

a lesson:

## ON THE BOOK OF ESTHER

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1/28/2007 AD

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## I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Book of ESTHER may be placed historically between the events recorded in EZRA and NEHEMIAH. ESTHER 1:1-3 gives us the setting, “Now it came to pass... when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his [Persian] kingdom, which was in Shushan the palace, In the third year of his reign... the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him.”<sup>1</sup> Here the Persian Empire is at its height. We are placed in the Empire’s capitol city of Shushan, in particular in and around the royal Persian palace. This Persian king – Ahasuerus or Xerxes – was the third of four successive Persian kings who play a prominent role in the events of EZRA-NEHEMIAH.

Although there is some difference in dating between sources, we may construct a reasonable outline of the historical background to The Book of ESTHER: First was King Cyrus, who began his rule by the overthrow of the Babylonian Empire in 539 or 538 BC and issuing his famous decree that the captive Jews be allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild The Temple.<sup>2</sup> Cyrus continued to rule until 530 BC.<sup>3</sup> Second was King Darius I, who ruled from 521 to 486 BC.<sup>4</sup> It was during the rule of Darius I that the rebuilding of The Temple in Jerusalem was completed in 515 BC.<sup>5</sup> And it was during the reign of Daruis I that Ezra returned to Jerusalem in 458 or 457 BC.<sup>6 7</sup>

Third was King Ahuseurus, also called Xerxes, referred to in ESTHER 1:1-3 above. It was during Ahuseurus’s reign that the events of ESTHER begin to unfold. As recorded in The Book of ESTHER, it was this third Persian king who married the Jewish heroine Esther, which opened the way for GOD to use her to intervene through the sympathetic graces of her husband the king to save the Jews throughout the Persian Empire from destruction by their foes.<sup>8</sup> Fourth was King Artaxerxes I, who ruled from 464 to 423 BC.<sup>9</sup> This is this same sympathetic Persian king, in The Book of

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<sup>1</sup> 1, KJV, ESTHER 1:1-3.

<sup>2</sup> 2, Dillard and Longman, EZRA-NEHEMIAH, introductory comments, paragraph 2, page 179.

<sup>3</sup> 3, Wycliffe, EZRA, Introduction, Historical Background, paragraph 1 - 2, page 423.

<sup>4</sup> 3, Wycliffe, EZRA, Introduction, Historical Background, paragraph 1 - 2, page 423.

<sup>5</sup> 4, Howard, Date of The Events, paragraph 1, page 280.

<sup>6</sup> 4, Howard, EZRA-NEHEMIAH, Date of The Events, paragraph 2, page 280.

<sup>7</sup> 5, Matthew Henry, EZRA, Chapter VII, Ezra’s Arrival at Jerusalem.

<sup>8</sup> 3, Wycliffe, NEHEMIAH, Introduction, Historical Background, paragraph 1, page 435.

<sup>9</sup> 3, Wycliffe, EZRA, Introduction, Historical Background, paragraph 1 - 2, page 423.

NEHEMIAH, commissioned Nehemiah by royal decree to go to Jerusalem, becoming royal governor over Judah for twelve years, and overseeing the rebuilding of the walls and gates of The City, between about 445 to 433 BC.<sup>10 11</sup>

The New American Bible offers this list of the kings of Persia, of which we will note the above four: 1) Cyrus: 538 to 529 BC – the Jews released by royal decree from captivity to return to Jerusalem in 538/539 BC; 2) Darius I: 521 to 485 BC – the rebuilding of The Temple completed by 515 BC, Ezra goes to Jerusalem in 458 BC; 3) Ahuserus (Xerxes): 485 to 464 BC – the events of ESTHER, such as the honouring of Mordecai by the king, the plot to murder the Jews throughout the Persian Empire by Haman, the elevation of Esther to Queen of Persia, the intervention of GOD through Mordacai, Esther and King Xerxes to deliver The Jews from their enemies and institution of Purim; 4) Artaxerxes I: 464 to 423 BC – Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem in 445 BC.<sup>12</sup>

## II. CONTENTS OF BOOK

Matthew Henry divides ESTHER into the following sections based on the flow of events: “I. How Esther came to be queen and Mordecai to be great at court, who were to be the instruments of the intended deliverance, ch. i., ii. II. Upon what provocation, and by what arts, Haman the Amalekite obtained an order for the destruction of all the Jews, ch. iii. III. The great distress the Jews, and their patriots especially, were in thereupon, ch. iv. IV. The defeating of Haman's particular plot against Mordecai's life, ch. v.-vii. V. The defeating of his general plot against the Jews, ch. viii. VI. The care that was taken to perpetuate the remembrance of this, ch. ix., x.”<sup>13</sup>

Wycliffe offers this division of ESTHER based on key events: “I. Vashti divorced. 1:1-22. II. Esther made queen. 2:1-23. III. Haman's plot against the Jews. 3:1-15. IV. Esther's decision [to intervene to help her people]. 4:1-17. V. Esther's first banquet. 5:1-4. VI. Haman humiliated before Mordecai. 6:1-14. VII. Esther's second

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<sup>10</sup> 4, Howard, Date of The Events, Postexilic Chronology [table], page 281.

