

ESTHER 1

DIVINE PROVIDENCE

What are we to think of the book of Esther? What is described in this book appears to be so secular and worldly that it hardly seems to apply to the Christian life. What divine lessons could possibly be learned from this book which does not even contain God's Name? That's the main crux here, and I am sure that almost everyone knows that this book does not once have God's Name in any passage.

One wonders -and it has often been asked- what this book is doing among the canonical books? The *canonical* books are those accepted from the beginning by the catholic and apostolic church as being inspired books and therefore a norm of faith and life. If it is to be regarded positively in any way, should it not be among the *apocryphal* books, which contain good lessons, perhaps even accurate information, but are not recognized as the inspired and infallible Word of God?

The book of Esther gives us an interesting story, no doubt, even a kind of a romance -if we can go that far- but how can one *preach* on it and proclaim the Gospel by it? Of course, there is something to be learned here, for there is much wisdom and diplomacy used by Mordecai and Esther. They have become "heroes" in Jewish history, and the *Purim* feast inaugurated by Mordecai is one of the most popular Jewish feasts, still today. But it is rather a nationalistic feast than a religious one. When this book is read during the Purim feasts, the people boo and hiss whenever Haman's name is mentioned, and they cheer and clap whenever Mordecai's name is read. Hardly fitting for a Bible book or church service, one might say.

Besides, the book does not mention prayer (like e.g. in Ezra and Nehemiah, where prayer is emphasized). You'd expect this to be made very explicit, for there are some tense moments narrated here. God's covenant and his promises, which are key matters, are nowhere mentioned. Everything seems to hinge on Mordecai's schemes and plans, which amazingly succeed. This fellow is a real politician in his own right.

A HISTORICAL NOVEL?

It is no wonder, then, that various scholars, also Reformed ones, have struggled with the canonicity of this book. Some called it an historical *novel*, based on real events and persons, but not God's Word. Some feel that it is too pragmatic and worldly, even somewhat immoral, witnessed in all the feasting, drinking, sensuality, and the beauty contest that far outstrips today's Miss World contest.

Still, the verdict on this book has mostly been positive. The Jews of old regarded it as a canonical book. The early Christian church with its ecumenical councils overwhelmingly regarded it also as canonical and infallible. The setting

and the events described are for a large part also mentioned in other reliable sources, for example by the Jewish historian Josephus and the Greek historian Herodotus. So we can and must accept this book today also as the true Word of God, which then also has a *message* for us today! God does not tell stories, but reveals to us himself in his Son, Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit!

THE MESSAGE

But what is the message? To get a firm grip on what is being revealed here, we must look beyond the immediate, human context. The detailed human element is of importance, but we must first take an overall, birds-eye view here. And then most scholars, who accept this book as canonical, agree that we may see here the wondrous way and powerful effect of God's sovereign *providence*.

It may seem to be only a tale of human intrigue. But we find that above all this are God's guidance and power. He takes care of his children, also of those who are dispersed throughout the Persian empire, and who daily have to contend with much hostility and opposition. The present and the future of Christ's church do not depend on our schemes, but on God's love and care.

We find here also consistently the main theme of the entire Bible: the enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman remains till the end. You see this enmity again flaring up in the animosity between Mordecai, of the tribe of Benjamin, of the house of Saul, and Haman, the Agagite, a descendent of Agag and Amalek. Mordecai does what Saul did not do: carry out God's judgment over Amalek. Haman is still trying to achieve what Amalek failed to do: destroy Israel.

INSTRUMENTS OF GOD

Others have also been instruments of God at the courts of the kings of Babel and Persia to fend for God's people. Think of Daniel and Nehemiah. Their tasks were difficult and dangerous as well. Yet they learned to go in the strength of the LORD. What is explicit in the lives of these men, is presented as implicit in the life of this woman, Esther.

For, indeed, now a young woman is given an important, formidable task, one that she, too, cannot perform in her own strength. As a true daughter of Zion, she recognizes this clearly. Perhaps a central text in this book is found in Esther 4: 16, where she says to Mordecai: go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and *fast for me*. She needs the support of God's people in prayer and fasting (for fasting was combined always with prayer). "Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day...". She and her maids will also fast.

And see also the end of this verse: if I perish, I perish. That's not fatalism, but acceptance. She places her life in the *Lord's* hand! Only in this way, in this surrender of her life to God, may she help to deliver her people. She will do her part, and leave the outcome in God's hand.

THE SCENE IS SET

There is still another matter which we must consider here with respect to this chapter and this book, an aspect that some explainers mention but of which the significance is mostly overlooked. The book starts with these telling words, "This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces, stretching from India to Cush (Ethiopia)." The way this is formulated suggests that Xerxes was not unknown to the readers, perhaps also that he no longer lived. It happened then, during the time of Xerxes.

