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*Archaeological Backgrounds of the
Exilic and Postexilic Era
Part 2:*

The Archaeological Background of Esther

Edwin M. Yamauchi

Objections and Problems

LITERARY FORM

In the last twenty years there has been no lack of erudite and ingenious attempts to unravel the riddle of Esther by reading between the lines and discovering hidden meanings below the surface of the text.

Assyriologist J. Lewy suggested that the tale of Esther originally involved a story of the threatened extermination of Babylonians loyal to Marduk in Susa rather than of Jews.¹ This proposal was recently revived by Littman.²

Cazelles thought that Esther resulted from the combination of a liturgical account with a historical account.³ Bickerman, citing numerous parallels from the *Arabian Nights*, viewed Esther in a similar light as pure folklore.⁴ Gerleman perceived Esther as consciously modeled on the story of the Exodus,⁵ whereas Talmon defined the Esther narrative as a "historicized wisdom tale,"⁶ like the story of Ahiqar.⁷

Dommershausen has analyzed Esther by focusing on particular stylistic elements such as the references to drinking.⁸ Bardtke believes that separate tales of Vashti, Mordecai, and Esther were combined to form the present book.⁹

These earlier attempts at literary analysis are reviewed and shown to be less than satisfying in a recent work by Berg who herself chooses to relate Esther to the story of Joseph.¹⁰

All these studies contribute insights into the literary

techniques of the author and underscore certain aspects of the narrative, such as the author's humor.¹¹ At the same time many of these studies too readily reject the claims of the work itself to be a historical narrative.

PURIM

Esther is numbered among the five *Megilloth* which are read at five festivals; it is indeed the *Megillah* par excellence and is known by that name.¹² It is read at Purim, which has become the most festive and popular holiday celebrated by the Jews.

Many scholars assume that Esther is an aetiological tale written to explain, in terms acceptable to the Jews, an originally pagan holiday. Typical is the comment by Humphrey. "There is little need today to refute the suggestion that the Book of Esther is a history. In its present form it is the festal legend for the Jewish feast of Purim."¹³

Outside of Esther the first reference which recalls the events of the book is 2 Maccabees 15:36 which refers to the celebration of the thirteenth day of Adar (February-March), called "the day before Mordecai's day."¹⁴

The Talmudic tractate *Megillah* (7b) reports the tradition that at Purim men should be so intoxicated with merriment that they are unable to distinguish between "Blessed is Mordecai" and "Cursed is Haman." Gaster notes, "The Hebrew expression for 'fail to distinguish' is 'ad lô' yada', and for this reason *Adloyada* has become the popular name for Purim celebrations in modern Israel."¹⁵ Gaster describes how Purim is celebrated.

Conversely, every mention of Haman's name is greeted with stamping and with the whirling of noisemakers In some places, it is even customary to chalk the name of the wicked vizier upon the soles of one's shoes so that it may be literally trodden underfoot and blotted out. Children are permitted special license on this occasion, and what would normally be regarded as an interference with the decorum of divine worship is on this day not only tolerated but actively encouraged.¹⁶

Though it is quite clear that the name Purim is derived from a non-Hebrew word for "lots" (cf. Heb. לִּוְיָ, Esther 3:7; 9:24), namely, the Akkadian *pūrum*,¹⁷ this does not necessarily presuppose that Purim was originally a heathen festival. Attempts to find analogies in various Persian festivals¹⁸ are not convincing. After surveying various proposed parallels, Berg concludes: "No extra-Israelite festival suggests itself as a suitable model for Purim or explains the particular mode of its observance."¹⁹

Moreover, as Berg points out, "Purim is not central to the narrative" of Esther.²⁰ It is mentioned only in Esther 9:28-32 with allusions to it in 3:7 and 9:24.

Place and Date of Composition

In view of Esther's setting in Susa, its Persian background, its Aramaisms, and its lack of reference to Palestine, there is widespread agreement that Esther was composed in the eastern Diaspora, quite probably at Susa itself.²¹

However, scholars disagree widely on the probable date of the composition of Esther, depending on their views of the purpose and the nature of the book.

