

OUTLINE STUDIES IN THE BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

by

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

ESTHER

The book of Esther chronologically falls into the interval between the first and the second expeditions to Jerusalem from Babylon, a period embracing about eighty years. Ahasuerus' reign began in B. C. 486, and ended in B. C. 465—twenty-one years. In the third year of his reign the events narrated in this book commenced. The book is anonymous, but it must have been written not long after the death of Ahasuerus—Rawlinson thinks within twenty years from the death of that monarch. It is a deeply interesting book, one of the inspired commentaries on God's marvelous providence.

The key word is "*Providence*"; the key verse, 4:14.

1. Principal characters of the book—*dramatis persona*:

(1) *Ahasuerus*.

No doubt this is the Hebrew name for the famous Persian king, Xerxes. Khshayarsha is said to be his Persian name; and the similarity between it and the Hebrew is so great as to be almost identical. The Greeks turned it into Xerxes. This is the man who played so important a part in Grecian history; who marched his army against Greece; who insanely attempted to chain the Hellespont, and madly beat the sea with whips because forsooth it broke up his boats.

(2) *Mordecai*, a Jew dwelling at Shushan and intimate at court; an upright, intelligent, and far-sighted man, to whose noble heart the people of Israel were very dear. He was of the family of Kish and of the tribe of Benjamin. He was the first cousin of Esther, whom he had brought up as his own daughter. Her Hebrew name was Hadassah, Esther being probably Persian. She was an orphan, and a woman not only of great beauty, but also of sagacity and devotion. Her "woman's wit" was more than a match for the astute and malignant Haman.

(3) *Haman* was a high officer at the court of Xerxes, was possessed of princely wealth, 5:11, stood nearest the throne, was entrusted with the king's signet ring, and had the power of life and death over the subjects of the empire, 3:1, 10-12.

But withal he was a man of utmost vanity, blindest prejudices, and capable of the deadliest enmity; a timeserving, selfish, implacable, swaggering bully, a man whose mind was covered over at the top so as to shut out all lofty aspirations, and closed in at the sides so as to shut out all kindness, and open only at the bottom for the incoming of base passions, pride, haughtiness and hate.

Singular, when all the world was bowing down to him, Haman would go home to boast of his riches, his children, his high standing with the king and queen, and yet wind up the list of his successes with the doleful note, “**Yet all this availeth me nothing so long as I see Mordecai, the Jew, sitting at the king’s gate;**” supremely unhappy because one poor man refused to stand up with turban in his hand as he passed in and out of the palace gate. Haman was an Agagite, probably a descendant of Amalek; and being such Mordecai could not pay him homage, Exodus 17:16.

2. The design of the book is to show God’s providential care of His people.

It also illustrates the nature and ways of Divine Providence. Multitudes of Jews remained in the region of Babylon after the publication of Cyrus’ decree for the return to Judea. They had been born and reared there and would not exchange it even for Jerusalem.

The same God who watched over the builders of the temple and the walls of the holy city also guarded these stranger Jews in the one hundred and twenty provinces of Ahasuerus’ empire, and this book is the record of His care for them. “No weapon that is formed against thee” is the lesson it teaches. It is an inspired commentary on the great promise, “**I will not fail nor forsake thee,**” Deuteronomy 31:6; Hebrews 13:5.

3. Providence is secret, mysterious, and even unintelligible until its ends are revealed. One peculiarity of the book is that the name of God is not found in it. In this it differs from all other portions of the word of God. Even the shortest Psalm has it. “The author avoids, as if by design, the name of God,” writes Ewald. And yet there are few parts of Scripture where He is more obviously present than in this. There must be a reason for this omission of the name.

(1) The Jews’ relation to God.

- They were out of the land of promise and of the covenant,
- They were in the land of the stranger;
- They held no longer any position owned of God.

So God acts toward them in accordance with the facts. He stands at a distance from them, as we may say; does not show Himself openly; watches over them from afar, and in a nameless way; and therefore, characteristically, His name does not appear in this book just as He Himself is not seen in open interposition in their behalf.

Infinite goodness delivers them, but in a way in exact accordance with the relation they sustain to Him.

But this is likewise the distinctive feature of Providence in the broadest sense. It is mysterious, nameless, often paradoxical and inexplicable; yet to faith the finger of God is visible in every event, His hand is discovered in the strange weaving that goes on.

Men and women appear to be the chief actors in this drama: Ahasuerus, Vashti, Esther, Mordecai, Haman and the rest, these are the prominent figures; these seem to be doing all that is done. But back of the screen there stands One who is infinitely wise and loving and patient, who guides all things for the accomplishment of His glorious purposes, and for the good of His people. His name is not mentioned, as He Himself is not seen save as faith discovers Him; yet in all that occurs He is present.