This is not just a minor biographical or geographical note. This sets the scene. We are faced here with the Persian empire in all its expansive glory and vast wealth. You can find some information about Xerxes in the NIV footnotes. He ruled around 450 years before Christ, when the Persian empire was at its peak. That is why we can read in verse 4 that Xerxes gave a banquet which lasted for a full 180 days, where he "displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendour and glory of his majesty."

Such a lavish banquet must have a special purpose. The Persians more than once held great councils with festive banquets. But notice who are invited to this banquet. Verse 3: first, his nobles and officials. The "nobles" are the members of the aristocracy, the royal family, probably those who functioned at the king's court or in the various capital cities. The "officials" are of a lower rank, undoubtedly, and functioned as special emissaries of the king or his governors. We also read -and this is significant- that the military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes and nobles of the provinces were present. They have come from far and wide to the king's residence in Susa, nobles, officials, and military leaders.

A MILITARY CAMPAIGN

What is the purpose of this banquet? Surely, it is not just to eat and drink that these important men have come together. Heads of state and chiefs of staff gather for only one purpose: to plan a military campaign and strategy. This banquet functions at the same time as a meeting where a forthcoming military campaign is being discussed, revised, and determined. It is a meeting of a war cabinet.

The Greek historian, Herodotus, by the way, writes precisely about such a massive meeting in Susa where the campaign against the *Grecian states* was planned and finalized. Xerxes is throwing a party, but he has an ulterior motive: to unite the Persian empire against the new arch-enemy, the Greeks. Therefore, this pompous display of splendour, this great banquet, is meant to get everyone motivated and energized for the coming campaign. Xerxes is making an excellent case for a pre-emptive strike against Greece. The Persians know: if their vast empire is to continue, they must dispose of the Greeks, the new kids on the block.

The Persians had already under King Darius waged a first war against the Greeks. The Persians needed more gold and easier access to western food supplies. King Darius first was successful as he conquered the Greek islands one by one with

his massive fleet. But his troops were defeated at the battle of Marathon, where more than 6000 Persians were killed. Defeating the Greeks would not be easy.

Xerxes, then, is organizing what is known as the second Persian war. I may mention that Xerxes and the Persians again failed in their campaign against Greece. Initial successes were made, but at great cost. The mighty army of the Persians suffered great losses at the battle of Thermopylae, and despite a victory there, could not conquer the Greek city states. Xerxes' fleet of more than three hundred ships was destroyed, partly by storms, at the battle of Salamis. The historians tell us that Xerxes became so angry and frustrated that he went to the sea and started hitting the water with his belt because he felt betrayed by the elements. This was the last foray of the Persians to broaden their empire; from then on it slowly fell apart and was conquered by Alexander the Great. The city of Susa fell around 331 B.C. The Hellenistic period had arrived.

THE BEGINNING OF A TRANSITION PERIOD

The aspect then that many explainers overlook is that we have here in the book of Esther the beginning of a *transition* period, the decline and fall of the Persian empire, the last world empire of the Old Testament period. It is the dawning of a new era, the rise of Greece and Rome, when the power base shifts from the east to the west, the time in which our Lord Jesus Christ will be born.

And what is now the issue in this last Old Testament period? It is the same matter as in the beginning of that period: the destruction of the people of Israel! As Xerxes prepares for his campaign against the Greeks, and this mighty empire will once more raise up its ugly head and extend its powerful tentacles, there is a plot also to kill all the Jews. This plot is organized by an old enemy, an Agagite (descendent of Agag) Haman of Amalek, the people who hated Israel from the very day they went up out of Egypt.

It is a plot of which Xerxes approves for whatever reasons. What does he care about a bunch of Jews who lived as exiles throughout the Persian empire, even in Susa, the capital. It will only serve Persian unification and fervor if a common enemy within the empire is first destroyed.

When Xerxes takes away from the Jews the protection normally accorded to all minorities in the Persian empire, and when this appears to become his final legacy, *God* acts, and he prevents this genocide, this ethnic cleansing from happening. He does so through simple people, like Mordecai and Esther, who have no position whatsoever in the empire, until God gives it to them, as he did with Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. For he reigns and his power is supreme. He will also in this time of transition protect his people, not for their sake as such, but for the sake of his great Son, our Lord and Saviour!

