, Haman stands in the court. The king said, Let him come in-* Haman was risking his life to enter uninvited, but such was his obsessive jealousy.

*Esther 6:6 So Haman came in. The king said to him, What shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honour?*- It is tempting to imagine that the king was aware of Haman's antipathy toward Mordecai, and already suspected foul play in the plan to exterminate the Jews. At least, it seems he may well have asked the question knowing that Haman would reply as he did, assuming that he was in view.

*Now Haman said in his heart, Who would the king delight to honour more than myself?*- Again we see the focus of the record upon the human heart and its self-talk. The self talk of a man's heart is recorded for us to review, many centuries later. "Said in his heart" is a phrase used multiple times in the Bible, but the vast majority of them are about evil men saying wrong things in their heart- confirming the Lord's teaching that sin comes from the heart's self-talk (Mk. 7:21-23). The irony of the situation is of course huge, and intended. The extent of the irony makes us realize that there is a higher hand orchestrating everything- and God is hiding in plain sight, although never mentioned.

*Esther 6:7 Haman said to the king, For the man whom the king delights to honour-* Haman's eyes were on the throne, and so he asks that this person be set up as the successor of the king; thinking it should be himself. See on :8. The irony of the situation is so strong that again we are left asking ourselves how it could have arisen... were it not for God's invisible hand.

*Esther 6:8 Let royal clothing be brought which the king wears, and the horse that the king rides on, and on the head of which a crown royal is set-* "Royal clothing" is LXX "the robe of fine linen". As noted on Esther 1, the palace and regal system is being set up as a fake temple and Kingdom of God. But the impression given here is that Mordecai is being set up as the king, wearing the king's own clothing, riding the king's horse with a royal crown upon it. David's command for Solomon to ride upon his own horse meant that he wanted Solomon to be the next king after him (1 Kings 1:33). See on :9. This grossly exaggerated response to Mordecai's faithfulness was typical of powerful eastern monarchs; we recall how Pharaoh made the prisoner Joseph to be the Prime Minister of Egypt when just hours before he had been wallowing in a dungeon, and was totally unknown to Pharaoh. This would have been shocking to Haman; that Mordecai was suddenly being declared the successor to Ahasuerus. It seems typical of his irresponsible behaviour. But it was tantamount to replacing Haman with Mordecai; for surely Haman's eyes were on the throne for himself.

*Esther 6:9 Let the clothing and the horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes, that they may array the man whom the king delights to honour with them, and have him ride on horseback through the city square, and proclaim before him, 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honour!'*- The man of the king's "delight" is a way of saying 'Whom he wishes to set upon his throne'; it is used in that sense in 2 Chron. 9:8 and possibly 1 Sam. 18:22. The woman whom the king 'delighted in' was made queen (Esther 2:14 s.w.). See on :8.

*Esther 6:10 Then the king said to Haman, Hurry and take the clothing and the horse, as you have said, and do this for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Let nothing fail of all that you have spoken-* "The Jew" means that now Mordecai has declared his Jewishness; or perhaps a note had been made of this in the chronicles,

and the king was thereby reminded of it. It could be that the king was unaware that the nation to be destroyed were the Jews; or that he had agreed to it whilst drunk (see on Esther 3:8) and was unaware of what he had really agreed to. The paradox was that a man who was publically disobedient to the king's command to bow before Haman (Esther 3:3) was now being exalted. Again the king is being nudged towards realizing the trap of his own legalism. He had made a law which a man whom he was deeply indebted to- had broken! He likely had heard of Mordecai's disobedience, because it was performed publically and was known by the king's servants.

*Esther 6:11 Then Haman took the clothing and the horse, and arrayed Mordecai, and had him ride through the city square, and proclaimed before him, Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honour!-* The record naturally invites us to imagine the tone of voice in which he said this. Haman felt he had to be obedient to the king's commandment- to honour a man who was disobedient to the king's commandment (Esther 3:3 "Why do you disobey the king's commandment?").

*Esther 6:12 Mordecai came back to the king's gate, but Haman hurried to his house, mourning and having his head covered-* The roles are now reversed; recently Mordecai had been weeping with covered head in the king's gate, and now Haman was. Esther mourns before going to the first banquet; and now Haman does before the second banquet. The way God brings about justice reflects His full awareness of all that has gone on in the past; unlike human justice. See on :14.

*Esther 6:13 Haman recounted to Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and Zeresh his wife said to him, If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall is of Jewish descent, you will not prevail against him, but you will surely fall before him-*

The very same words are used of how Mordecai recounted to Esther "everything that had happened to ['befallen'] him" with regard to Haman's planned pogrom (Esther 4:7). He was being made to understand what he had done to Mordecai and the Jews. Not solely as punishment, but perhaps in the hope he would therefore repent. But he didn't.

These "wise men" were those who had thrown the lots in order to choose the day of the massacre (Esther 3:7). Suddenly their wisdom changed- from advising to massacre the Jews and kill Mordecai, to now predicting that Haman was not going to succeed but would himself perish. Again, the folly of Persian customs, traditions and wisdom is being developed. Zeresh, his friends and wise men had only yesterday been joining him in glorying over his enemy; and now they change completely, and he is left awfully alone. The book of Esther perhaps functioned as a means of telling the Jews in exile that they were preferring the kingdom of Persia over that of Yahweh; and the kingdom they preferred was terribly weak and compromised at its very foundations. They say that he is going to "fall" before Mordecai; and it was exactly Mordecai's refusal to "fall" before Haman which had been so engraved in Haman's memory (see on Esther 5:13). And again we find repeated the theme of a wife being wiser than her husband and willing to be separate from his positions, as Vashti and Esther were before Zeresh; and what she says comes to pass.

Zeresh has a strong belief that any conflict against the Jews will end in victory for the Jews. It seems she was previously ignorant of Mordecai's Jewish connections, because he like Esther had hidden them and was a non-practicing Jew. Otherwise her sudden *volte face* is not understandable. Perhaps Zeresh knew the prophecies that

Israel would finally triumph over Amalek and their descendants the Agagites, from whom her husband was descended (Ex. 17:16; Num. 24:20; Dt. 25:17-19; 1 Sam. 15). She had a very strong premonition about the power of Israel's God for His people, just as Mordecai is sure that the God of Israel will come through for the Jews generally, but he can't believe that Israel's God will come through for him personally. Perhaps this is why although her husband and sons were slain, there is no record that she was. The statements of both Zeresh and Mordecai definitely imply the existence of the God of Israel, and that He will come through for His people. But this is not explicitly stated by either of them. It is only our careful reflection on the implications of their words that reveals this. And so it is, time and again, with the fact that our God will come through for us in the end. The truth of it is there, so clearly, but it is not explicitly stated to us.

*Esther 6:14 While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs came, and hurried to bring Haman to the banquet that Esther had prepared-* Just as Haman had "hurried" the messengers carrying his decree to kill the Jews, so he was "hurried" by the messengers to come to the banquet; see on :12.

## ESTHER CHAPTER 7

*Esther 7:1 So the king and Haman came to banquet with Esther the queen-* The record helps us see it all happening as if in a video. Haman went first to the king and then together they two came to Esther. Remember that "banquet" means 'a drinking'. For men and women to drink alcohol together was unusual. I have suggested that Esther's plan was to get the king drunk and then make her request. I suggest she gave the impression that she too was drinking wine, perhaps pouring her drinks from a non-alcoholic wine she had carefully prepared. Again and again we have to comment, that all this was not the most spiritual way to achieve the salvation of God's people. It does indicate a high degree of initiative on her part; for she had nobody to take advice with. She had seen the pattern of wine-wrath-decree of death or exile followed by anger abating, with Vashti; and she thought the same could happen with Haman. And it did. Until now she had been mutely obedient; but now the need was the call. And this is typical of how God works in human life. Perhaps her insistence upon the private banquet, rather than grabbing the opportunity to get the king to give her anything, was because she was ambitious enough to actually want Haman killed. And she knew that the drinking party was more likely to achieve that than asking the king for such a favour in a more rational and formal setting.

*Esther 7:2 The king said again to Esther on the second day at the banquet of wine, What is your petition, queen Esther? It shall be granted you. What is your request? Even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed-* "The banquet of wine" confirms the connection between the king and alcohol discussed on Esther 3:8. "Banquet" is literally "the drinking". But in Yahweh's system of things, "wine is not for kings" (Prov. 31:4). The kingdom of Persia is set up as most definitely not the kingdom of God, to which the exiles ought to have aspired rather than to prosperity in Persia's kingdom. Again we the readership wait with baited breath, knowing that surely now Esther has to overcome her stage fright and speak. And she does.