<sup>11</sup> 2, Dilland and Longman, The Dates of The Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah, paragraph 1, page 182.

<sup>12</sup> 6, The New American Bible, The Book of EZRA, introductory comments, “...list of the kings of Persia, with the dates of their reigns...,” page 456.

<sup>13</sup> 5, Matthew Henry, ESTHER: Introduction. Matthew Henry offers divisions of ESTHER based on flow of events.

banquet. 7:1-10. VIII. Mordecai's counterdecree [for the Jews to defend themselves]. 8:1-17. IX. The Jews victorious and Purim instituted. 9:1-30:3." <sup>14</sup>

### III. AUTHORSHIP AND TEXT

Although the human authorship of ESTHER is not known to us, we do know that The Book was handed down to The Church in two forms: "...a short Hebrew form and a longer Greek version. The latter contains 107 additional verses, inserted at appropriate places within the Hebrew form of the text." <sup>15</sup> The shorter Hebrew text interestingly "...systematically omits reference to GOD [by Name] and His Providence over Israel..." So for instance The New American Bible offers ESTHER A as "Prologue" entitled "Dream of Mordecai" about a great worldwide war involving two dragons and the affliction of the just. <sup>16</sup> ESTHER A:8-9 in The New American Version reads for example, "The whole race of the just were dismayed with fear of the evils to come upon them, and were at the point of destruction. Then they cried out to GOD..." <sup>17</sup>

The King James Version Bible omits this prologue, and so ESTHER 1:9 therein reads, "<sup>9</sup> Also Vashti the queen made a feast for the women in the royal house which belonged to king Ahasuerus." <sup>18</sup> The longer Greek text, which includes direct references to GOD, is considered "...a later literary paraphrase... [but nonetheless] The [Roman Catholic] Church has accepted the additions as equally inspired with the rest of The Book." <sup>19</sup> Matthew Henry makes the same observation on the omission of any of The Names of GOD in the Hebrew text version of ESTHER: "The Name of GOD is not found in This Book; but the apocryphal addition to it (which is not in the Hebrew, nor was ever received by the Jews into the canon)..." <sup>20</sup>

In any event, ESTHER shows the author had detailed knowledge of the moving events and intimate details of the events surrounding the Persian King Ahuserus (Xerxes), and so we may with certainty place the writing of The Book not long after about 464 BC – the last year of that Persian king's reign. Wycliffe reports that Josephus

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<sup>14</sup> Wycliffe, ESTHER, Outline, page 448.

<sup>15</sup> 6, The New American Bible, The Book of ESTHER, introductory comments, paragraph 4, page 515.

<sup>16</sup> 6, The New American Bible, ESTHER A, Prologue, Dream of Mordecai, page 515.

<sup>17</sup> 7, NAB, ESTHER A:8-9.

<sup>18</sup> 1, KJV, ESTHER 1:9.

<sup>19</sup> 6, The New American Bible, The Book of ESTHER, introductory comments, paragraph 4, page 515.

<sup>20</sup> 5, Matthew Henry, ESTHER: Introduction.

attributed the authorship of ESTHER to Mordecai, but this is not provable.

“Nevertheless, the author must have been a Jew who lived in Persia at the time of the events narrated and who had access to the official chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia.”<sup>21</sup>

#### IV. SYNCRONICITY WITH DANIEL

In EZRA and NEHEMIAH we saw the hand of GOD working through the pagan Persian kings and against all human opposition to bring to fulfillment The Word which He caused Jeremiah to reveal when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in JEREMIAH 29:10, “For thus saith The LORD, That after Seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform My good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place.”<sup>22</sup> So DANIEL 9:1-2 records Daniel’s observation of the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophesy of The Return from Babylon, “In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus... I Daniel understood by books the number of the years, whereof The Word of The LORD came to Jeremiah the prophet, that he would accomplish seventy years in the desolations of Jerusalem.”<sup>23</sup>

In DANIEL we see that Daniel was in contemporary of Ezra, Nehemiah, Mordecai and Esther. He in fact was in constant service to the Gentile kings of Babylon and then Persia who, themselves instruments of The Most High GOD, were used by Providence to first chastise and then redeem the Jewish people. For interpreting the prophetic dreams of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, we find in DANIEL 2:28, “Then the king made Daniel a great man, and gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief of the governors over all the wise men of Babylon.”<sup>24</sup> In DANIEL 5 we find Daniel pronouncing Divine judgement upon the corrupt King Belshazzar of Babylon. DANIEL 10:1 opens, “In the third year of Cyrus king of Persia a thing was revealed unto Daniel...”<sup>25</sup> DANIEL 11:1 records, “Also I in the first year of Darius the Mede, even I, stood to confirm and to strengthen him..”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Wycliffe, ESTHER, Introduction, Date and Authorship, page 447.

