

BUT DID THEY LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER?
THE ESCHATOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

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The eschatology of the Book of Esther may seem at first sight to be an unpromising topic for an article. Some scholars doubt that the book even has a theology to speak of, let alone an eschatology. After all, the book does not mention the name of God even once on its pages, and has been described as a work that is “detheologized” and “desacralized.”¹ Putting this position even more strongly, J. E. McFadyen stated that “all the romantic glamour of the story cannot blind us to its religious emptiness and moral depravity.”² Many would agree with the opinion of the nineteenth-century German scholar Heinrich Ewald, who said that when you come to Esther from the other books of the OT, you “fall from heaven to earth.”³

If heaven is as completely absent from the Book of Esther as Ewald suggested, then it could hardly have an eschatology. For, according to Geerhardus Vos,

[e]schatology deals with the expectation of beliefs characteristic of some religions that: (a) the world or part of the world moves to a definite goal (*telos*); (b) there is a new final order of affairs beyond the present. It is the doctrine of the consummation of the world-process in a supreme crisis leading on into a permanent state.⁴

In other words, eschatology is the expectation that this present world order (“the earthly”) is neither all-encompassing nor ultimate: there is another world (“heaven”) whose values and laws are determinative for the course and the goal of history.

In this article, I will argue that the Book of Esther is far from being focused exclusively on the earthly, as Ewald suggested. On the contrary, a fundamental conflict between the heavenly order and the earthly order underlies the whole narrative, from beginning to end. The end of the story of Esther depicts a triumph for the heavenly (“eschatological”) order, but a triumph that is as yet only partial and incomplete. An awareness of the larger trajectory of redemption is

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¹ G. Gerleman, *Esther* (BKAT; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), 43.

² *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: A. C. Armstrong, 1906), 315.

³ Quoted approvingly by S. R. Driver in *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (4th ed.; New York: Scribners, 1893), 457.

⁴ *The Eschatology of the Old Testament* (ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001), 1.

alluded to in key phrases and motifs that serve to show that fulfillment of the heavenly order is not yet a present reality. To adopt the classic Hollywood imagery, the Book of Esther is not a fairy tale that ends with the hero and heroine riding off into the sunset, destined inevitably to live happily ever after. Rather, it closes thankful that the Lord has lightened his people's darkness, but still looking forward with longing eyes for the dawn of the promised new world order.⁵

I. *The Two Kingdoms in Conflict: The Stage Is Set*

Every story, as Aristotle taught us, has a beginning, a middle, and an end. We often neglect the beginning and the ending of stories, focusing instead on the middle, where the dramatic tension is concentrated. That is a great mistake.⁶ The beginning of any story forms a kind of contract between the author and the reader, preparing expectations (which may then be fulfilled or disappointed)

⁵ The extent to which such future expectations feature as part of the post-exilic writings of the OT has been a subject that has attracted considerable discussion, though the Book of Esther itself has not featured in the discussion. In an influential book, Otto Plöger advanced the thesis that in the post-exilic community in Jerusalem during the Persian and Hellenistic periods, there arose a sharp tension in which "the various attitudes to the eschatological question may be regarded as the decisive point of difference" (*Theocracy and Eschatology* [trans. S. Rudman; Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968], 46). More precisely, he argued that there was a "theocratic" group based around the priesthood and the temple who believed that the purposes of God for Israel were being realized in the present community to such an extent that there was little, if any, place for further eschatological expectation. For Plöger, books like Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah represented the point of view of this party (*Theocracy and Eschatology*, 111). Sharply opposed to this group, according to Plöger, was the "eschatological group": those who looked to the future for a dramatic intervention of God that would bring about a restoration of Davidic rule and the glories of the past. This group's theology is presented in texts like Isa 24–27 (the so-called Isaiah Apocalypse), Zech 12–14, and Joel, and was a step on the path toward the full-blown apocalyptic expectations that we find in the Book of Daniel. Plöger does not discuss the Book of Esther, but there seems little doubt that he would have identified it within the "theocratic" group.