As the reference to Mordecai in 2 Maccabees 15:36 comes from late in the second century B.C., Esther must be dated before this. Torrey, who generally advocated very late dates for the post-exilic books,²² argued that the most probable date was the middle of the second century B.C.²³ Altheim and Stiehl, by relating Esther to certain events in Hellenistic history, advocate a date of 140 B.C.²⁴ Because of the absence of Esther and Mordecai from the roll call of heroes in Ben Sirah, Morris suggested that Esther was written between 175 and 172 B.C. to encourage Jewish cooperation with Antiochus IV before he became a tyrant.²⁵ This is a specious argument, however, since Ben Sirah was primarily concerned with builders such as Nehemiah. Ben Sirah had certain biases which led him to omit, for example, Ezra.²⁶

Bardtke favors a date between 250 and 200 B.C.²⁷ Berg, who believes that there may be references to the *proskynesis* ("prostration") controversy of Alexander in Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman, dates Esther in the Hellenistic period despite its strong Persian traditions and lack of Greek words.²⁸

Moore prefers to date Esther in the late Persian period, that is, the early fourth century.²⁹ Gordis favors a similar date.

The style indicates a date of composition of approximately 400 B.C.E., only a few decades after the reign of King Xerxes. . . . there is a considerable number of Persian and Aramaic words and idioms. There are, however, no Greek words, a fact which clearly points to a pre-Hellenistic date . . .³⁰

Talmon argues for a still earlier date. Noting that Grintz has made a strong case for the dating of Judith, which was patterned after Esther, in the reign of Artaxerxes II (404-359 B.C.), he concludes, "This conflux constitutes a strong argument in favour of dating the composition of the Esther-story in the beginning of the

Persian era. The traditional setting of the book in the days of Xerxes I (485-465 B.C.) cannot be wide off the mark."³¹

Classical Sources

Scholars who dismiss the historicity of Esther generally do so because of discrepancies with classical sources on Xerxes, chiefly Herodotus, the father of history.³² One must first assess the validity of Herodotus as a historical source.

It is true that against the widespread skepticism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century,³³ Herodotus has been vindicated as a generally observant and honest reporter, especially of what he himself saw.³⁴ He was, however, the victim of unreliable informants and was not infallible. He was wrong in his depiction of Cambyses' invasion of Egypt,³⁵ and the sparing of Croesus by Cyrus.³⁶ He also had his axes to grind.³⁷

As a source Herodotus is vastly superior to Ctesias, the Greek physician at the court of Artaxerxes II (403-359 B.C.), who is notoriously unreliable though he claims to have had access to official documents.³⁸ Herodotus got six of the seven Persian noblemen who overthrew the Magian pretender, Gaumata, correct, whereas Ctesias got only one of the names right.³⁹

The classical sources were, of course, interested in Xerxes primarily for his invasion of Greece in 480-479 B.C.⁴⁰ According to Shea, "the classical historians almost universally lost interest in Xerxes after his forces were defeated at Plataea and Mykale in 479, thus they provide little information bearing upon the events described in Esther that are dated later in his reign."⁴¹

Persian Sources

The number of contemporary cuneiform texts (Old Persian, Akkadian, Elamite) inscribed by the Achaemenid kings is very limited, and on the whole — with the exception of the Behistun Monument of Darius — they are not very informative about historical events. The tally of Achaemenid inscriptions is as follows:⁴²

Cyrus	3
Darius I	58
Xerxes	21
Artaxerxes I	2
Darius II	2
Artaxerxes II	8
Artaxerxes III	1

Most of the inscriptions after the time of Xerxes are but stereotyped imitations of the inscriptions of Darius. According to Gershevitch, "The brief inscriptions of Xerxes's successors — which are only thirteen, dictated over a period of about one hundred years — are merely correctly written impersonal stereotypes modelled on brief inscriptions of Darius" ⁴³

Many of the inscriptions of Xerxes refer to his structures at Persepolis, which his father Darius had begun and which he completed. ⁴⁴ In 1967 an important new text was discovered near Persepolis when a tractor struck a stone. ⁴⁵

Of the Elamite administrative texts, Shea notes, "Of the 85 Persepolis Treasury tablets published by Cameron, 66 come from the time of Xerxes, but they are of a selective administrative nature and offer only indirect information about the major events of his reign." ⁴⁶ The nineteen Aramaic ritual texts dated to Xerxes' reign and published by Bowman contain no historical information. ⁴⁷ Shea also observes, "In spite of the extensive excavations by the French at Susa . . . only one administrative text from the Achaemenid period has been found there" ⁴⁸