<sup>22</sup> 1, KJV, JEREMIAH 29:10.

<sup>23</sup> 1, KJV, DANIEL 9:1-2.

<sup>24</sup> 1, KJV, DANIEL 2:28.

<sup>25</sup> 1, KJV, DANIEL 10:1.

<sup>26</sup> 1, KJV, DANIEL 11:1.

V. A MEMORIAL VERSE: ESTHER 4:13-14 – FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS!

ESTHER also shows how The Almighty's hand works through the lives of the faithful and the flow of human history, though we ourselves – although faithful to GOD and yet suffering for a time – can not see the overall scheme of events that The Creator sees. And when GOD places us His saints in whatever time and place, it is often through us that He works to confront evil and bring about the deliverance of the innocent. When Mordecai learned of how the enemy of his people Haman had secured authority of the Persian king to murder all the Jews of The Empire on a certain day, he prayed, fasted and then went forth to call Queen Esther to intervene with the king.

Esther hesitated, at which point Mordecai spoke out to spur her on to take action in the face of this oncoming evil. Therefore we read in ESTHER 4:13-14, “Then Mordecai commanded to answer Esther, Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews. For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”<sup>27</sup> But GOD's deliverance for His people often involves His people taking up the mantle of confronting evil in the strength of The LORD. Esther struggled with the question, “What can I do? Who am I that GOD should use me to work His will?” Esther could have remained silent, saying to herself, “I am safe. I have my place of security in the king's house. Why should I risk all that I have and even my own life? Let GOD send somebody else!” And yet she submitted to The Providence of GOD, the call of duty to oppose evil in her righteousness and place the welfare of others over that of herself.

Now in ESTHER we read of the guiding Divine Providence of The Almighty to protect Mordecai, Esther and the Jewish people throughout the Persian Empire during the reign of King Ahuserus (Xerxes) from utter destruction from their enemies. ESTHER 8:7-8 records how Esther and Mordecai were delivered from the plots of Haman by the authority of the king: “Then the king Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen and to Mordecai the Jew, Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and him they have hanged upon the gallows, because he laid his hand upon the Jews. Write ye also for the

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<sup>27</sup> 1, KJV, ESTHER 4:13-14.

Jews, as it liketh 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 no man reverse.”

<sup>28</sup> But there was still the sword about to come upon all the Jews in Persia.

Although the previous decree of the Persian king to destroy the Jewish people that Haman had deceitfully obtained could not itself be reversed, Esther's husband King Ahasuerus gave full authority in his royal name to command the Jews to band together to defend themselves against their enemies in The Empire. ESTHER 8:11-12 reveals the nature of this royal decree and how GOD intervened to save His people: “Wherein the king granted the Jews which were in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all the power of the people and province that would assault them, both little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey, Upon one day in all the provinces of king Ahasuerus, namely, upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar.”<sup>29</sup>

And as Scripture faithfully records, the Jews were successful in defending themselves. Thus the establishment of Purim to commemorate this Divine deliverance, which is also to be found in ESTHER 9:31-32, “To confirm these days of Purim in their times appointed, according as Mordecai the Jew and Esther the queen had enjoined them, and as they had decreed for themselves and for their seed, the matters of the fastings and their cry. And the decree of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in The Book [of ESTHER].”<sup>30</sup>

## VI. FIRST LESSON OF ESTHER – GOD DELIVERS THE JUST

In all these events at the close of the historical events in The Old Testament canon, one can not help but be awestruck at how The Creator of the Universe intervened so directly and amazingly to preserve and recreate The Jewish nation. The New American Bible offers that ESTHER is primary a teaching Book, emphasizing “...the glorification of the Jewish people and the explanation of the origin, significance and date of the feast of Purim... The Book was intended as a consolation for Israel, a reminder that GOD's Providence continually watches over them, never abandoning them when

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<sup>28</sup> 1, KJV, ESTHER 8:7-8.

<sup>29</sup> 1, KJV, ESTHER 8:11-12.

<sup>30</sup> 1, KJV, ESTHER 9:31-32.



they serve Him faithfully or turn to Him in sincere repentance...”<sup>31</sup> The events of ESTHER remind us of the truth of PSALM 37:9-11, “For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth. For yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be: yea, thou shalt diligently consider his place, and it shall not be. But the meek shall inherit the earth; and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace!”