But I will argue on Esther 8-10 that although Esther is indeed heroic and a commendable example of the triumph of good over evil, neither she nor Mordecai go

far enough. For they do not seek the restoration of the Jews to Judah. She is set up in conscious contrast with Nehemiah, also a Jew in the palace at Shushan. He too asked for a favour, and whilst also very nervous is asked by the king "What is your request?" (Neh. 2:4). His request was for the restoration of the Jews to their land. Esther by contrast says nothing about the restoration, but asks only for short term deliverance.

*Esther 7:3 Then Esther the queen answered, If I have found favour in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request-* "My request" reflects her understanding that their salvation was being made to depend upon her requesting it. The same words are used in Ezra 7:6, the only time outside of the book of Esther, to describe how "the king granted [Ezra's] request, according to the hand of the Lord his God upon him". Perhaps Esther had been encouraged by Ezra's example, knowing that the invisible hand of God made kings of Persia grant requests. We too should be directed and inspired by Biblical examples, and those within our own experience of the brotherhood. The ideas of 'finding favour in your sight' and asking for petitions / requests being granted are more commonly associated with people praying to God; indeed the whole verse is intended to recall Moses' plea to Yahweh to save the people, if indeed Moses has "found favour in Your sight" (Ex. 33:12,13,17). This young, nervous, not very spiritually strong teenager was suddenly catapulted into the place of Moses, Judaism's most revered figure. We are surely intended to conclude that her begging the king was a reflection of her prayers to God, or at least, she would have perceived that her petitioning the king was effectively petitioning Yahweh. Again, she was led closer to God by her experience.

It simply can't be that we rejoice in our own salvation, and don't want to breathe a whimper of that good news to others. Esther made her request for "my life... my people" in parallel; and when her own safety was assured, she didn't just relax and mop her brow with relief, she went on to petition for them- with all the risks this involved for her (see on Esther 8:3). We can't possibly just rejoice in our own salvation, that we have found the Lord and are secured in Him; if we have truly experienced this, we will wish to share it with others.

*Esther 7:4 For we are sold-* This could mean that the huge sum of money offered by Haman if the Jews were destroyed may not have been a reference to their goods being plundered; but rather to Haman 'buying' the Jews through a huge donation to the treasury. Esther here is an eloquent type of the Lord's mediation for us, risked her life because she felt that "we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed". She was tempted to reason that if she'd have kept her mouth shut, *she* wouldn't have been destroyed. But she fought and won the same battle as we have daily or weekly before us: to identify ourselves with our weaker and more suffering brethren. The Lord Jesus didn't sin Himself but He took upon Himself our sins- to the extent that He *felt* a sinner, even though He wasn't. Our response to this utter and saving grace is to likewise take upon ourselves the infirmities and sins of our brethren. If one is offended, we burn too; if one is weak, we are weak; we bear the infirmities of the weak (Rom. 15:1).

*I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish-* Esther had apparently concealed her Jewishness for five years, clearly eating unclean food and going along with idolatry. That's a long time, and we can only conclude that she had not been an observant Jewess. She didn't only eat and dress like a Persian, but worshipped like

one. She was hardly like Daniel who prayed regularly towards Jerusalem with his windows open for all to see. This is Esther 'coming out' as a Jewess; she seems to emphasize the point: "we... I and my people... we...". It appears only later that she stated her relationship to Mordecai (Esther 8:1). We reflect how little the king knew about his wives; he didn't know her nationality, her parents nor even her birthday (see on Esther 5:4). It's rather like Moses coming out as a Hebrew at age 40 to save his people.

*But if we had been sold for bondservants and bondmaids, I would have held my peace, although the adversary could not have compensated for the king's loss-* Haman the adversary [LXX *ho diabolos*, the devil] had offered to compensate for the lives of the Jews by paying money to the treasury. But she is saying that even if the Jews had been enslaved and not killed, the loss to the king would never have been compensated by money. She argues for the value not only of human life, but of that human life being lived in freedom and not slavery. And we note her usage of the word "we" in reflection of her connection with her people. LXX "for the slanderer is not worthy of the king's palace". As discussed on Esther 3:9, Esther alludes to how Haman had sold his plan to the king as a plan to possibly deport or enslave the Jews rather than necessarily exterminate them all. Once the king agreed to the principle, Haman wrote the decree to command their actual extermination. The word for "destroy" in Esther 3:9 has a very wide meaning. It is used of expulsion or fleeing. The words for "enslave" and "destroy" have only one small letter different; quite possibly Haman gave the impression he spoke of enslaving, not destroying. The king agreed to this, but he may have understood it as no more than the expulsion / deportation of an ethnic group from his empire. Esther is cleverly getting the king to see that Haman had misled him. She was working to a plan, drawn up it seems purely on her initiative.

*Esther 7:5 Then King Ahasuerus said to Esther the queen, Who is he, and where is he who dared presume in his heart to do so?-* Again we note the emphasis of the record upon "his heart". Surely the king knew the answer. "Where is he" could as well be translated "How could he...", as if the king is now angry with himself for letting this happen. Or perhaps he really was so disconnected from reality that he didn't guess it was Haman. We notice this disconnection from reality several times in the record (not least his not enquiring which people were to be destroyed before agreeing, and failing to make the connection between the Jews being destroyed and Mordecai being a Jew). Through all this, God was revealing His Name. Although the Name of God doesn't occur in the Hebrew text of Esther, the letters Y-H-V-H are found in various forms throughout the book as acrostics, and this is an example (Esther 1:20; 5:4,13; 7:5,7). Although whenever a Gentile is speaking, the Y-H-V-H is formed by the letters at the end of the words.

*Esther 7:6 Esther said, The adversary and the enemy is even this wicked Haman!-* These words "adversary and enemy" are frequently used together in the Psalms, in prayers that the adversary and enemy would not triumph but that God would triumph over them. Surely Esther was alluding to them. She could have tried to tactfully point out that the destruction of the Jews would involve her and Mordecai being killed, and work towards some negotiated solution, without wishing to offend Haman. But she calls him "this wicked Haman!". It was all or nothing. If the king took Haman's side, she would lose her life. For this was not a tactful approach. It was an outburst of accusation. But it worked. Likewise in standing up for God's people, it is all or nothing; nice speak and negotiated solutions cannot be the answer.

I imagine that Esther could have resolved her personal problem in a quite different way. She had invited Haman and the king to a banquet / drinking of wine. She could have chatted them up nicely, waited until they were drunk, and then said to the effect: "Gents, I have a slight problem with this decree about killing the Jews; because actually, I'm a bit Jewish. Can't you just kindly resolve that little problem for me?". And her two guests would likely have proudly chuckled and said to the effect "Sure, no problem, we can just easily fix that, don't you worry, just relax, really it's nothing, sure, sleep easy tonight about that. The whole thing's under our control, nobody will touch you, all's good. And just... bring us the next pink champagne on ice". This was the kind of thing the holocaust was full of. But she didn't take that path. Her spiritual growth was very fast, as it can be in all people. She realized now that it wasn't a case of merely her salvation, but that of the body of God's people. To focus solely upon "me being saved" would be selfish. There is more to relationship with God than that. It's about His glory and the larger picture of His purpose rather than only "me". It takes some decades to realize this; but Esther got there in the course of a few days.

*Esther 7:7 The king arose in his wrath from the banquet of wine and went into the palace garden-* Circumstances again repeated in his life; for he had arisen in fury from the banquet in Esther 1, seeking to have Vashti killed; and he was circumscribed by his own laws, as discussed there. Likewise here, he was angry because he was circumscribed by his own laws. It would be hard to change the law without resigning his own supposed divinity. We enquire what is the connection with the other mention of the palace garden in Esther (Esther 1:5; 7:7). It was in the palace garden that Vashti had shamed the king at the banquet; and after Haman's plot is revealed, he goes alone to the same place, again after drinking wine and after a private banquet, presumably with the garden strangely empty now. Again he has been shamed and made to look foolish, this time by Haman. Considering the similarities, he would surely have reflected that now he has a good woman. And this would have made him yet more open to Esther's subsequent requests regarding her people. We note the stress that the king arose from his wine feast and made a decision. The connection is made clear between the alcohol and his subsequent behaviour. Again we have to comment that Esther doesn't present ideally by getting him drunk before pressing her request. A spiritual woman would surely have done otherwise; and yet God worked through this to save His people, from the results of Mordecai's own pigheaded actions.