Such a description of the expectations of the post-exilic community has been challenged by a number of studies that have sought to demonstrate that the so-called "theocratic" texts are not nearly as satisfied with the present as Plöger suggested. On the contrary, they too contain a significant expectation of greater future blessings that may appropriately be termed "eschatological." Thus, for example, H. G. M. Williamson argued that in Chronicles the Davidic dynasty is viewed as having been eternally established through Solomon's faithfulness, regardless of the apostasy of the later kings. As a result, the people could look to a future that was brighter than their present, even including a restoration of the Davidic monarchy ("Eschatology in Chronicles," *TynBul* 28 [1977]: 133-54; see also Brian E. Kelly, *Retribution and Eschatology in Chronicles* [JSOTSup 211; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996]), while J. G. McConville concluded with reference to Ezra-Nehemiah that "the books express deep dissatisfaction with the exiles' situation under Persian rule, that the situation is perceived as leaving room for a future fulfilment of the most glorious prophecies of Israel's salvation and that the cause of the delayed fulfilment is the exiles' sin" ("Ezra-Nehemiah and the Fulfillment of Prophecy," *VT* 36 [1986]: 223). My thesis would place the eschatology of the Book of Esther very much in line with the partially realized eschatology that McConville identifies as the outlook of Ezra-Nehemiah.

⁶ On the importance of beginnings and endings in the Bible, see Yair Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 33-45.

about the kind of story that will follow.⁷ The way in which the scene is set in the Book of Esther, and the way in which the action is finally wrapped up, say a great deal about the message of the book.

The Book of Esther begins with a remarkably long exposition (Esth 1–2) and ends with an equally lengthy conclusion (Esth 9:20–10:3), surrounding the dramatic narrative core in chs. 3–9:19. Both the beginning and end speak of an emperor who claims an authority that extends over virtually the whole world, stretching over 127 provinces from India to Cush (1:1; 9:30).⁸ In fact, the “main characters” of the story, Mordecai and Esther, are not introduced until the middle of the second chapter, a fact which suggests that, however central they are to the immediate conflict, they are merely bit players in a much larger struggle. There are bigger issues at stake in this narrative than the happiness or otherwise of particular individuals.⁹

This emperor, Xerxes, not only claims to rule virtually the entire world, he also claims total authority over even the most intimate of relationships, issuing decrees about the balance of power between wives and husbands (Esth 1:22). His empire has vast wealth, such that he can afford feasts of unimaginable length and extravagance, conducted on pavements constructed out of materials that lesser emperors would have locked away in their treasuries. We might say that the chief end of everything and everyone in Xerxes’ empire is to glorify him and produce things that may be enjoyed by him forever.

Yet the powerlessness and folly of the empire are also subtly (and humorously) on display. An imperial edict was required even to tell the guests at the royal party that they are free to drink as they wish (Esth 1:8), surely a sign of bureaucracy run amok. Meanwhile, a mere woman, Queen Vashti, sent shockwaves throughout the civil service by refusing to submit to the demand of the king that she present herself before him and his drunken companions (1:12).¹⁰ Reinforcing the picture of an empire strangled by its own bureaucracy, the king’s advisors counseled the dissemination of an edict that was as impossible to enforce as it was to change¹¹—

⁷ Amos Oz, *The Story Begins: Essays on Literature* (trans. M. Bar-Tura; New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 7.

⁸ The number of provinces has attracted criticism as an historical anachronism, since in reality, it has been argued, there were only twenty or thirty provinces (Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* [2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 15). However, the purpose of the number may be more satirical than historical, poking fun at the enormous bureaucratic structures of the empire. The same satirical motif is visible in the stories of Dan 1–6 in the repeated lengthy list of different classes of government officials who turn up to worship Nebuchadnezzar’s golden statue and the similar long and repeated list of instruments that are played to give the command for worship. The empire cannot resist the temptation to put on a great show!

⁹ This kind of exposition would seem to fit the class of “philosophical” contract, a category in which Amit places the similarly lengthy exposition of Gen 1–2 (*Reading Biblical Narratives*, 41).

¹⁰ The rabbis may have been going beyond the text when they interpreted the command for Vashti to appear wearing her royal crown as requiring her to wear nothing else apart from the crown, yet they were correct in reading the offensiveness of Xerxes’ actions.

¹¹ The assertion of the book that the “the laws of the Medes and Persians cannot be changed” (Esth 1:19; 8:8) is often cited as a marker that the book is a fantasy since such a policy would be practically unworkable (Adele Berlin, *Esther* [JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication

that every man should be ruler in his own household (1:22). In fact, this edict merely ensured that all of the emperor's subjects were swiftly informed of Xerxes' impotence to control his own household. Vashti's refusal demonstrated that resistance to the empire might be costly, but it was nonetheless possible.