THE HISTORY OF REDEMPTION CONTINUES

If someone then asks what the message of the book of Esther is, the answer

is clear: the history of redemption continues. God preserves his people from final destruction in the transition from Old to New Testament. This book therefore has a *pivotal function* in the Bible, from Old to New Testament, and it lets us hear the Gospel: how God arises and saves his people for the day of the great King of kings, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Egypt fell, Canaan fell, Assyria fell, Babel fell, and now also Persia falls, and what remains standing is the throne of David, where he shall appear who has been called to sit at God's right hand forever. Things are happening, times are changing, but, as one poet wrote, "God stands in the shadows, keeping watch over his own". In the book of Esther, God is in the background in this sense that his name and covenant are not mentioned, but every page contains his imprint, the way of the Gospel. It is a book for Advent: a new era is dawning, the time of the great Messiah.

THE IMPRINT OF GOD

When we look to discover further this imprint of God, it first comes from a very unexpected angle. The king and his nobles, his generals and officers, have come to a conclusion: they will go out and conquer Greece. Nothing can stop them, they believe, for perfect plans and sure-fire strategies have been established. This time Greece will fall. The moment has come for a celebration.

We read in verse 4 about the main banquet which lasted 180 days. This may seem rather extravagant. However, much time was needed to set up a complete strategy for world dominion, and then the banquet is not really very long. But when the plans are adopted and the various tasks are determined, it's time for a broader celebration. We read about this in verse 5: when these (180) days were over, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days, in the enclosed gardens of the king's palace for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa. Everyone was welcome!

In verse 6 we receive a fine description of the size and the set-up of this garden, a description that fits with archeological findings at Susa. There were fine-coloured linens draped everywhere from marble pillars, and couches of gold and silver on walkways of precious stones. There was an abundance of wine, and we read in the verses 7 and 8 that the wine (and food, of course) was abundant, served in goblets of gold (a nice take-home gift) and the people could drink whatever they wanted and how much they wanted. Xerxes has sold his military campaign to the princes, and now he is selling it to the paupers, and everyone falls for it. They think that Persia is invincible.

BOOSTING THE MORALE

We read in verse 9 that Queen Vasthi also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes. We are not told why she did this, and we know that Persian women were allowed to be present at the feasts of the men. Perhaps Vasthi did not really have much interest in the affairs of state or in the strategies

of war. She was not party to the campaign planning. But when the plans were set, she, too, decided to throw a party for the women in the palace.

Notice how she does not invite any commoners. This may betray a haughty disposition. The queen did not go about with people of low descent. Perhaps she looked down on her husband's exuberance and extravagance. It is fine to have a banquet for nobles and officials, but to invite the commoners, even street people, goes too far.

So she did not attend her husband's feast, and stayed in the women's section of the royal palace. I daresay that she was conspicuously absent, for all commoners loved to get a rare glimpse of the legendarily beautiful queen. Where is Vashti?

Xerxes looks at the festive throngs and thinks: it is all going according to plan. We read in verse 10 that on the seventh day of this celebration, he was in high spirits from wine. The king had enjoyed a little too much of the bubbly froth. He notices that Queen Vashti is missing, and concludes that she should at least be present on the last day for the closing ceremonies. He wants her to come, sit by his side, so he can also show her beauty to all the men around. Everyone will say even more: this Xerxes is a mighty man. It will be a tremendous boost to an already high morale. The royal order is spoken: let the Queen join the feast. One can almost hear the word going from mouth to mouth, "The Queen is coming". Her legendary beauty will at last be admired by all the king's men.

VASHTI'S REFUSAL

Xerxes sends his personal servants to go and get Vashti who is to come in full royal regalia, crown and all, to the banquet. Much to our surprise, we read that Vashti flatly refuses to come. We are not told why she refuses, and so we can only guess at the reason. Who can fathom the motives of a queen? Perhaps it was disagreement with her husband's spending spree, his military obsession, or perhaps (I think this to be more likely) she did not like attending a feast where the men are mostly drunk, to be paraded around like some kind of a trophy. After all, she's the queen, not a concubine or a whore!

Whatever her reasons may be, the LORD has his own special purpose. He stands behind this decision of Queen Vashti. For he has other plans than Xerxes. This is the message of the first chapter of the Book of Esther: the LORD has plans of his own. Notice that Vashti is not put to death for her refusal. She will not come? Well, then she is dismissed altogether. She is banished from the king's palace and condemned to lead a life of solitude under strict house-arrest.

It has been suggested that this remarkable and resourceful woman, Vashti, later worked her way back into the king's good graces, but for now she is removed, off the scene. The king's honour has been salvaged, and Vashti was unharmed: the people could breathe a sign of relief. The battle with the Greeks remains higher on the royal agenda than the battle of the sexes.