*Haman stood up to make request for his life to Esther the queen; for he saw that there was evil determined against him by the king-* We recall that Haman fixed the picture in his mind of Mordecai not standing up before him in respect, and it led to terrible jealousy complexes (Esther 5:13). And now he stood up and bowed in desperate respect for his life before Mordecai's Jewish daughter. Through all this, God was working. Although the Name of God doesn't occur in the Hebrew text of Esther, the letters Y-H-V-H are found in various forms throughout the book as acrostics, and this is an example (Esther 1:20; 5:4,13; 7:5,7). The same word for "make request" is used of Esther. She too 'stood up' before the king and 'made request' for her life and the lives of her people. "Evil" had been likewise determined against her and her people. We wonder whether Esther thought that therefore she ought to show Haman grace. We too at times have those same difficulties. We who have been shown grace wonder as to the degree and nature of grace we ought to show others who clearly have been abusive. In this case, as also can happen in our lives, the decision can be taken out of our hands. For Haman has a panic attack and collapses on Esther's bed, the king

walks in and assumes Haman has tried to rape Esther, and therefore immediately orders his death.

*Esther 7:8 Then the king returned out of the palace garden into the place of the banquet of wine; and Haman had fallen on the couch where Esther was-* The Esther story is full of the hand of providence. It seems Haman had collapsed, perhaps suffered a heart attack from the stress on top of the alcohol from the "banquet / drinking of wine" (:2). And he fell unconscious onto Esther's couch. That was surely from God, because the king was greeted by the sight of Haman's prostrate body on his wife's couch.

*Then the king said, Will he even assault the queen in front of me in the house?-* "Assault" is AV "force", and the idea is not only of force but more manipulation. The word choice reflects the king's anger at how he had been manipulated.

*As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face-* Condemned criminals were not allowed to see the king's face. The courtiers knew that Haman was condemned to death. This was all a strange fulfilment of Ps. 71:13 "Let them be covered with reproach and dishonour that seek [s.w. Esther 3:6 of Haman seeking the destruction of the Jews] my hurt ["evil", s.w. "the evil of Haman" Esther 8:3]". The circumstance in David's life now repeated in the life of Esther.

*Esther 7:9 Then Harbonah, one of the eunuchs who were with the king said, Behold, the gallows fifty cubits high, which Haman has made for Mordecai, who spoke good for the king, is standing at Haman's house. The king said, Hang him on it!-* This may have been one of the eunuchs sent to collect Haman from his house, who had seen the gallows at Haman's home and heard from the surrounding folks what it was intended for.

*Esther 7:10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then was the king's wrath pacified-* The irony is huge; the reversal of fortune absolutely 180 degrees. To such an extent that we can only see "God" here yet again, even though He is not specifically mentioned. Just as we see in our own lives. Earlier, the king's wrath had demanded pacification in killing Vashti. But he was caught by his own legal system, and had been unable to do that. We wonder whether there was any legal basis for the execution of Haman; probably there wasn't. By the letter of the law, he had done everything right. So the execution of Haman was the king departing from the letter of the law; and as discussed on Esther 1:15, this is a major theme of the book. God was nudging the king beyond legalism, and also to a realization that his laws weren't actually very good and needed to be changed. And therefore, he was not the divine being he liked to think he was, who made perfect laws that could never be changed because to do so would be to question his divinity and rightness.

## ESTHER CHAPTER 8

*Esther 8:1 On that day, King Ahasuerus gave the house of Haman, the Jews' enemy, to Esther the queen-* "Enemy" here is LXX *diabolos*, the slanderer / enemy. Clearly he is set up as representative of the organized opposition to God's people, although we have here another example of how the word refers simply to a human

being and not an external cosmic being. The presence of the article, *the slanderer / diabolos*, is significant in that it torpedoed the position of those who argue that every reference to *ho diabolos* refers to the cosmic being of popular theology. It doesn't, for here it refers simply to the man Haman.

*Mordecai came before the king; for Esther had told what he was to her-* The king was ignorant of this, apparently not knowing much about the personal history of his wives; see on Esther 5:4. We now see them both 'coming out' even more. We are intended to shine as candles not under a bucket but set on a hill. And God gently works to lead us all to a situation where our faith isn't solely personal but is made public. And yet we struggle to believe that the king married a woman without knowing anything of her background. We are surely led to believe, given the characterization of the king as forgetful and distant from domestic reality, that rather he had clean forgotten her relationship to Mordecai, and that Mordecai was a Jew.

*Esther 8:2 The king took off his ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman-* The gift of a "house" to a woman and this decision making by a woman was unusual; but the whole story is about the overthrow of traditional, conservative paradigms and legalistic approaches by the movement of God's invisible Spirit. For the very young, previously passive Esther suddenly becomes a head of house. It is also a story of the subdued, obedient young woman, always obedient to Mordecai and Hegai, being faced with a case of "the need is the call". And this transformed her. She takes initiative, and becomes the initiator rather than the manipulated and used. Such transformations in character are often worked by God in a similar way today.

*Esther 8:3 Esther spoke yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and begged him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews-* This presumably involved risking death again by going in to the king's audience uninvited. But she had learnt the lesson- that she was not to merely seek her own salvation but to continue to risk her life for that of others. She begs "with tears", apparently more emotionally and passionately than she did when she first asked about the matter. Her passion for the salvation of others had now become stronger than her desire for personal salvation; when according to our reflections on Esther 4:11 her initial reaction to the news of the decree was to consider that she could save herself by keeping quiet, and she had been unwilling to go to see the king uninvited. Such spiritual growth over such a short period can be seen in the lives of God's people today and is possible for each of us. Esther now intercedes with tears, unlike in her first nervous request for her own life. Her passion for the salvation of her people was greater than her passion to save her own life. This is psychologically credible, and yet is a pattern for us all- to not be spiritually selfish. Too many sit within the bubble of church or denominational life, and are effectively spiritually selfish. It could be argued that Esther's request for her people is the only thing she does on her own initiative; and the only thing she did that was not motivated by personal benefit for herself. Although she does express it in terms of not wanting to see her own people suffer.

*Esther 8:4 Then the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre. So Esther arose, and stood before the king-* The use of the sceptre shows she was still approaching him uninvited and at the risk of her life.

*Esther 8:5 She said, If it pleases the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right to the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the king's provinces-*

Esther's appeal failed. The letters were not reversed or withdrawn [Heb. *shub*]. Although the laws of the Persians could not change, there was also a law that said the king was sovereign and could do as he wished, above any laws. The laws of the Persians could be overridden by the king, and Esther clearly knew this, hence her request. It was only pride that stopped them exercising this right. Cambyses, desiring to marry his sister, was advised by his advisers that, although there was no law permitting such an act, yet there was one to the effect that the king might do as he pleased. But all the same, the king didn't reverse the letters of Haman. He simply gave another law that allowed the Jews to defend themselves. This consideration militates against any view of Esther as a gloriously successful heroine. And we ponder the lack of later allusion in scripture to Esther. There are Proverbs which allude to Haman's folly and pride coming before a fall (Prov. 27:1; 29:23), and possibly to the king's folly in listening to unwise advisors and acting hastily (Prov. 12:23; 29:20; Ecc. 10:1 are alluding to both the king and Haman). But there are no such allusions to Esther nor Mordecai. I find that significant. Christians are raised with the image of Esther winning a beauty contest [rather than a sex competition, as it actually was], and heroically saving her people through her faithful devotion to God. But she acted for her own salvation from force of circumstance and with fatalism more than faith. Getting the king drunk before making her request for her own life. And her attempt to save her people failed insofar as the decree about the pogrom was not reversed, as she asked for.

She stresses that Haman wrote the letters- even though they were written in the king's name. But laws of the Persians couldn't be reversed- unless the king was going to admit he wasn't actually divine. And it could be that she was asking him to make this radical step of realization and humility. To "reverse" the decree, or turn it back, was the same idea as 'repenting'. But he refuses, and instead tries to get around the problem by issuing another decree.

Clearly Esther did find favour before both the king and her God. But this apparently contradicts earlier statements in the prophets. But the passion and love of God leads Him time and again to apparently contradict Himself. He says that He will cast Judah out of their land, they would go to Babylon and serve other gods there, "where I will not show you favour" (Jer. 16:13). But actually Esther and her people were shown favour there [s.w. Esther 4:8; Esther 8:5]. God was gracious [s.w. 'show favour'] to those in exile (Is. 30:18,9; Am. 5:15; Mal. 1:9). But Jer. 16 goes on to state that God would not ever hide His eyes / face from the iniquity they had committed, i.e. the reason why they were in captivity (Jer. 16:17). But actually He did do just that- He hid His eyes from the sin of Judah and the sin of the exiles (Is. 65:16); the hiding of His face from them was in fact not permanent but for a brief moment (Is. 54:8). God then outlines a plan- He will recompense their sin double, and this would lead them back to Him (Jer. 16:18). But this was to be an unrepeatable, once-for-all program that would "cause them to know mine hand... and they shall now that my name is The Lord" (Jer. 16:21). This double recompensing of Judah's sin happened in the exile in Babylon (Is. 40:2), and therefore the joyful news was proclaimed to Zion in Is. 40 that now the Messianic Kingdom could begin. But there wasn't much interest nor response to the call to return to Judah in order to share in it. The exile didn't cause

God's people to repent nor to know His Name. It wasn't the once-for-all program which He intended. Now none of this makes God out to be somehow not serious or unreliable. Rather is it all an indication of His passion and how deeply He wishes His plans of redemption for us to work out. He's not ashamed to as it were humiliate Himself, lay Himself open to petty critics, in His passion for us. Thus God was so [apparently] sure that the exile would bring about Judah's repentance and return to Him: "Thy lovers shall go into captivity: surely then shalt thou be ashamed and confounded for all thy wickedness" (Jer. 22:22). But actually the very opposite happened. It's rather like "They will reverence my son" (Mt. 21:37)- when actually they crucified Him.