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Matthew Henry observes that ESTHER shows how The Almighty delivered and protected His Old Testament people, both those who had in faith returned to Jerusalem, as well as those who elected to remain dispersed in their exile throughout The Persian Empire: “How the providence of God watched over the Jews that had returned out of captivity to their own land... [and the] many who staid behind, having not zeal enough for God's house, and the holy land and city, to carry them through the difficulties of a removal thither.”<sup>33</sup> Of a certainty does The Almighty strike down the wicked, but He has compassion upon the afflicted upright man. So we read in PSALM 37:12-13 declares, “The wicked plotteth against the just, and gnasheth upon him with his teeth. The Lord shall laugh at him: for he seeth that his day is coming!”<sup>34</sup>

It would seem reasonable by man’s reasoning that The LORD would have not extended His arm of deliverance over the Jews who refused The Return to The Promised Land, but this was not the case. Matthew Henry marvels with us at this: “...but our GOD deals not with us according to our folly and weakness. We find in this book that even those Jews who were scattered in the provinces of the heathen were taken care of, as well as those who were gathered in the land of Judea, and were wonderfully preserved, when doomed to destruction and appointed as sheep for the slaughter.”<sup>35</sup> This is the encouragement for all good men of faith in all times and places who suffer at the hands of the bent which is declared in PSALM 37:16-17, “A little that a righteous man hath is better than the riches of many wicked. For the arms of the wicked shall be broken: but the LORD upholdeth the righteous!”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> 6, The New American Bible, The Book of ESTHER, introductory comments, paragraph 2, page 514.

<sup>32</sup> 1, KJV, PSALM 37:9-11.

<sup>33</sup> 5, Matthew Henry, ESTHER: Introduction.

<sup>34</sup> 1, KJV, PSALM 37:12-13.

<sup>35</sup> 5, Matthew Henry, ESTHER: Introduction.

<sup>36</sup> 1, KJV, PSALM 37:16-17.

## VII. SECOND QUESTION OF ESTHER – WHY THE JUST SUFFER UNJUSTLY

So does ESTHER addresses the age old cry of men, “Why, O LORD, does the wicked man seem to prosper, while the righteous at the hands of that wicked man so often to suffer?” In ESTHER we see this cry answered: The LORD does indeed punish the evil man and deliver the upright man according to His justice. The suffering of the just is as for a moment in this world, but the damnation of the wicked by The Almighty is forever. ESTHER amply demonstrates this in “...the reversal of fortune of the prosperous wicked and the oppressed virtuous through eventual punishment of the former and triumph of the latter...”<sup>37</sup>

The answer to this question lies in part in the counsel of Saint Paul in ROMANS 8:28, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love GOD, to them who are the called according to His purpose.”<sup>38</sup> Like Esther, we can not see the big picture of life that swirls around us. But there is One Who can, He being of course The Almighty. And though the innocent and the just may for a time suffer unjustly in their innocence at the hands of the wicked, GOD is their hope and stay. And in that suffering and affliction, we His saints are the ones called to work and testify to His Truth. For as CHRIST Himself teaches us in MATTHEW 5:10, “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is The Kingdom of Heaven.”<sup>39</sup>

For when we love GOD with all our heart, mind and soul and earnestly place our hope of salvation in The Body and Blood of our Lord JESUS CHRIST shed for us, we may take certain comfort in the words of Saint Paul as he declares in ROMANS 8:38-39, “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of GOD, which is in CHRIST JESUS our Lord!”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> 6, The New American Bible, The Book of ESTHER, introductory comments, paragraph 2, page 514.

<sup>38</sup> 1, KJV, ROMANS 8:28.

<sup>39</sup> 1, KJV, MATTHEW 5:10.

<sup>40</sup> 1, KJV, ROMANS 8:38-39.

### VIII. IN CONCLUSION

It is thus the duty of the saints of GOD in this life to answer the calling to which The LORD places before us as faithful servants – even in the midst of trials and suffering; even when to answer that call brings upon our heads the threats of the world, the flesh and the devil; even as our Lord JESUS CHRIST The Son was obedient to GOD The Father in going to The Cross! For our Christian duty is not so much to fully discern and understand The Providence of GOD in our lives as to trust and obey. In whatever time and place The Almighty has placed us in this world in His Present Kingdom - The Church on earth - we are called to believe and serve as His faithful servants. This, that when we stand before The Judgement Seat of CHRIST in Heaven, we might then receive a full crown of glory in His Eternal Kingdom, The Church in Heaven. And as we have noted – if we truly love GOD and our fellow man as CHRIST commands us – should we not be convicted by the same words which Mordecai spoke to Esther in ESTHER 4:14, “...and who knoweth whether thou art come to The Kingdom [of GOD on earth] for such a time as this?”<sup>41</sup> In The Name of The Father, and of The Son, and of The Holy Spirit, AMEN!

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<sup>41</sup> 1, KJV, ESTHER 4:14.

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