CHAPTER VII

ESTHER
Some persons deny the inspiration of the book of Esther because the name of God does not occur in it. although the name of God does not occur in the book of Esther, the Lord Himself is there most conspicuously in every incident which it relates. In this book, as much as in any other part of the Word of God, more than anywhere else, the hand of Providence is manifestly to be seen. The Lord intended by the narrative of Esther’s history to set before us a wonderful instance of His providence. It is said that the book of Esther is a record of wonders without a miracle.

Esther was a beautiful young Jewish woman. Her cousin Mordecai adopted her after her parents’ death. She was very obedient to her cousin, foster father.

Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died. (Esther 2:7)

King Ahasverus, emperor for 127 provinces, invited the grandees and the army to celebrate his coronation. At the close of the period a seven-day feast was arranged for
all who had gathered at Shushan. The Persian court was noted
for excessive drinking but on this occasion no one was
compelled to drink (Esth 1:8).

Persian custom did not make it necessary for men
and women to dine separately. Women were often present at
meals but Vashti chose to have her own separate party for the
women. Merry with wine, the King sent seven eunuchs to ask
the queen to show her beauty to the drinking guests. With
befitting modesty she refused. The queen, in the opinion of
the wise men, was guilty in two respects: she openly defied
her husband and she gave to all other wives an example of
domestic insubordination. Hence letters containing the
decree that the queen must be deposed were sent to the
various provinces. The chamberlains proposed a plan for the
selection of another wife (1 kings 1:1-4). The most
attractive maidens of the realm were brought to Susa who
should prepare themselves by means of cosmetics for the royal
inspection, under the supervision of Hegai, the chief eunuch.

Among them was Esther, the cousin and foster
daughter of Mordecai, a Benjamite descendant of Kish, the
father of Saul (Samuel 9:1). The chief eunuch liked Esther
and gave to her beauty preparations and royal food, assigning
to her seven maids and lodging her in the best part of the
harem, where Mordecai came daily to see her.
The girl pleased him and won his favour. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king's palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem.

Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Everyday he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her. (Esther 2: 9-11)

Esther did not observe the dietary laws of Judaism. She actually concealed her nationality. How Mordecai could have access to the harem, and how Esther's kinship with him, and therefore her race, could remain a secret are questions which are disturbing to us.

After one whole year devoted to enhancing their beauty, six months with myrrh and six with balsam and other cosmetics, each one of the virgins was brought before the king and became then one of his concubines. Esther wisely let herself be guided by the judgment of Hegai, who besides being an expert in such matters must have known the taste of the king. She did not "find favour," she "won" it by her
character. On Esther's turn, she succeeded in pleasing the king instantly and was made queen.

Mordecai discovered a plot against the life of Ahasverus, while he was sitting, as was his custom, at the entrance of the royal palace. Through Esther he communicated his discovery to the king and his service was recorded in the royal annals. Sometime between 478 BC and 473 BC Haman was made grand vizier. He was an Agagite, presumably a descendant of the Amalekite king defeated by Saul (I Samu. 15:8). Wherever Haman went, people bowed low before him — that is everyone except Mordecai. He remained conspicuously seated when Haman went by. It might be because he regarded the customary prostration as an act of idolatary connected with emperor worship or because he despised the descendant of Agag. His explanation to those who were curious to know the reason for his behaviour was that he was a Jew. It was not long before Haman's attention was called to this matter. In a simmering rage, Haman determined that he would attempt to destroy not only Mordecai but all the Jewish remnant throughout the Persian empire. Representing the Jews as a rebellious people, Haman asked the king for permission to destroy them. The king agreed to endorse a pronouncement that all Jews in the empire were to be exterminated on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month of the year.
Haman, having gained a decree for the destruction of all the Jews, was very anxious to have his cruel work done thoroughly. Therefore, being very superstitious and believing in astrology, he bade his magician cast lots that he might find a lucky day for his great undertaking. The lots were cast for the various months, but not a single fortunate day could be found until hard by the close of the year, and then the chosen day was the thirteenth of the twelfth month.

Then on the thirteenth day of the first month the royal secretaries were summoned. They wrote out in the script of each province and in the language of each people all Haman's orders to the kings satraps, the governors of the various provinces and the nobles of the various peoples. These were written in the name of King Ahasverus himself and sealed with his own ring.

Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews - young and old, women and little children - on
a single day, the thirteenth day of the
twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to
plunder their goods. (Esth.3: 12-13)

Truly the lot was cast into the lap, but the
disposal of it was of the Lord. There were eleven clear
months left before the Jews would be put to death, and that
would give Mordecai and Esther time to turn around, and if
anything could be done to reverse the cruel decree, they had
space to do it in. Haman's mode of destroying the Jews was
wonderfully overruled for their preservation.

They were to be slain by any of the people among
whom they lived who chose to do so, and their plunder was to
reward their slayers. This was a very cunning device, for
greed would naturally incite the baser sort of men to murder
the thrifty Jews, and no doubt there were debtors who would
also be glad to see their creditors disposed of. Regarding
this device, Spurgeon comments,

But see the loophole for escape with this
afforded! If the decree had enacted that the
Jews should be slain by the soldierly of the
Persian empire, it must have been done, and it
is not easy to see how they could have
escaped, but, the matter being left on private
hands, the subsequent decree that they might defend themselves was a sufficient counteraction of the first edict. Thus the Lord arranged that the wisdom of Haman should turn out to be folly after all.¹

Once again we mark the restraining hand of God, namely that Mordecai, though he had provoked Haman to the utmost, was not put to death at once. Haman refrained himself. Proud men are generally in a mighty tiff if they consider themselves insulted and are ready at once to take revenge. But Haman refrained himself until that day on which his anger burned furiously and he set up the gallows, he smothered his passion.

Esther sent to Mordecai a robe to replace his sackcloth, so that he could enter the palace, but he refused it and informed her through Hathach of the gravity of the situation, urging her intervention on behalf of the Jews. Esther replied that she could not intercede for her people before the king without risking her life. No one dared appear unsummoned in the presence of the ruler, or even enter the inner court, from which he could be seen, under penalty of death, unless the sovereign held out to the intruder his golden scepter:
All the King's servants, and the people of the kings provinces, do know, that whosoever, whether man or woman, shall come unto the king into the inner court, who is not called there is one law of his to put him to death, except such to whom the king shall hold out the golden sceptre, that he may live: but I have not been called to come in unto the king these thirty days. (Esth. 4 : 11)

The reply of Mordecai was illogical, but, as often, a weak argument presented forcibly carried conviction. If the decree was executed, he argued, Esther would perish; if the Jews were saved without Esther's intervention, she would lose the opportunity of a life time. Mordecai was quite sure the Lord would deliver His people, and he expressed that confidence, but he did not therefore sit still. He stirred up Esther, and when she seemed a little slack, he put it very strongly,

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?

(Esth. 4:13-14)

Humanly speaking, it seems far more likely that the king would spare his beloved wife than that the Jews should be saved through their own efforts or through foreign intervention. Here and in the next verses religious faith, confidence in Jehovah in desperate straits, is deliberately suppressed to emphasize human ingenuity.

It was possible that being a queen it might enter into her mind that she would be safe even if all the rest of the Jews were put to death. It would be a painful thing that her countrymen should be destroyed, but still the stroke might not touch her in the seclusion of the palace, where she had "not yet showed her kindred nor her people." She would still remain the favoured wife of the great king. And she might, therefore, selfishly look to herself, and leave those who were in peril to look to themselves or to their God, while she coldly hoped that the Lord would somehow or other give them deliverance.

Sorrow and dread filled her heart. There was no hope for her people unless she would go in to the king - that
despot from whom one angry look would be death. Even then she decided to plead for her nation and asked Mordecai,

Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day: I also and my maidens will fast likewise; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law: and if I perish, I perish. (Esth. 4:16)

As Robert H. Pfeiffer observes,

"Esther's noble resolve to go to the king at the risk of her life is the moral high-water-mark of the book, eventhough a cynic may remark that according to Mordecai's argument she had everything to gain and nothing to lose by doing it."\(^2\) Esther sought divine help in this mission and she asked the Jewish community to intercede with God on her behalf. "Some idea of the seriousness with which Esther approached her task can be seen from the fact that she called for a fast right at the time of the feast of Passover."\(^3\)