*Esther 8:6 For how can I endure to see the evil that would come to my people? How can I endure to see the destruction of my relatives?*- Life lived solely for ourselves, even eternal life, is not endurable if our brethren are not living it with us. This had multiple implications. LXX "How can I survive the destruction..." suggests she felt she would die with those who died. Her life was bound up with the life of her Jewish people, although previously she was but an ethnic Jewess who had totally assimilated into the life of the Persians. But she in her heart would live and die with them. Just as part of us dies in the death of those we love, and the Lord died and dies in our deaths and we in His.

*Esther 8:7 Then King Ahasuerus said to Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew, If I have freely granted you all that was Haman's, because he laid his hand on the Jews, and hanged him on a gallows, what do you further seek?*- We begin to tremour a little with Esther, wondering if the king's patience has worn thin. But we see again the king's shortsightedness and lack of empathy and appreciation of the implication of events and statements. He considered that if Haman was dead, and he had given the wealth of Haman to Mordecai, then there could be no other problem. The king is basically saying that Esther has an open cheque, just as he gave to Haman. Again and again, he is characterized as being hasty and distant from actual issues. This would fit very well with our earlier suggestion that he was alcoholic.

*Esther 8:8 Write also to the Jews, as it pleases you, in the king's name, and seal it with the king's ring; for the writing which is written in the king's name, and sealed with the king's ring, may not be reversed by any man*- The idea is that the first decree could not be reversed, but the king could issue a second decree empowering the Jews to defend themselves. Again, as explained on Esther 1:15, the king was caught up in his own legalism. God was trying to nudge him towards realizing that he was not in fact God; for that was the basis upon which they considered that royal laws couldn't be changed, because they thought 'gods' were unchanging. But he is repeatedly taught, and the readership are taught, that any such system of legalism ends up limiting freedom of movement and ends up in contradiction. What is being highlighted is that the God of Israel isn't like that; He can and does change, even His own laws. Casuistic approaches to law were bound to fail, because God Himself is dynamic; the only point at which He doesn't change is His constant love for the sons of Jacob and not punishing them as their sins deserve (Mal. 3:6). His comment that the king's decree could not be reversed "by any *man*" may suggest that he was slightly moving towards the acceptance of a personal God far mightier than himself; for he may mean that "man" couldn't reverse it, not even himself, but God could.

*Esther 8:9 Then the king's scribes were called at that time, in the third month Sivan, on the twenty-third day of the first month, which is Nisan; and it was written according to all that Mordecai commanded to the Jews, and to the satraps, the governors and princes of the provinces which are from India to Ethiopia, one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, to every province according to its writing, and to every people in their language, and to the Jews in their writing and in their language-* It seems better to go with AV and GNB "This happened on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan". Seventy days have elapsed since the decree was given on 13 Nisan. The persecution intended by Haman was part of the 'fishers and hunters' sent to return Israel to their land. These 70 days surely connect with the 70 years of intended captivity before they returned. The connection is surely to suggest that the response of the Jews should have been to return to their land. But like men ignore bush fire evacuation orders in order to remain with their property in the vain hope of saving it, so the Jews remained in Persia.

Again we have a tacit recognition of the degree to which the Jews had been scattered, throughout the 127 provinces of the empire- exactly in fulfilment of the prophecies of scattering. For the proud king to do this was also a tacit recognition that his laws and decision making were not infallible and he had been set up to make a major decision which was wrong. It is perhaps to his credit that he allowed the second decree to be written and sent.

*Esther 8:10 He wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus, and sealed it with the king's ring, and sent letters by courier on horseback, riding on royal horses that were bred from swift steeds-* There may have been an attempt to outrun the carriers of the earlier decree, even though they were also "hasted".

*Esther 8:11 In those letters, the king granted the Jews who were in every city to gather themselves together, and to defend their life, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish all the power of the people and province that would assault them, their little ones and women, and to plunder their possessions-* The second edict is worded in the terms of the first; the Jews were empowered to do to their enemies what those enemies had wished to do to them. This is the repeated basis for judgment in the last day; thus throughout Revelation, the seals of judgment upon latter Israel are then brought upon their abusers in the form of the trumpets and vials. The LXX adds some detail; "he charged them to use their own laws in every city, and to help each other". Haman had previously made a fuss about the Jews' laws. Now they were encouraged to use their own laws, and to use them as they were intended- to help each other, after the pattern of Esther not thinking only of her own salvation. This was another prod of the exiles towards obedience to the law as intended, and to turn to their God more fully.

However we could comment that such extreme measure for measure judgment, killing the women and children, was not exactly spiritually correct. Self defence is one thing, but murder of women and children because of their association with aggressors is surely another. Perhaps we see here another hint that Mordecai was not a very spiritual person, although he evolved quickly.

*Esther 8:12 on one day in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar-* This was the date which Haman had

chosen by casting lots. And again the hand of God was invisibly in that, for now the Jews had plenty of time to prepare themselves.

*Esther 8:13 A copy of the letter, that the decree should be given out in every province, was published to all the peoples, that the Jews should be ready for that day to avenge themselves on their enemies-* Vengeance on Israel's enemies was the language of the restoration prophecies and the reestablishment of the Kingdom which was potentially possible at the restoration. But the Jews in Persia were those who hadn't responded to that. And yet it is as if God so eagerly tries to by all means achieve at least a partial fulfilment of those prophecies. They were intended, of course, to see the similarities and return both to their God and His land. But they were content with the very partial fulfilment of what was at that time potentially possible. See on :14; Esther 9:22.

*Esther 8:14 So the couriers who rode on royal horses went out, hastened and pressed on by the king's commandment. The decree was given out in the citadel of Susa-* The parallel is clearly with the hastening of the king's commandment to destroy the Jews. Esther is full of such inversions. The impression given is that there was to be a complete reversal of their fortunes. But this was the language of the restoration prophecies and the reestablishment of the Kingdom which was potentially possible at the restoration; see on :13.

*Esther 8:15 Mordecai went out of the presence of the king in royal clothing of blue and white, and with a great crown of gold, and with a robe of fine linen and purple; and the city of Susa shouted and was glad-* The colours and materials are those mentioned in the description of the scene at the king's palace in Esther 1:6. Mordecai is, on one hand, totally absorbed into the way of the Persian empire. Rather than being back in Jerusalem where he ought to have been. The descriptions of his clothing however recall some elements of the High Priestly clothing; he too wore a crown. Zechariah's visions were of a king-priest dressed in the garments of both king and priest, who would reign in Jerusalem when the Kingdom was restored (Zech. 6:11,14; the "crown" is s.w. Esther 8:15). Zerubbabel disappears from the record, as does Joshua the High Priest. They were the intended fulfillments, but failed. I suggest Mordecai may have been set up as another potential fulfilment; but he too failed, preferring to remain in the secular glory of the Persian court.

The joy of Susa is in conscious contrast with how at the first decree, the city of Shushan was perplexed (Esther 3:15; 4:1). As noted on :13,14, the impression given is that there was to be a complete reversal of their fortunes. But they didn't take this theme further, and realize that it was in Zion where their fortunes were to be finally and more totally reversed. They were experiencing a foretaste of what would be possible far more fully if they repented and returned to Zion; but they refused to take that Divine nudge.

*Esther 8:16 The Jews had light, gladness, joy, and honour-* This is the image of Ps. 97:11: "There is sprung up a light for the righteous". The springing up of Judah's light is spoken of in Isaiah as happening at the restoration, in terms of Zion's light coming to Jerusalem in the person of Messiah. Likewise joy and gladness was to be Judah's experience in Zion. But it seems what could have been the breaking in of the Messianic kingdom for them even in captivity didn't lead to that Kingdom. For they preferred their own kingdom of wealth in Persia. They remained there; and the true light and joy of Zion wasn't experienced by them. See on :13-15.