The bearing of fragmentary extrabiblical sources for the period of Xerxes on the question of the historicity of Esther should be obvious. Berg perceptively observes:

The difficulty may rest with the inadequacies of our sources and with our imprecise knowledge of the Jewish diaspora during the Persian period. Nevertheless, we possess no information concerning the historical situation posited in Esther apart from the story itself. Views that the book represents the novelistic expansion of an historical event thus rest upon a circular argument. ⁴⁹

The Dramatis Personae

XERXES

Biblical Ahasuerus (Heb. אֲחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ) was identified in Jewish Midrash with Artaxerxes. ⁵⁰ Hoschander argued that Ahasuerus was Artaxerxes II (403-359 B.C.). ⁵¹ But extrabiblical evidence leaves little doubt that Ahasuerus was none other than Xerxes (485-465 B.C.), the son of Darius I. ⁵² Shea is able to list the spelling of both Xerxes and Artaxerxes in seven languages (Greek, Old Persian, Elamite, Aramaic, Hebrew, Akkadian, Egyptian); there is always a "t" in the spelling of the latter name. ⁵³

Apart from Esther, Ahasuerus is mentioned only in Ezra 4:6 in relation to an accusation which was lodged against the Jews in his reign. Another Ahasuerus was the father of Darius the Mede

(Dan. 9:1). Morgenstern has postulated a destruction of Jerusalem in 485 B.C. in the reign of Xerxes as the immediate background of Ezra and Nehemiah.⁵⁴ Most scholars would agree with the judgment of Leesberg that "the arguments for this position rest upon an exegesis of many passages of the Old Testament which is highly subjective and in some cases is simply the piling of one assumption upon a previous one."⁵⁵

Herodotus, in addition to depicting Xerxes' role in the invasion of Greece, presents an unflattering portrait of the king as an impatient, hot-tempered monarch with a wandering eye for women. According to Herodotus, Xerxes not only tried to have an affair with his brother's wife, but also did have an affair with her daughter.⁵⁶

According to Barucq, the role which Ahasuerus holds in Esther "conforms perfectly to Xerxes as we know from Herodotus."⁵⁷ Moore agrees. "Much of what the author of Esther says about King Xerxes corresponds fairly well with what the classical writers had to say about such things, for example, . . . his nasty and at times irrational temper (1:12; 7:7-8)"⁵⁸

In contrast to these reports is the self-laudatory description of Xerxes found in the recently discovered inscription translated by Gharib.

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

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

(23-26) What a man says against a man, that does not convince me, until I hear the solemn testimony of both.⁵⁹

VASHTI

One of the most serious discrepancies cited by scholars to discredit the historicity of Esther is the fact that Herodotus⁶⁰ claims that the queen had to come from one of the seven Persian families, and that Xerxes' queen was Amestris.⁶¹ Amestris was a very vengeful, powerful, and influential woman. When she learned of Xerxes' affair with Artaynta she had Artaynta's mother cruelly mutilated.⁶²

Wright has suggested that with certain phonetic modifications an identification of Vashti with Amestris can possibly be made⁶³ — a conclusion accepted also by Shea.⁶⁴ Shea works out a detailed synchronism to show how the events in Esther 1 can be harmonized with Xerxes' absence in Greece in 480-479 B.C.⁶⁵

As to the objection that Esther could not have become queen, as Amestris/Vashti certainly wields power when her son Artaxerxes I came to the throne in 464, Shea responds:

In essence, Herodotus breaks off his account of Xerxes' reign at this point (479 B.C.), after the description of these events that took place in Xerxes' 7th year subsequent to the king's return from the Greek campaign. Thus it is an overstatement of the case to say that Amestris was Xerxes' queen between his 7th and 12th years, since we have no further information about her until the time her son Artaxerxes I occupied the Persian throne. In view of this silence of our sources, there is no specific evidence to indicate whether or not Amestris was Xerxes' chief wife from his 7th year to the end of his reign.⁶⁶

The Rabbis added midrashic embellishments to the story of Vashti, holding that her refusal was the king's order that she appear naked before his guests — a motif which is redolent of Candaules, the Lydian king, who wished to show off his wife's beauty to Gyges.⁶⁷ According to the Talmud the queen refused to come because Gabriel had smitten her with leprosy.⁶⁸ The Rabbis held that Vashti was executed — a just punishment for the daughter of Belshazzar! The biblical account simply implies that she was demoted, not killed or divorced.