Tense with the consciousness that her life depended on a royal whim and wearing, with true feminine shrewdness, her royal apparel, Esther entered the forbidden
inner court on the morning of the third day after her decision. Fortunately the king, who spied her from the throne room, was in good humour and extended to her the golden sceptre. Approaching, she touched it reverently. On being asked what her wish was with the promise that it would be granted "even to the half of the kingdom," Esther, postponing her real petition, invited the king and Haman to a banquet:

If it pleases the king, let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him. (Esth. 5:4)

After the meal, when according to Persian custom wine and fruit were served, the king again asked Esther to make her petition. Esther started out to implore the king to save the Jews when suddenly, her strength proving unequal to the ordeal, she procrastinated again and wound up with another invitation:

My petition and my request is this:

If the king regards me with favor and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfil my request, let the king and Haman come
tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question. (Esth. 5: 7-8)

In Spurgeon's words, "Doubtless she longed to bring out her secret, but the words came not. God was in it; It was not the right time to speak, and therefore she was led to put off her disclosure. I dare say she regretted it and wondered when she should be able to come to the point, but the Lord knew best."4

After the banquet Haman went out joyfully at the palace gate, but being mortified beyond measure by Mordecai's unbending posture, he called for his wife and his friends and told them that his riches and honours availed him nothing so long as Mordecai, the Jew, sat in the King's gate. Haman's wife and friends advised that Mordecai be hanged on the morrow and swung in the wind while Haman would sit happily at the queen's banquet.

His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, Have a gallows built, seventy-five feet high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged in it. (Esth. 5:14)
King Ahasverus was sleepless that night and ordered the royal annals to be read before him. Toward morning, when they came to the story of the conspiracy disclosed by Mordecai, the king became interested and asked how the man who had served his life had been rewarded. He was told that nothing had been done for Mordecai. Spurgeon is of the opinion that "Ahasuerus is master of one hundred and twenty and seven provinces, but not master of ten minutes." To pass that sleepless night he could call soothing instruments of music, ask for a merry ballad. But he asked to read a book for him. He could ask for "a volume perfumed with roses, musical with songs, sweet as the notes of the nightingale." But he asked for the chronicles of the empire. There were one hundred and twenty seven provinces and each province had its own records. Out of ten thousand records, the king chose the record of Shushan the royal city, the centre of the empire. Reading the particular section in which Mordecai's discovery of conspiracy was written, was not an accident. But it was certain that the Lord knew where the record was and guided the reader to the right page.

Haman, who had come to the palace early to obtain permission to hang Mordecai, was summoned before the king to propose a plan for honouring a faithful subject. Imagining, in his conceit, that he himself was the person in question,
Haman answered that man should be mounted on a royal steed, crowned, and led through the streets by a high official making a proclamation before him (Gen 41:30-44).

Haman, concealing his feelings, carried through the ordeal unflinchingly, after knowing that the man to be honoured was Mordecai, his enemy, and attended the banquet prepared by Esther. While drinking wine after the meal the king for the third time asked Esther for her wish. With impassioned words Esther begged for her life and for that of her people without naming their nationality:

If I have found favour with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me life - this is my petition. And spare my people - this is my request.

For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king. (Esth. 7 : 3-4)

John Bendor Samuel says, "Esther would not have bothered the king with their little problems and so would
have kept quiet if it had just been a matter of slavery and not death."7

Horrified, the king asked who had made the murderous plan. Esther, pointing her finger to Haman, forthwith accused him. Haman who had not had the opportunity to vindicate himself, realized, in his panic, that he had unwittingly planned the death of the queen. Haman decided to appeal to Esther for mercy rather than follow the king and beg for mercy from him, perhaps because he knew from experience that the king's anger, once roused, was blind and un governable. Some commentators have criticized Esther for not interceding for him, forgetting that so long as Haman lived he constituted a deadly threat to her and her people. While the King had gone out to the park, to recover from the shock, Haman, wild with terror, fell at the feet of the queen, who was reclining on her couch, for she alone could now save him. Ahasverus detecting him thus, interpreted Haman's action as a violation of the strict rules concerning the harem.

Esther, adamant against all pity, took an unfair advantage of an absurd suspicion of the king and allowed Haman to be condemned for a crime he had not committed. Perhaps Esther surmised that Haman could have justified the decree against the Jews if given a chance, although later the
king thought he had condemned Haman for his hustling against the Jews.