The final chapters of Esther have much to say about the joy of the Jews. It is a consistent theme. But the same words are used of the joy Judah were intended to have at their return from Persia / Babylon and restoration of the Kingdom- which they refused to do. The rejoicing of Judah is to be contrasted with the consistent teaching that Israel and Judah were to rejoice and be glad when their exile was ended, when their "captivity returned" (Ps. 14:7; 53:6; Jer. 31:13), with their rejoicing being in their God (Ps. 85:6), rejoicing "in My [restored] house" (Is. 56:7; Zech. 4:10), when Judah's mourning would be turned to joy at the restoration (Jer. 31:13; Zech. 2:10); and then the nations would be glad and rejoice (Ps. 67:4). The Gentiles in Persia rejoiced [s.w.] at the outcome for the Jews and the exaltation of Mordecai (Esther 8:15 "the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad"). But all this joy was misplaced; the joy of Judah and the nations was intended to be in the restoration of God's Kingdom and the return of His people from captivity. But their joy was of a purely secular nature.

*Esther 8:17 In every province, and in every city, wherever the king's commandment and his decree came, the Jews had gladness, joy, a feast, and a good day. Many from among the peoples of the land became Jews; for the fear of the Jews was fallen on them-* Although the ideal was that they returned to Zion and experienced light and joy there (:16), it seems God was willing to amend that plan so that their experience of it in captivity led to the Gentiles becoming Jews (as in Esther 9:27). For this is the consistent prophetic picture of the restored Kingdom of God- that Gentiles would join with repentant Judah in forming a multiethnic Kingdom of God in Zion. Just as some Egyptians joined the Jews in their exodus from Egypt, which is constantly alluded to in the restoration prophecies as the prototype for Judah's exodus from captivity, so it began to happen. But they didn't make the exodus; they remained where they were, although all was now set up for them to return. See on :13-16 and Esther 2:6.

The raising up of Haman's pogrom was of God; it was part of the threatened punishment of sending them into exile and sending a sword after them to destroy them there. And it was part of Jeremiah's "fishers and hunters" sent to drive God's people back to their land. On one hand, it failed to achieve this, and God cut short the pogrom from sheer pity. And yet through this whole exercise, the fact many Gentiles "became Jews" [which surely implies they became Jews in a religious sense] shows that God used even this failure to further His saving purpose. Quite possibly in the Kingdom we will share eternal fellowship with some random Persian Gentile who became a Jew because of all this experience. Absolutely nothing can foil God's purpose to save man, not even the failure of His plans to bring about Israel's repentance. He works to save in every way and through every situation. Such is His saving grace and His core, essential personality as a Saviour.

## ESTHER CHAPTER 9

*Esther 9:1 Now in the twelfth month, which is the month Adar, on the thirteenth day of the month, when the king's commandment and his decree drew near to be put into effect, on the day that the enemies of the Jews hoped to conquer them, (but it was turned about so that the opposite happened- the Jews conquered those who hated them)-*

"To conquer" is the same word used in Dan. 6:24 for the lions having the mastery over those Persians who wished to kill Daniel by throwing him to the mastery or

conquering of the lions in the den of lions. We have noted the many spiritually unfavourable contrasts between Daniel's spirituality and Esther and Mordecai's unspirituality. But the connection with Daniel's deliverance from the lions shows that by grace, God treated them the same as He did Daniel.

This theme of 'turning about so the opposite happens' is a major theme of Esther. The fasting of Esther is contrasted with the feasting of Haman and the king; and now it is the Jews who are feasting. Instead of the Jews being destroyed by their enemies, they destroy their enemies. The impression given is that there was to be a complete reversal of their fortunes. But this was the language of the restoration prophecies and the reestablishment of the Kingdom which was potentially possible at the restoration; see on Esther 8:13. The turning of curse into blessing is simply because God loves Israel (s.w. Dt. 23:5; Neh. 13:2). But the exiles had doubted His love, as Ez. 18 makes clear. But through this whole incident, God seeks to display His love to His people, and His grace.

One great theme of Esther is of reversal of fortune. Esther 9:1 spells this out: "It was turned about so that the opposite happened- the Jews conquered those who hated them". The same word is found in Esther 9:22; the day of their destruction "was turned to them from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning into a good day". The book opens with a parade of the greatness of the king and the Persian empire; it closes with the greatness of Mordecai the Jew. The Persian banquets of the opening are matched by those of the celebrating, victorious Jews. Esther begins by identifying as a Gentile, but the book closes with Gentiles identifying as Jews (Esther 8:17). The elevation of Haman (Esther 3:1) is matched by Mordecai's elevation and granting of the king's signet ring as once given to Haman. The command to destroy the Jews ends up with a command to destroy the enemies of the Jews. And it is this great reversal of all things which is stamped throughout God's dealings with man. The poor become rich, the weak become the strong, the despised become the glorified, with the Lord's death on the cross and subsequent glorification being the parade worked example.

Dramatic reversal of fortune in this way is typical of what happens when God is at work for His people. Although God isn't mentioned here specifically, how else could things have been 'turned around' like this? The implication is that someone turned things around. And who, if not God? We think of the songs rejoicing at the victory over Egypt at the Red Sea (Ex. 15), Hannah's song of rejoicing (1 Sam. 2), the David and Goliath story... the underdogs amongst God's people come out on top. Because of God. Here, the reversal of fortune is clearly stated. But we are left to join the dots, and see that God has to be the source of that. But this isn't specifically mentioned, because we are left to reflect that God achieved this in this case without miracle but through His unseen hand. It is the difference between what Robert Roberts called "The Visible Hand of God", as seen at the Red Sea and David's conquest of Goliath; and "The Ways of Providence".

This theme of Divine reversal of things in Esther contrasts with how the laws of the Persians could supposedly not be reversed: "Let it be written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot be revoked / reversed" (Esther 1:19). The decree to destroy the Jews likewise appeared unable to be reversed. But the invisible hand of God totally reversed the apparently irreversible decree. The evil of Haman was overturned or reversed, because Esther "beseeched him to overturn the evil plotted by Haman" (Esther 8:3).

This theme of ultimate reversal is at the core of the Gospel. The Beatitudes spell it out, spoken as they were as the Lord's opening statement of the Christian message. The weepers will rejoice, the poor will become rich, the mocked will be praised, the

weak and sickly become immortally strong, the renters and homeless become eternal owners etc. This theme is so major that it is absolutely logical that we now must be the underdogs. We cannot have it both ways- being the great ones now and also eternally. Otherwise this massive theme of reversal cannot be played out in our personal experience.

*Esther 9:2 The Jews gathered themselves together in their cities throughout all the provinces of the King Ahasuerus, to lay hands on those who wanted to harm them. No one could withstand them, because the fear of them had fallen on all the people-* Their gathering together to help each other was after the pattern of Esther not thinking only of her own salvation. Her example would have been inspirational in the mending of so many interpersonal relationship issues amongst the Jews, just as the Lord's example of mediation and sacrifice to achieve it should likewise for us. For "the fear..." see on :3.

"To lay hand on such as sought their hurt" can be read as more than self defence, but rather a command to kill those who had shown support for the decree to kill the Jews. Thus it was open to the Jews to assume the offensive, and not necessarily await an attack. In this case, we reflect that there was some providence in there being a gap between the decrees. The overall result was that all anti-Jewish opposition was revealed and destroyed, and the Jews exalted. This was clearly brought about by some unseen hand- that of the God of Israel. "Withstand" suggests the Jews were not just fighting in self defence, but twisted the permission to do so in order to go on the attack. Again the morality of the whole thing is called into question; and yet it resulted in the exaltation of God's people.

*Esther 9:3 All the princes of the provinces, the satraps, the governors, and those who did the king's business helped the Jews, because the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them-* The fear of Israel falling upon the peoples (also in :2) uses the very same phrase used about the effect of the Exodus miracles upon the Egyptians (Ex. 15:16; Ps. 105:38), with Mordecai functioning as Moses. And yet the same effect as the visible miracles was achieved by the invisible, non-miraculous hand of God working in human and national lives. The implication was that this was all to prepare the exiles for their intended exodus out of Persia and back to their land- but they refused to make good on what was set up for them.

*Esther 9:4 For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame went out throughout all the provinces; for the man Mordecai grew greater and greater-* LXX "For the order of the king was in force, that he should be celebrated in all the kingdom". The king was obviously deeply impressed by Esther and Mordecai, and surely was being himself nudged towards accepting the God of Israel by the transformation he witnessed in these secular Jews towards truly spiritual, brave people of principle. "The man Mordecai" suggests this was all rather human and secular rather than spiritual. After Isaac had sinned in unfaithfulness to his wife, we read the same phrase: "The man grew great, and grew more and more until he became very great" (Gen. 26:13). This is identical language now used about Mordecai. We find "the man" used about Jacob when again he is blessed undeservedly, by grace, after a "low" spiritual period also outside the promised land: "The man increased exceedingly, and had large flocks" (Gen. 30:43). The connection with Isaac and Jacob shows this was by grace alone, and quite undeserved blessing which came right after moral failure.