HAMAN

No contemporary evidence exists for Haman, but there is a remarkable painting in the Dura Europos synagogue (ca. A.D. 245) which depicts Mordecai riding on a horse, led by a man who is presumably Haman. Ahasuerus is seated on the throne "of king Solomon" with Esther by his side.⁶⁹

According to Esther 2:23; 5:14; and 9:14, Haman and his sons were hung on high gallows. Many extra-biblical inscriptions and reliefs depict this form of disgraceful execution. According to Herodotus Darius I impaled three thousand Babylonians when he took the city of Babylon,⁷⁰ an act which Darius himself recorded on his Behistun Inscription.⁷¹

Jewish tradition added further ignominy to Haman's disgrace. When the daughter of Haman mistook her father for Mordecai as he was leading the latter on horseback, she dropped a chamberpot on her father's head. When she learned the truth, she was overcome with shame and leaped to her death.⁷²

ESTHER

Herodotus' statement that the queen could come only from

the seven leading Persian families⁷³ is often cited as an obstacle to accepting the biblical record of Esther as the queen. But as Wright perceptively notes, Herodotus is contradicted by the fact that Amestris was the daughter of an Otanes, who was not from one of these families. Darius also married outside these families.⁷⁴

Some possible light on the process by which Esther beautified herself may come from one of Albright's last articles. He suggested that an incense burner found at Lachish should be compared with cosmetic burners from Arabia, which impregnated not only the women but also their clothes with the fragrance of the incense (cf. Esther 2:12; Ps. 45:8).⁷⁵

Both Josephus and the Jewish Rabbis exaggerated the beauty of Esther and elaborated on her virtues and piety. The Rabbis held that Esther was one of the four most beautiful women in history along with Sarah, Rahab, and Abigail (*Megillah* 15a). Josephus⁷⁶ maintained that Esther "surpassed all women in beauty" in the entire habitable world.⁷⁷

Esther's courage is heightened by Josephus' remark that around Ahasuerus' throne stood men with axes ready to punish those who approached the throne without being summoned.⁷⁸

One of the additions to the canonical Esther in the Greek version is a "Prayer of Esther."⁷⁹ According to the Rabbis, Esther in her prayer reminds God that she is but a poor orphan. In Josephus,⁸⁰ according to Feldman, "Esther prays for two things, for eloquence and for greater beauty than she had ever had before, so that she may by both these means turn aside the king's anger; the Septuagint omits the request for additional beauty and mentions merely her desire for eloquence."⁸¹

In the center of Hamadan (ancient Ecbatana) stands the Synagogue of Esther and Mordecai, containing sarcophagi covered with brocaded cloth. It has been suggested that one of the tombs may be that of the Jewish queen of the Sassanian ruler Yazdegird (A.D. 399-421).⁸²

MORDECAI

Mordecai's name is derived from Marduk, the god of Babylon, as Esther's name may have been derived from Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love. Some earlier scholars had indeed suggested that these names represented not humans but gods in a historicized myth.

In the past a number of scholars expressed doubts about the historicity of Mordecai. Bickerman remarked, "But the name,

which means 'man of Marduk' or 'worshiper of Marduk,' . . . is not Jewish at all. We may wonder whether the hero of the original tale was a Jew."⁸³ As one of the objections to the historicity of Esther, Gaster listed the fact that "there is no mention anywhere but in the Book of Esther of . . . a courtier named Mordecai who eventually replaced Haman."⁸⁴ Even Hoschander, who attempted to support the historicity of Esther albeit by displacing it nearly a century too late, despaired of finding attestation for Mordecai: "It is exceedingly doubtful whether the name of Mordecai ever occurred in the Persian annals, as there is scarcely room for doubt that among the Persians he had a pure Persian name."⁸⁵