We live in a world governed by a system of laws invariable and constant, so we are told. Doubtless, but back of all law, natural or otherwise, One is who upholds and controls all, and uses them for His glory, Hebrews 1:3. Here is a great manufactory. Thousands of spindles are twirling, numberless wheels and shafts and belts are revolving; men and women run here and there, receiving the finished material, supplying the machinery with fresh. Who turns all that vast and complicated mechanism? Itself? The men and women attending it? No. Outside, in the little brick building pulses and throbs the strong engine that moves all within.

Who shape and guide the events of the world? Statesmen, politicians, armies? Only in a very subordinate way. Every wheel and screw, every shaft, pivot and belt in the complicated machinery of human affairs is under the hand of Him, who is unseen and nameless, and yet who controls and conducts all things according to His sovereign will. Nevertheless, He seems to stand apart from them, and at a distance. It is appropriate, therefore, that in a book devoted to the elucidation of God's mysterious providence His name should be omitted.

(2) *Another characteristic is the attention to minutia and detail.* Providence in this book takes up the little things, the trifles as men name them, and out of these works its far-reaching aims.

Out of the whim of Ahasuerus during his great feast the queen Vashti was set aside, and Esther, the orphan Jewess, chosen in her stead, 1, 2.

A sleepless night on the part of the king led to the consultation of the court journals and the discovery of Mordecai's fidelity whereby the king's life had been saved, which brought him into royal favor and set him in a position effectively to counteract and checkmate the cruel plots of the enemy, Haman, against the Jews, 6.

In its marvelous unfoldings, Providence never neglects what men may be disposed to regard as things of no moment. It takes up the details, the minutia, the shreds and ravelings of life, and it combines and twists them together into a mighty cable by which irresistibly the purposes of God are drawn forward and accomplished.

All revolutions, changes, achievements whatsoever, greatest and smallest, which the world has ever beheld, have often, in the course of their genesis, depended on the merest trifles, on the turning of straws, we might say.

It is the delight of the historian to trace the starting-point of the French revolution to the cast of a camp kettle over the head of a Marquis Riqueti as he lay wounded on a bridge at the battle of Cosano. That marquis, thus saved from death, became the grandfather of the fiery Mirabeau who was the prime leader in the movement which culminated in the horrors of the Revolution.

It was the flight of birds from north toward the south which turned the prows of Columbus' little ships to the southern half of the western hemisphere, and which led ultimately to the settlement of that section of the world by the peoples of the Latin race. God's Providence meant that this northern continent should be reserved for a very different people, a Protestant people, with an open Bible, and with church and state completely separated. History is filled with similar instances of the very greatest and most far-reaching consequences following small divergences at the starting-point. As with nations so with the individual.

Many a one's whole life-current has been changed by a trivial circumstance; by going around the square of a city in one direction rather than in another, by meeting casually with another whose words exert a lasting influence.

(3) The intelligence and wisdom of Providence is another feature which the book reveals.

Fate is blind. Providence has eyes. Fatalism says, Whatever is, must be. Providence says, Whatever God ordains must be; but God never ordains anything without a benevolent purpose. Esther strikingly illustrates all this.

We see how exactly God adjusts everything to accomplish His will. Queen Esther comes to the throne for just such a time of distress and exigency as that through which the Jews were to pass, 4:14, 16.

- Sleep is taken from Ahasuerus at precisely the right time, 6:1-3. A day sooner or a day later might have been fatal.

- Mordecai is brought into prominence at the right juncture, 6:10-13.

On the thirteenth day of the first month the lot was cast by the superstitious Haman for the slaughter of the innocent people of Mordecai; and it fixed the day of execution on the thirteenth of the twelfth month, one year hence. God ordered it so that sufficient time should intervene, that there might be ample opportunity for counteraction and ultimate deliverance, 3:7; 8:9-17; 9:1, 2.

4. Alleged difficulties.

Some have objected to the contents of Esther as improbable. It has been said that it is unlikely that the Persian monarch would issue an order for the destruction of the Jews, and afterward a counter-order authorizing them to slay their enemies, his own subjects. But if it be true as related by an ancient historian (Diodorus Siculus), that Xerxes put the Medians forward at Thermopylae that they might be all killed because he believed they were not reconciled to the loss of their national supremacy, it is surely not incredible that he should grant permission to his chief officer to destroy strangers who were represented as dangerous to the well-being of the state.

Besides, we are to remember that the events of the book transpired after the disastrous expedition to Greece. Xerxes, we may well believe, was exasperated with the result, and in no humor to show clemency. Haman insinuated that vast revenues would flow into the king's treasury from the plundered Jews, and in the exhausted condition of the finances the plot must have commended itself to the king of the Persians.

Furthermore, we must remember that the stupid custom of the Medes and Persians as to the irreversible nature of a royal decree still prevailed, and Xerxes himself, autocrat as he was, could not annul it. The only thing to be done was to authorize the Jews to defend themselves, and this the king did.

The feast of Purim, instituted at the time, became a national observance, and has remained to this day as the most cherished of Jewish usages, and is proof of the integrity and validity of the book.

~ end of chapter 17 ~

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