*Esther 9:5 The Jews struck all their enemies with the stroke of the sword, and with slaughter and destruction, and did what they wanted to those who hated them-* This suggests a primary fulfilment of the prophecy that the exiles in Babylon / Persia would become God's weapons of war with which to judge the nations where they had been taken captive (Jer. 51:20). The intention was that they would judge their captors, return to the land and be part of the reestablished Kingdom of God. But the exiles only allowed a partial fulfilment of this, and remained with their wealth in Persia; see on Esther 8:13-16.

*Esther 9:6 In the citadel of Susa, the Jews killed and destroyed five hundred men-* AV "In Shushan the palace". The extent of opposition to the Jews was therefore significant (800 killed in all, :15), despite Mordecai now being the prime minister, and the king clearly pro-Jewish. The pre-existing anti-Jewish sentiment was significant in the palace, and therefore Esther is revealed as the more brave for coming out as Jewish. Haman knew that his plan was tapping in to widespread support. If indeed Haman was the descendant of Agag the Amalekite (see on Esther 3:1) this would mean that the people killed here by the Jews would likely have been Amalekites. This would therefore have been a fulfilment of the prophecies about Yahweh's unceasing war with Amalek (Ex. 17:16) and Israel's final victory over them through Messiah (Num. 24:7 "higher than Agag"). No Messiah figure was in view; but had they returned to the land in faith and repentance, then the restoration prophecies stated that one would have arisen. And so we find here a partial fulfilment of the prophecies about Amalek and Agag, and not a complete one. See on :11.

*Esther 9:7 They killed Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha-* The "ten sons" of Haman is a phrase stressed four times in :10-14, and although ten are indeed listed here, the idea may mean "all his children" as in 1 Sam. 1:8. The Jews interpret Haman as representative of the *yetzer ha rah*, the evil inclination, which the New Testament at times understands as the great satan / adversary to spiritual life. The Jews then see in the meanings of the names of his sons the various characteristics of the flesh. Each of the names of the sons apparently contain the word "self" in the Persian language. Although the meaning of these names is hard to define, the Jewish view is that these first three names stand respectively for 'distance [from God]', 'door to bad intentions', 'gathering of money'.

*Esther 9:8 Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha-* See on :7. The Jews define these names as meaning respectively 'a woman's private parts' [if spelt backwards]; 'pride' and 'preying like a lion to destroy others'.

*Esther 9:9 Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai and Vaizatha-* See on :7. The Jews define these names as meaning respectively 'ripping into division', 'subjugation of the righteous' and 'bitterness', the end result of all these various features of the fleshly life.

*Esther 9:10 the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Jew's enemy; but they didn't lay their hand on the plunder-* This is emphasized, because they had been given the right to do this (Esther 8:11). They were following the example of Abraham who refused to add to his wealth by taking the spoil of his enemies (Gen. 14:23). This can be read as a politically astute decision, so as not to give the impression they had orchestrated all this for their benefit; but there was surely thereby a nudge from God

towards remembering that they were Abraham's seed, and ought to return to the land promised them as his seed. We can also read this refusal to take the spoil to themselves as an implication that it was not theirs but God's, seeing He had given them the victory. Possibly in this case they burnt the spoil rather than take it to themselves, as in Josh. 6:17,18; or sent it to the newly rebuilt temple, thus partially fulfilling prophecies about the wealth of the Gentiles flowing to Zion. And thus they reversed the sin of Saul who took the spoil to himself (1 Sam. 15)- recalling that Mordecai was in the direct line of Saul. The destruction of all Haman's sons but not his wife was perhaps an attempt to fulfil what their ancestor Saul failed to do- to destroy the rulership of Agag / Amalek. And yet ten sons of Saul were slain and hung, three on the wall of Bethshan (1 Sam. 31) and then seven when revenge was taken on Saul's family by the Gibeonites (2 Sam. 21). Saul's descendant Mordecai had effectively slain and hung 10 sons of the Agagite, doing what Saul should have done. And yet ten of Saul's sons were slain and hung. This is again one of those strange twists in the story which may not have specific meaning, and yet the very existence of which shows the higher hand of God somehow involved.

*Esther 9:11 On that day, the number of those who were slain in the citadel of Susa was brought before the king-* A king would surely be concerned about the outbreak of civil war. The fact he allowed the slaughter to continue right on his doorstep in Susa would suggest that he perceived that those killed were not his own people, but the supporters of Haman, Amalekites. See on :6.

*Esther 9:12 The king said to Esther the queen, The Jews have slain and destroyed five hundred men in the citadel of Susa, including the ten sons of Haman; what then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your petition? It shall be granted you. What is your further request? It shall be done-* Her first intercession had brought her to a position where now the king came to her, guessing what she would like and offering it. She doesn't come to him, he perceives what she wants and offers it to her. We possibly see here some insight into the nature of the Lord's relationship with the Father after He interceded for us on the cross. Rom. 8 describes all this as the intercession of the spirit, as if the Father and Son have a meeting of minds / spirit, and the Father knows and automatically grants what He knows His Son wants for His people. The question "What is your further request?" implies that the king perceives that Esther is not yet satisfied. We see Esther now as the initiator and controller, a far cry from the cowed, submissive youngster she once was. Transformed by the principle of 'The need is the call'.

*Esther 9:13 Then Esther said, If it pleases the king, let it be granted to the Jews who are in Shushan to do tomorrow also according to this day's decree, and let Haman's ten sons be hanged on the gallows-* We see here how circumstances repeat. Esther had previously come to the king with a request to come to a banquet, and then repeated that same request, to come "tomorrow". The Esther story shows clearly how things work according to a Divine plan which is multidimensional and yet has internal consistencies and similarities. See on :12. We are left wondering whether Esther was not just seeking maximum damage upon her enemies. For to fight in self defence is one thing; but to ask for another day of fighting rather suggests the Jews were on the offensive and not the defensive. Is Esther not being simply bloodthirsty? After all, at this point no Jewish blood has been shed. Nor, apparently, will it be. We are tempted to see similarities with Israeli desire to abuse others as they were abused during the

holocaust. Such suggestions of course read difficultly to those who have been raised to think of Esther as a heroine of faith. I suggest that the Bible is full of examples of failure and partial success, with very few of the characters presented as totally positive [Joseph, Daniel, the Lord Jesus]. We are to find ourselves in the stories and autobiographies, and to perceive the connections and lessons. For we too are mixed and impure. We are not so much as awed by the peerless examples we meet [which is often unfruitful], as challenged by the similarities between our weakness and those of others who all the same were the historical people of God.

*Esther 9:14 The king commanded this to be done. A decree was given out in Shushan; and they hanged Haman's ten sons-* We have just read in :10 of the murder of his sons. Perhaps the LXX is therefore to be preferred here: "And he permitted it to be so done; and he gave up to the Jews of the city the bodies of the sons of Aman to hang".

*Esther 9:15 The Jews who were in Shushan gathered themselves together on the fourteenth day also of the month Adar, and killed three hundred men in Shushan; but they didn't lay their hand on the spoil-* This makes a total of 800 killed over the two days. See on :6 for the significance of this anti-Jewish sentiment in Shushan. For "spoil", see on :10. For "gathered themselves together" see on :16. Their refusal to take the spoil is mentioned three times (:10,15,16), and stands in contrast to the intention of taking their property as spoil under Haman's plan (Esther 3:13). The Jews had been empowered to take the spoil and also kill the women and children of their attackers (Esther 8:11). But they only kill the men, and don't touch the spoil (also :12). We too have apparent rights to treat others as they treated us... but the way of the Spirit is not to do so. We noted earlier the clear connections between Haman and Agag king of Amalek, and the way Mordecai is a direct descendant of Saul. All Agag's spoil was to be taken and dedicated to Yahweh (1 Sam. 15), and the command of Esther 8:11 allowed the Jews to do so. But they didn't. They could have legitimately seized the spoil of the 75000 they slew and sent it to the temple community in Jerusalem. Lesson: the fact we can legitimately do something, even according to God's word, doesn't mean we have to. There may be a higher way of wisdom.

*Esther 9:16 The other Jews who were in the king's provinces gathered themselves together, defended their lives, had rest from their enemies, and killed seventy-five thousand of those who hated them; but they didn't lay their hand on the plunder-* LXX renders "gathered themselves together" as "and helped one another". They were learning the lesson from the nervous teenager Esther, who didn't just seek her own salvation, but risked her life in order to bring about the salvation of all God's people. We see here how good spiritual attitudes can spread quickly and effectively.