Haman was taken in his own trap, and he and his sons were hanged upon the gibbet set up for Mordecai. His property was confiscated and presented by the king of Esther, who entrusted it to Mordecai's administration. Knowing that Mordecai was a cousin and foster father of the queen, the king gave him the rank of the highest officials and granted him the possession of the royal signet-ring. In power and wealth Mordecai was henceforth second only to the king. We can notice poetic justice; the dignities expected by Haman belong to Mordecai and on the gibbet that he had erected for his enemy Haman was hanged himself: "Whose diggeth a pit shall fall there in" (Prov. 26:27).

As for the Jews, they were in this special danger that they were to be destroyed on a certain day, and with unnecessary personal risk, for Mordecai was now the grand vizier, Esther made her petition in behalf of her nation. With disinterested and ardent patriotic zeal, now that her own safety was not in question, even before the golden sceptre was stretched forth as a sign of immunity, she begged the king to revoke the edict that Haman had devised for his private vengeance:
If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman, which he wrote to destroy the Jews which are in all the King's provinces:

For how can I endure to see the evil that shall come unto my people? or how can I endure to see the destruction of my kindred?

(Esth. 8: 5-6)

In spite of his favourable attitude the king was unable to resolve the edict, for it was a rule of the constitution that the law of the Medes and Persians could not be altered. The king might determine what he pleased, but when he had once decreed it, he could not change it. Hence the decree that the Jews might be slain could not be reversed. But God showed the door of escape - another decree was issued giving the Jews permission to defend themselves and take the property of any who dared to attack them.

In the provinces the Jews received the new edict with exuberant joy and proclaimed a holiday; the heathens were struck with terror: many, in their panic, actually became Jewish proselytes.
On the 13th of Adar, when the two conflicting decrees went into effect, the Jews assembled themselves for the fray while their disorganized enemies fell into a panic. The provincial authorities, now that Mordecai was at the helm, did not hesitate between the opposite instructions received from the king: siding with the Jews, they contributed to wipe out their foes, whether active or passive. In the capital five hundred heathen were slain in addition to the ten sons of Haman. The king was so unconcerned with the slaughter of so many of his subjects that he offered to grant another wish of Esther:

If it please the King, let it be granted to the Jews which are is Shushan to do tomorrow also according unto this day's decree.

(Esth. 9:13)

Three hundred more victims fell on the 14th in Susa. In the provinces the Jews slaughtered seventy five thousand heathen on the 13th of Adar. Esther joined Mordecai in prescribing to the Jews of the one hundred and twenty seven provinces the observance of Purim, which means lots. Purim was celebrated by the Jews and their proselytes, everywhere to indicate the averted anger. In his exaltation Mordecai did not forget, as often happens, his own nation;
active in furthering the welfare of the Jews, he was free from envy on their part and was greatly beloved.

There were two races, one of which God had blessed and promised to preserve, and another of which He had said that He would utterly put out the rememberance of it from under heaven. Israel was to be blessed and made a blessing, but of Amalek the Lord had sworn that He "will have war with Amalek from generation to generation." These two peoples were therefore in deadly hostility, like the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent between whom the Lord Himself has put an enmity. The Lord had said,

No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper, and every tongue that riseth against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn.

And it is proved by Esther the Jewess.

The main focus of this story is the incredible courage Esther demonstrated. No one could appear unbidden before the king. If the king chose not to raise his sceptre when Esther appeared before him, she would be summarily executed before sundown. Esther also knew Haman was a favourite of Ahasverus, second only to the king in power. She had to know that her life was in the balance if her
exposure of Haman were to backfire. Yet Queen Esther combined bravery with wise charm, and God saw that she was protected. Her act saved the lives of thousands, and that is why this beautiful young Jewish woman is still honoured today: "Esther is a powerful reminder of our priceless heritage. We follow in a long line of biblical heroes and saints who have courageously stood for what is right and good. Like Esther, they have risked their lives to protect others and to protect a faith that is founded on the word of God."
REFERENCES

1. Spurgeon, OT Women, Book 1, 124.


5. Spurgeon, OT Women, Book 2, 127.


7. John Bendor-Samuel 517

8. Stephen Fortosis 90.