The name appears in Aramaic letters, but most significant is the occurrence of the name *Mardukâ* in a tablet from Borsippa in Mesopotamia. The tablet was first noted in the Amherst collection in England in 1904, but was not published until 1942 by Ungnad⁸⁶ after it had been sold to the Berlin Museum. *Mardukâ* is listed as a *sipîr* ("an accountant") who makes an inspection tour of Susa during the last years of Darius or early years of Xerxes. It is Ungnad's conviction that "it is improbable that there were two Mardukas serving as high officials in Susa."⁸⁷ He therefore concludes that this individual is none other than Esther's uncle. This conclusion has been widely accepted.⁸⁸ According to Gordis it is "the strongest support thus far for the historical character of the book"⁸⁹

Gordis notes that the phrase that Mordecai sat in the gate indicates his high official status (Esther 2:19, 21; 5:9, 13). It was this elevation of Mordecai through Esther which infuriated Haman. "The verses mean not that the mere sight of Mordecai arouses Haman's wrath, but rather that the spectacle of Mordecai as a royal official, obstinately refusing to pay deference to his superior, infuriates Haman."⁹⁰

Esther 2:6 is sometimes thought to present a problem since it seems to state that Mordecai was deported by Nebuchadnezzar in 597 B.C.⁹¹ This would mean that Mordecai would have been about 120 years old in the time of Xerxes, and what is even more improbable, that Esther would have been about seventy-five years old — a situation which the Rabbis accepted! But as a number of scholars have pointed out, the relative pronoun אֲשֶׁר should be taken not with Mordecai, the first name in the series, but rather with Kish, the great-grandfather of Mordecai who is the last name in the series.⁹²

The Rabbis explained Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman

by explaining that Haman had affixed a graven image on his tunic. Josephus stated that his refusal was based on his wisdom and his native law.⁹³

Rabbi Joseph contended that the study of the Torah is more important than the saving of life, a lesson which he drew from a rather curious exegesis of the name Mordecai. After identifying the Mordecai who is mentioned in Ezra 2:2 (cf. Neh. 7:7) with the Mordecai of Esther, he observed that the name occurs in the fifth place in the former passage but in the sixth place in the latter, which he held was written after Mordecai was exalted.

The rabbis view this as scriptural proof of his loss of stature upon acquiring his new position, caused by his neglect of the Torah. Thus the Talmud concludes the story of Mordecai by showing us that even this pious Jew, who was the most righteous man of his entire generation, was eventually corrupted by too much wealth and power (Meg. 16b).⁹⁴

Corroborative Details

THE PERSIAN BACKGROUND

Even scholars who regard Esther as a "historical novel" because of the alleged difficulties listed above concede that the author is intimately acquainted with the Persian background of the purported period.

The author's familiarity with both general and specific features of Persian life during the Achaemenian period also lends credence to his story. . . . the story's intimate knowledge of Persian court-etiquette and public administration strengthens impressions of its accuracy.⁹⁵

Gordis also states, "Esther has an excellent familiarity with Persian law, custom, and language in the Achaemenid period."⁹⁶ Mayer notes that Esther betrays an accurate knowledge of chronological data, the topography of Susa, palace protocols, court intrigues, etc.⁹⁷ Paton⁹⁸ and Moore⁹⁹ list in their commentaries an impressive array of items and customs which lend verisimilitude to the story. Talmon concludes:

On the other hand there is a fairly universal agreement among scholars that the author of the Esther-story generally shows an intimate knowledge of Persian court-etiquette and public administration. . . . If his tale does not mirror historical reality, it is indeed well imagined.¹⁰⁰

PERSIAN NAMES AND WORDS

There are thirty or more personal names of Persian and Elamite origin and twelve Persian loans in the text of Esther.¹⁰¹ In

contrast to the confusion that reigns in the spelling of these names in the Greek and Latin versions as illustrated by charts set out by Moore,¹⁰² the Masoretic Text has preserved the Persian names with remarkable accuracy as Millard has demonstrated.¹⁰³