The edict of Esther 8:11 allowed the Jews to "cause to perish all the power of the people and province that would assault them, their little ones and women, and to plunder their possessions". It is noted they didn't make use of the provision to plunder. But we can surely infer that they made use of the other provisions- to kill their enemies and also their women and children. To achieve this, the Jews would have spent months arming themselves. Instead, they ought to have moved to Judah, which was the Divine intention of the pogrom.

*Esther 9:17 This was done on the thirteenth day of the month Adar; and on the fourteenth day of that month they rested and made it a day of feasting and gladness-*

Israel being given "rest" from their enemies was the sign that they should now inherit the promised land (s.w. Dt. 12:10); rest from their enemies meant that they were to blot out the name of Amalek (s.w. Dt. 25:19). Clearly these things were coming about, seeing that Haman was an Amalekite and those they were killing were likely Amalekites (see on Esther 3:1). But they failed to go further with these Divine possibilities, just as we can fail to; see on Esther 8:13-16. Being given rest meant they could inherit the land (Josh. 1:13 s.w.) but they preferred to remain in Persia. Tellingly, the same word is used in Neh. 9:28, addressed to the exiles: "But after they had rest, they did evil again before You; therefore You left them in the hand of their enemies".

*Esther 9:18 But the Jews who were in Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth and on the fourteenth days of the month; and on the fifteenth day of that month, they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness-* The subtext to this otherwise positive picture of good triumphing over evil is that their day of feasting and gladness was prophetically intended to be in Zion (Is. 25:6 s.w.). They went into exile exactly because they had days of 'feasting' and didn't respond to the prophetic message (s.w. Is. 5:12). It was in Zion that they were to experience "gladness" (Is. 35:10) when they returned (Is. 51:11). They were to leave the lands of their captivity in "gladness" and thus come to Zion (Is. 55:12 s.w.). But they didn't return. They were to have eternal "gladness... *in their land*" (s.w. Is. 61:7), the day of Jer. 31:7 (s.w.). The "day of gladness" was to be accompanied by the blowing of trumpets (s.w. Num. 10:10), summoning them to Zion. But there is no mention of this; because they didn't want to return there, but to remain in prosperous Persia. See on :21.

*Esther 9:19 Therefore the Jews of the villages, who lived in the unwallled towns, made the fourteenth day of the month Adar a day of gladness and feasting, a good day-*

The decree to kill the Jews was given on the 13th day of the first month, the night before Passover, when the Jews would have been reciting the narrative of their deliverance from Egypt. Again we see the hidden hand of God- for this ought to have reminded the Jews of their Passover deliverance. Just as we read nothing of "God" nor prayer in Esther [forgetting the LXX additions], so too the connection with Passover is not made explicit. Possibly the Jews weren't keeping it anyway; and effectively, they replaced it with Purim, a feast not commanded by God. And perhaps they consciously did this, because they kept Purim on the 14th day of the 12th month whereas Passover was on the 14th day of the first month. And they command that Purim is to be kept "for ever" (Esther 9:19), in the very language used of the Passover (Ex. 12:24-27). We must read their instigation of Purim in the context of Zechariah and Haggai criticizing the returned exiles for establishing at least three other feasts, whilst not keeping God's commands properly if at all. It was a way to escape their obligations to their God, through creating their own set of legalistic traditions. We note there is no later Biblical allusion to Purim; it was man-made, and not part of God's original intention nor command.

The existence of Jews even in villages and remote settlements of the Persian empire reflects the degree of their scattering, in fulfilment of the prophecies about this.

*And a day of sending presents of food to one another-* Generosity to others was a reflection of their personal experience of grace. We are to be generous to others and concern ourselves with their salvation, as God did to us. "Grace" literally means a gift, and the giving of gifts ought to reflect that. As noted on :16, they were learning

the lesson from the nervous teenager Esther, who didn't just seek her own salvation, but risked her life in order to bring about the salvation of all God's people.

One thing we learn from the book of Esther is that we must look beneath the surface of the text, meditate upon it, and see a subtext. The clearest example is that such meditation reveals that the apparently absent God is in fact hiding in plain sight. And so we here think about the implication of sending presents "to one another" [repeated in :22]. But not to the Gentiles. Surely the Jews ought to have responded to God's grace to them by reflecting that grace to the Gentile world, and bringing them to their gracious God. But there is not a word of gratitude to God. Just celebrating their good luck, and celebrating it selfishly amongst themselves.

*Esther 9:20 Mordecai wrote these things, and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, both near and far-* LXX "wrote these things in a book". Perhaps here we have the origin of the book of Esther; it was an account by Mordecai of how he, a secular and not very religious Jew, had seen his weaknesses used by God in order to save others; it was written as a testament to grace. But on :29 I will note that the book could equally have been written by Esther.

*Esther 9:21 To enjoin them that they should keep the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month Adar yearly-* Whilst this was understandable it could be argued that the subtext of the history is negative; there is no mention of them keeping the Mosaic feasts, but instead they created a new one to celebrate in the lands of exile. Instead, they ought to have returned from those lands and not remained there; see on :18.

*Esther 9:22 as the days in which the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month which was turned to them from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning into a good day; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, and of sending presents of food to one another, and gifts to the needy-* LXX "a change was made for them, from mourning to joy, and from sorrow to a good day". This change from mourning to joy connects with the prophecies of the restored kingdom, when mourning would be turned to joy for Zion (Is. 51:11; 60:20; 61:3). But Judah hadn't repented nor returned to the land as intended. And yet it is as if God so eagerly tries to by all means achieve at least a partial fulfilment of those prophecies. They were intended, of course, to see the similarities and return both to their God and His land. But they were content with the very partial fulfilment of what was at that time potentially possible. See on Esther 8:13. For "turned...", see on :1.

Thanks to Esther's mediation and Haman's death, the Jews "had rest from their enemies". But this is the phrase used for how Israel in the promised land would finally have "rest from their enemies" (Josh. 11:23). Significantly, it is the phrase used in Dt. 12:10,11 for the precondition required before the a permanent tabernacle [cp. the temple] could be established: "*When...* He gives you rest from all your enemies around you, so that you dwell in safety, *then* to the place which Yahweh your God shall choose, to cause His name to dwell there, you must bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices". This "when... then" is quite clear. The 'rest from enemies' should have led them back to the land. As they had been commanded. But still they refused, and to this day Judaism continues to use their self-declared feast of Purim as an excuse to get drunk and party. God sent Haman's persecution as the 'fishers and hunters' of Jeremiah, to prod them back to their land. They were given 11 months notice of their destruction, during which they could have emigrated back. Their materialism and attachment to Persia meant that they didn't. So

God by grace saved them, despite His promises to chase and pursue them to death amongst the nations. He changed this intention by grace alone; for there is no record of the peoples' prayer nor repentance, simply their lament as to their persecution. This 'rest from their enemies' should have provoked them to return to the land and establish the temple. And again they refused, as they refused all His various ways of coaxing and appeal. Even worse, we don't read of any thanksgiving to God for the amazing deliverance by grace. It went unperceived. If some did make or feel some gratitude to God, it isn't recorded... because presumably it wasn't more than skin deep.

This serves as a bookend, connecting with how the Esther story opens with the Persians feasting. Now everything is reversed, and it is God's people who feast with joy. We begin reading of the "greatness" of the king (Esther 1:4; 6:3) and conclude with the "greatness" of Mordecai (Esther 10:2). It seems to me that God's gracious salvation of His people was more powerfully shown by all the invisible miracles, than if He had acted by visible miracles. We thereby see more clearly the extra-ordinary in the ordinary, the vast scale of the invisible miracles. And such things happen in our lives today, so there is no disjuncture between the book of Esther and our own lives.

*Esther 9:23 The Jews accepted the custom that they had begun, as Mordecai had written to them-* What is specifically in view is the command to keep the 15th day as well. The abiding weakness of the exiles was their attempt to have a foot in both camps and to compromise with the world of their exile- rather than returning to Judah and worshipping Yahweh exclusively. Zechariah criticizes them for not keeping God's laws as required, and yet establishing various new feast days to memorialize the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple and the captivity. I suggest their inauguration of Purim was likewise not God's will, and was a compromise with the world of their exile. The Babylonians also had a feast to celebrate "pur", the lot; reflecting their belief that on New Year's Day, the gods met and cast lots to determine the destinies of man for the next year. It has also been suggested that "Purim" is a corruption of Phruraia or Phurdaia, a word derived from the Persian "Farwadigan", a festival celebrated at the end of the year. The LXX and Josephus confirm this. The Farwadigan festival and Purim were both in the month of Adar.

*Esther 9:24 because Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur, that is, the lot, to consume them, and to destroy them-* LXX has "the Macedonian" for "Agagite", as if to encourage the reading of the whole story as applicable to the abuse of the Jews by Alexander of Macedon.