Xerxes does make use of the occasion to warn all Persian women to respect and obey their husbands. That's how the chapter ends: an edict is sent throughout the empire that every man should be ruler over his own household! What the man says, goes.

The man who would rule the world could not even rule his own house. He is deserted by his wife in what should have been his finest hour. Meanwhile the post of the Queen of Persia is vacant. We get the impression that Xerxes did not have much time to do anything about this, for shortly hereafter he leaves with his troops and fleet to fight the Greeks. He is gone for about three years. In all this time, there is no queen in Persia.

AN EMPTY PLACE

It is only later, after Xerxes comes back from his failed expedition, and ponders his life, that he remembers how he had decreed that Vasthi be banned from the palace. Who will now comfort him in his loss? The mighty king is at bottom a foolish and lonely man. He can throw a big party, but cannot rule his own household, and cannot conquer the world. He has sealed his own loneliness: the royal edict cannot be withdrawn, and Vasthi cannot be recalled. In every way this king has made life very difficult for himself. In Jewish terms he will have been considered a fool, as one explainer writes, for he corrupts his leaders, promotes laziness, drinks excessively, acts impulsively in anger, and lets things go spinning out of control.

Vasthi, perhaps the only one in the royal line with an sense of decency, is gone and the place of the queen is empty. We understand, however, that this place is empty because the LORD wants that place open. He will put there a person, a woman, whom he will appoint for the protection of his people! This introductory chapter only sets the scene. The real battle is yet to come. But God then has the strategic places covered without pomp and circumstance. The LORD works in mighty ways, but often these are *quiet* ways. His ways take time and careful preparation.

GOD'S PROVIDENCE

Sometimes I must discuss with catechism students what "providence" means. God's providence is confessed and explained in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Day 10. I always emphasize that "providence" means first having a *plan*, and then, secondly, having the *power* to carry out that plan. God has a plan, and he surely has the power! We believe that God governs all things to the benefit of his people and to the glory of his Name!

When discussing this, I say to the youth: God has a plan also for each one of us. Also our lives fall under this providence. This sounds good and is true, but it is not always so easy to accept. There are many times, I am sure, that we do not see the benefit of God's providence. He does things that completely go against what we would have done or wanted. What benefit is there in God's hidden ways?

We may even feel betrayed when certain adversities overcome us from God's hand.

Remember the book of Esther. From the shadows, as one writer accurately wrote, God is ever watchful over his people, and he puts things into place that have far-reaching consequences, seen only later. God sets the scene of our lives, also, and determines our circumstances, so that we might more and more come to see the Lord Jesus Christ as our King and Saviour! God leads our lives so that we grow increasingly fruitful in his service. I think that here lies the key to understanding God's providence: that we mature in his service and become more fruitful as his children! Our Lord Jesus said it plainly, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples (John 15: 8)."

Recognizing this providence is foundational for the understanding of the Book of Esther.

SURPRISES ALONG THE WAY

Then there can be some surprises along the way, even unpleasant ones. Do you think Esther liked to be Queen of Persia, a glorified part of a vast royal harem, away from her people, in a heathen environment? Of course not. She was in fact a slave and could not see the king unless she was called to him. Life in the imperial harem was luxurious but also dangerous and difficult, filled with intense rivalry. It was for Esther, as a young Jewish woman, not an easy task. She probably had envisioned her life going in a totally different direction.

We do not even know how long she was queen. Our lives do not go as we have planned them, but as the LORD has determined them. Everything serves his wise and good purpose, and when we see, recognize, and believe that, we can find our peace in his wondrous ways. Then we do the work that lies before us, and leave the planning and providing to God.

GOD'S COUNSEL SHALL STAND

The Lord places his children in high places and at strategic posts when this is needed for the sake of the history of redemption. His counsel shall not fail, and his will shall be done. So it is in this great big world that often seems to be spinning out of control. God rules. So it is also in our lives, where sometimes also there is much turmoil and uncertainty. God rules and directs all things to his glory and our benefit.

Ultimately this is demonstrated once for all in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. His enemies thought he was off the scene. Dead and buried. But he arose from the dead, as we remember every Sunday and especially at Easter. He ascended and is seated in glory in heaven, from where he governs all things. All this, Peter says on Pentecost, happened with the foreknowledge of God (Acts 2: 23). It is part of his plan, his counsel of redemption, and he carried it out, even through all the plans and deeds of wicked men. His counsel shall stand and he

does all that pleases him.

For this purpose he calls simple people into his service. They are gifted people, like Mordecai and Esther, but also simple, for God's strength becomes manifest in our weakness (2 Cor 12: 10) and the blessing must come from the LORD (Ps 127: 1).