Of special significance is the observation that the names of Haman's sons can be analyzed as Daiva names.¹⁰⁴ The word *daiva* which meant "god" in early Iranian and Avestan (early Hindu) texts,¹⁰⁵ became degraded to the status of "demon" in Zoroastrian and Hebrew texts and magical texts of the Sassanian period.¹⁰⁶ In his famous "Daiva Inscription," Xerxes had declared, "Afterwards, by the favor of Ahuramazda, I destroyed that sanctuary of the demons, and I made proclamation, 'The demons shall not be worshipped!' Where previously the demons were worshipped, there I worshipped Ahuramazda and Arta reverent(ly)."¹⁰⁷

Of great importance is the fact that one of Haman's sons is named *Vaizatha* (Esther 9:9; AV, Vajezatha) since as Mayer observes, the diphthong "ai" had shifted to "ê" between the reign of Xerxes and Artaxerxes I. This indicates that the name transmitted in Esther is strikingly "old and authentic."¹⁰⁸

The care which the Hebrew scribes exercised in transmitting such foreign names stands in marked contrast with the practice of Josephus, who did not wish to bore his readers with long lists of unpronounceable names. Feldman notes, "He likewise omits ([*Antiquities*] 11.190 and 192) . . . the names of King Ahasuerus' seven chamberlains (Esther 1.10) and of his seven counsellors (Esther 1.14), as well as (*Ant.* 11.289) the names of Haman's ten sons (Esther 9.7-9)."¹⁰⁹

Berg concludes, "The number of Persian words in Esther and its numerous Aramaisms¹¹⁰ suggest the story's composition during a period not far removed from the events it describes."¹¹¹

SUSA

All the action of Esther takes place at Susa, the major city of Elam in southwestern Iran which has been excavated by the French for nearly a century. In the Achaemenid period it served as the winter palace; in the summers it became intolerably hot.

Altheim and Stiehl are the only scholars who believe that the writer of Esther is mistaken in his references to the "citadel" (Heb. *בֵּיתָה*) inasmuch as the Achaemenid palace is situated not on the "Acropolis Mound" but on the "Apadana Mound."¹¹² But this is a captious criticism inasmuch as these names are simply the names assigned by the French excavators, and since there is

but a low saddle between the two mounds.¹¹³ Both were probably comprehended in the term *הַבְּיָרֵךְ*, which is better translated "acropolis" than "palace" (AV) or "capital" (RSV).

Other scholars have been impressed with the writer's detailed knowledge of the palace and its various rooms.¹¹⁴ He distinguishes between the gate of the king (2:19), the outer court (6:4), the inner court (4:11), the house of the women (2:9), and a second house of the women (2:14) for concubines. Particularly striking is his use of the special word *בְּיָרֵךְ* (1:5; 7:8), which in the light of Akkadian texts, means "a special building within a palace." Oppenheim comments, "While the citizens of Susa are given a feast by King Ahasuerus 'in the court of the garden of the royal kiosk,' he himself has a *symposion* with the queen and Haman in this kiosk."¹¹⁵

The palace which housed Xerxes and his entourage would have been the one built by his father Darius. In the reign of Artaxerxes I (mid-fifth century B.C.) this palace burned to the ground. The remains of the Apadana (audience hall) as it is preserved today belong to the reconstruction by Artaxerxes II (403-359 B.C.), who seems to have faithfully reproduced Darius' structure, as his Apadana is very similar to Darius' Apadana at Persepolis.¹¹⁶ It included a square central hall, fifty-nine meters on a side, with six rows of six columns and porticoes on three sides.¹¹⁷ None of the sixty-five-foot high columns still stands, in contrast to the spectacular site of Persepolis. Though a reconstruction project was begun in 1969, the rebuilt low brick walls will probably not impress many tourists.¹¹⁸

Conclusions

Gordis summarizes the various lines in favor of the historicity of Esther by concluding, "All in all, the case for the historical basis for the book is impressive."¹¹⁹ Moore admits, "On the face of it, the story seems to be true. . . . nothing in the book seems improbable, let alone unbelievable."¹²⁰ If this is the case, and if the alleged historical problems are not totally insoluble, then it would seem clearly preferable to take the book at face value as a historical narrative rather than to resort to subjective and highly speculative reconstructions.