*Esther 9:25 but when this became known to the king, he commanded by letters that his 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-*

"When this became known..." (Esther 9:25) suggests that the king was ignorant of the intention to destroy the Jews, until Esther pointed it out to him. This may just be a simplified form of the story. But if these words are a true reflection of how things really were, we are again left with the impression of a king with limited awareness of reality, who never actually read the decree Haman issued in his name to destroy the Jews and only realized what it implied some time later. Being an alcoholic could explain this; but so could super narcissism and perhaps a total focus upon international political and military matters.

"Wicked device" is literally wicked thoughts (s.w. Gen. 6:5; Is. 59:7); perhaps some of the Proverbs which use the phrase to speak of wicked plans have Haman in view (Prov. 6:18; 15:26). Again we see the theme continued that it was for his thoughts that Haman was condemned; for the state of the heart is of paramount importance to God. But the phrase is used in Jer. 18:11 of how a "wicked device" against God's people was intended to elicit their repentance: "Behold, I frame evil against you, and devise a device against you: return you now each one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your doings". It didn't, and so they went into captivity in Babylon / Persia; and now again, repentance was not elicited as intended.

*Esther 9:26 Therefore they called these days Purim, from the word 'Pur'. Therefore because of all the words of this letter, and of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and that which had come to them-* They wanted to especially remember how the lots ["pur"] drawn by Haman were overruled by God to fall in nearly a year's time, so that there was time for Esther's mediation and their preparation. The Divine overruling of the lots was therefore felt to be the parade example of Divine providence in their salvation. But again, this seems rather a case of mistaken focus; the Divine grace of it all and the brave mediation of Esther were not the focus. It could be argued that it was more of a celebration of Jewish good luck than of Divine grace. The root meaning of *pur*, "lots", is 'a thing of nothing' (s.w. Ps. 33:10). Drawing lots was based upon astrology, and the fact the drawing of lots was to the Jews' favour hardly seems an appropriate thing to celebrate. And we are left with the impression that the Jews in Persia would now celebrate Purim religiously; whilst no mention is made of keeping Yahweh's feasts. Again, there is a subtext here that we have to read. But as ever with the book of Esther, it is below the surface.

*Esther 9:27 The Jews established and imposed on themselves and on their descendants, and on all those who joined themselves to them, so that it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to what was written, and according to its appointed time, every year-* Note the reference to the Gentiles who "joined themselves to them". Although the ideal was that they returned to Zion and experienced light and joy there (Esther 8:16), it seems God was willing to amend that plan so that their experience of it in captivity led to the Gentiles becoming Jews (as in Esther 8:17). For this is the consistent prophetic picture of the restored Kingdom of God- that Gentiles would join with repentant Judah in forming a multiethnic Kingdom of God in Zion. Just as some Egyptians joined the Jews in their exodus from Egypt, which is constantly alluded to in the restoration prophecies as the prototype for Judah's exodus from captivity, so it began to happen. But they didn't make the exodus; they remained where they were, although all was now set up for them to return.

*Esther 9:28 and that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor their memory perish from their seed-* This sadly presupposes ["every province"] that Judah were to remain in the lands of their exile. The Divine intention was that they should be provoked by what had happened to return to Judah; see on :18,21.

*Esther 9:29 Then Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew, wrote with all authority to confirm this second letter of Purim-* LXX "wrote all that they had done". Perhaps here we have the origin of the book of Esther; it was an

account by Esther of how she, a secular and not very religious Jewess, had seen her weaknesses used by God in order to save others; it was written as a testament to grace. But on :20 I will note that the book could equally have been written by Mordecai. See on :32. The powerful Esther, giving commands with such authority and initiative, is a transformed character from the girl totally submissive to Mordecai and Hegai. "The need is the call" transformed her personality, as it can for so many today who are otherwise caught in a submissive, bubble mentality.

*Esther 9:30 He sent letters to all the Jews, to the hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, with words of peace and truth-* This sadly presupposes that Judah were to remain in the lands of their exile. The Divine intention was that they should be provoked by what had happened to return to Judah; see on :18,21. "Peace and truth" is the language of the restored kingdom of God (Jer. 33:6); and it is the same term used by Hezekiah when he failed to grasp the potential of the Kingdom being reestablished in his times; he was content with peace and truth in his times alone (Is. 39:8). Likewise the Jews of Esther's time were content with "peace and truth" in their times, rather than seeing that what had happened was to lead them towards the eternal peace and truth with God of His Kingdom and not their own (see on Esther 8:13-16; 9:30). And this is the abiding temptation for all believers; to be satisfied with some degree of "peace and truth" emotionally and intellectually in their lives now, but resign the far greater realities of the Kingdom to come when "peace and truth" shall be in eternal reality.

*Esther 9:31 to confirm these days of Purim in their appointed times, as Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen had decreed, and as they had imposed upon themselves and their descendants, in the matter of the fastings and their cry-* LXX suggests differently, to the effect that Mordecai and Esther fasted at the time of Purim, perhaps in recognition of their own weaknesses at the time, asking forgiveness for how they had lived as secular believers before they were forced to give their whole lives to their God and their people: "And Mardocheus and Esther the queen appointed a fast for themselves privately".

Here and :27 stress that the Jews "imposed upon themselves" this feast. It was not of God, and must be seen in the context of Zechariah's condemnation of the Jews at this time for creating extra feasts as mere ritualism, whilst their hearts were far from God and the spirit of His feasts.

*Esther 9:32 The commandment of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book-* Confirming my suggestion on :29 that Esther was the author of the book.

## ESTHER CHAPTER 10

*Esther 10:1 King Ahasuerus laid a tribute on the land, and on the islands of the sea-* The idea is of imposed forced labour, such as Solomon ordered, and which caused much resentment. Why mention this? Perhaps it is included to signal that all was not well, although the story is to end with good triumphing over evil; see on :3. Or we can understand that Haman's offer to make the king rich by killing the Jews and taking their spoil was matched by this taxation policy of Mordecai. For the implication of :2 is that this tribute was one of the "acts" of Mordecai.

*Esther 10:2 All the acts of his power and of his might, and the full account of the greatness of Mordecai to which the king advanced him, aren't they written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?*- As noted on :1, the story ends positively, but with the subtext that all was not as it could have been. A Jew and a Jewish queen become almost the most influential people on earth at the time, with huge power and might. But still they did not lead their people back to their God and to their land. That is the unspoken conclusion which any spiritually minded, sensitive reader or hearer will come to. Again it is a story of so much potential and Divine grace being as it were wasted. Mordecai and Esther contrast unfavourably not only with Daniel, but also with Nehemiah. Although cup bearer to the Persian king, he used that permission to beg the king to let him go and assist the returned exiles in Jerusalem, and he grieved because of their situation. There is nothing like that recorded of Mordecai and Esther. Admittedly it is an argument against them from silence, but the silence is quite deafening.

*Esther 10:3 For Mordecai the Jew was next to King Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted by the multitude of his brothers, seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his descendants*- Even though Mordecai was so highly respected amongst the Jews, there is the implication noted on :2 that Mordecai failed to realize his full potential before God, even if he died respected by his own people. Not only did Cyrus and the other various potential fulfillments of the servant songs fail to rise up to their potential; Judah preferred to stay in the soft life. The sad ending of the book of Esther leaves Judah prosperous in Babylon, having declined the potential exodus back to Zion which God had set them up with. Mordecai and Esther ought surely to have used their huge power to move the Jews to return to the land, as was clearly the wish of God as expressed in the prophets. But they didn't; it seems the secularism which characterized their earlier lives may have returned in later life, and tradition has it that Esther was murdered when the Persian empire fell to the Greeks. And perhaps that is why there is no mention of God's Name in the book, nor any further allusion to Esther nor Mordecai in the Bible. We note that this epilogue makes no mention of Esther. She remained married to an alcoholic, abusive man. There is no happy ending for Esther. And that was to some degree, of her own making. Her willingness to go along with Mordecai's immoral usage of her had consequences, to the end of her days. It worked for Mordecai- he indeed achieved glory through the marriage of his adopted daughter. He got what he dreamt of. Haman got what he deserved, the king remained foolish and distant from domestic reality. But for her... ?

The story ends with the greatness of Mordecai, who out of such initial weakness was made strong. The account of him is full of reference to the Babylonian tales of the god Marduk, recorded in the Enuma Elish. Especially his glorification in Esther 8:15. Mordecai is a form of "Marduk", and so maybe the idea was to show Persia that in fact Marduk had no real existence; rather does God work through His weak people by His invisible hand, to exalt them. But again we are left with open questions at the very end here. Persia was about to fall to the Greeks, and so we wonder how long Mordecai's "descendants" went on for. Surrounded by the glory of his family and his own exaltation by the king, we see the similarities with Haman who had just the same experience. For a short while. And we are left wondering whether this too happened to Mordecai. For as always with the book of Esther, we are intended to read the subtext.