Even if one accepts the view of the historicity of Esther, serious questions about its place in Scripture can still be debated. As is well known it is the one book of the Old Testament which

does not explicitly mention God. Some have argued that Mordecai's appeal to Esther, in Esther 4:14, which referred to help coming from another place (מִקֶּרֶב), might be a veiled reference to God as the later Rabbis used the expression as a surrogate for God's name. Such an interpretation is highly doubtful, however.¹²¹

Esther is the one book of the Old Testament which has not been recovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Though this may be a sheer accident, the Qumran sect did not observe Purim.¹²² The Rabbis debated the nature of the Book of Esther but accepted it in their canon.¹²³ Esther was accepted by the Christians in the West but rejected by some in the East, including Melito the bishop of Sardis.¹²⁴

Martin Luther's notorious remark about Esther is often quoted: *Ich bin dem Buch und Esther so feind, dass ich wollte sie wären garnicht vorhanden, denn sie judenzen zu sehr und haben viel heidnische Unart.*¹²⁵ ("I am so hostile to this book [2 Maccabees] and to Esther that I could wish they did not exist at all; for they judaize too greatly and have much pagan impropriety.") A noted contemporary Jewish scholar, Samuel Sandmel, has echoed Luther's sentiments in saying, "If somehow or other the canon were to become open in the twentieth century, I would be among those who would vote to exclude Esther . . ."¹²⁶ Torrey called Esther "the strangest book in the Bible."¹²⁷

The early Jews sought to remedy the lack of explicit references to God and religious observances by attaching six Additions to Esther (107 verses) in the Greek version, including a dream of Mordecai, and prayers of Mordecai and of Esther.¹²⁸ These sections form part of the Old Testament Apocrypha, which was declared to be canonical for the Catholic Church by the Council of Trent in 1546 in reaction to Protestant criticisms.¹²⁹

For those who believe in God's providence, God's hand can clearly be discerned in the events of Esther. Whitcomb has subtitled his recent commentary on the book "Triumph of God's Sovereignty."¹³⁰ According to Loader, "The Book of Esther should be read as a story of God's intervention on behalf of his people, but also as a story of human wisdom and initiative."¹³¹

Berg discerns that the unstated recognition of Yahweh's power is present though veiled. "The narrator understandably refrains from any reference to the deity in order to accentuate the role of human responsibility in shaping history, and to indicate the hiddenness of God's control of history."¹³² The message in the

book is as follows: "The responsibility for saving the Jewish people rests with the queen who must decide whether to risk her own life. The Book of Esther suggests that each individual Jew who is in a position to do so must use his/her power and authority to assist the people of Israel."¹³³

That Haman's attempted genocide of the Jews is not an inconceivable fantasy has been learned from the Nazi Holocaust. Gordis poignantly recalls:

Anti-Semites have always hated the book, and the Nazis forbade its reading in the crematoria and the concentration camps. In the dark days before their deaths, Jewish inmates of Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka, and Bergen-Belsen wrote the Book of Esther from memory and read it in secret on Purim.¹³⁴

Christians as well as Jews may well learn the lesson that it is not a matter of sheer chance that they find themselves where they are. Mordecai's message to Esther can still pose a challenge to believers — especially in times of crisis: "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14, RSV).

Editor's Note

This is the second in a series of four articles delivered by the author as the W. H. Griffith Thomas Memorial Lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary, November 6-9, 1979.

Notes

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- 7 The historicity of Ahiqar as an adviser in the Assyrian court has been demonstrated. See E. M. Yamauchi, *Greece and Babylon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1966), p. 87.
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- 12 Women, who are ordinarily exempted from attendance at divine worship, are

required to be present during the reading of Esther. The four other scrolls are the Song of Solomon read at Passover, Ruth read at Pentecost, Lamentations read at *Tisha B'av* "The Nine (Days) in Av," commemorating the destruction of the temple(s), and Ecclesiastes read at Tabernacles.

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22 C. C. Torrey dated the work of the Chronicler to 250 B.C. See Yamauchi, *Greece and Babylon*, p. 83.

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31 Talmon, " 'Wisdom' in the Book of Esther," p. 449.

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33 See E. M. Yamauchi, *Composition and Corroboration in Classical and Biblical Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1966), pp. 10, 16-17; J. A. S. Evans, "Father of History or Father of Lies," *Classical Journal* 64 (1968): 11-17.

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