This picture of a universal empire that claims ultimate ownership of all power and wealth, and whose sovereign ruler issues decrees that cannot be challenged or changed, invites the discerning reader to consider how this empire and its ruler compares and contrasts with the kingdom of God.¹² The centrality of the theme of kings and kingdoms is underlined by the Hebrew word מֶלֶךְ and its derivatives, which occur no fewer than 45 times in the opening chapter of Esther. The royal glory of Xerxes is termed his מְבוֹרַח מְלִכּוּת, a phrase that occurs only in Esth 1:4 and in Ps 145:11, where it describes God's glory. Both kingdoms make ultimate claims on their citizens, and declare that their decrees are the laws that are truly unchangeable.¹³ Yet one, the kingdom of Xerxes, is extremely visible and tangible, with its glory on open display and its demands loudly proclaimed, while the kingdom of God is silent and invisible. Unlike the Book of Exodus, where God's work is all thunder and lightning, dramatic interventions that expose the emptiness of the Egyptian gods, here in the Book of Esther, we see God working invisibly and behind the scenes, just as he does in so much of our lives.

The rulers of these two kingdoms also invite comparison and contrast. Again, the text makes a verbal connection: the word for wrath (קִצְפָּה) that is ascribed to Xerxes is elsewhere almost exclusively used to describe God's wrath. Yet once again the differences are more significant than the similarities. The empire of Xerxes has at its head a buffoon who cannot even control his own wife and who seems utterly helpless to act without the advice of his counselors.¹⁴ The kingdom of God is governed by one who is the very embodiment of Wisdom, a ruler who needs none to counsel him. The contrast is thus set up for the perceptive reader at the outset between the highly visible, but ultimately impotent, empire of Xerxes and the invisible kingdom of God, who silently but effectively accomplishes all of his holy will. This contrast underlies the rest of the narrative.

Society, 2001], xvii, citing Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 22). However, many bureaucracies and governments functionally operate according to similar principles, even if no legal obligation to that effect is in place. It is reminiscent of the repeated slogan of the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who, when challenged by her critics inside and outside of her own party to change direction, would often say, "There is no alternative."

¹² H. Fisch comments: "In the end there is only one ruler whose commands, never officially promulgated, are unchanging and whose will prevails. He lurks behind the costly hangings of the court and whispers in the ear of Ahasuerus in the night. It is of him that the subtext speaks and whose deeds it records" ("Esther: Two Tales of One City," in *Poetry with a Purpose: Biblical Poetics and Interpretation* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988], 14).

¹³ This theme emerges also in Daniel, with the contrast between the law of the Medes and the Persians which cannot pass away (6:8, 12, 15) and the kingdom of God which will not pass away (7:14). The law of the Medes and the Persians can pass judgment on citizens of the kingdom of God, yet is repeatedly unable to kill those whom it judges.

¹⁴ On this aspect of the character of Xerxes, see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 174.

In the exposition at the beginning of the story, we are also introduced to two Jewish exiles, Esther and her uncle Mordecai. As exiles, they inhabit both of the competing kingdoms, the empire of Xerxes and the kingdom of God. Their dual citizenship is symbolized by the two names that they each bear. To the empire, they were simply Mordecai and Esther, loyal citizens with conventional Persian names that were thoroughly conformed to their culture. Mordecai is a Hebraized form of the Babylonian name *mardukâ*, which includes within it the name of the Babylonian god Marduk. Esther is a Persian name, “star” (perhaps also with an allusion to the pagan goddess, Ishtar).¹⁵ At home, however, they were Mordecai *the Jew*, a man with a kosher Benjamite genealogy that stretched all the way back to Kish (Esth 2:5), and Hadassah, a girl with a Hebrew name meaning “Myrtle” (2:7), the daughter of Abihail (2:15). Like many exiles, they lived their daily lives as citizens of two separate communities, maintaining two separate identities.

On one fateful day, the interests of those two kingdoms clashed, and they had to choose where their primary loyalty lay. Esther was selected by the king’s servants to be a candidate in the search for a successor to Queen Vashti (Esth 2:8). This unsought event was a wonderful opportunity for advancement from the perspective of her Persian identity, but pursuing that goal meant separating herself completely from the Jewish community. Win or lose, she would be isolated in the royal harem. In fact, on Mordecai’s advice, she lived such an assimilated lifestyle that even her nearest companions were unaware of her Jewishness, which must have meant ignoring virtually all of the Mosaic commandments (2:10). Far from showing resistance to the demands of the Persian empire, we read that she actively *won* the favor of Hegai, the keeper of the royal harem, which led to her promotion in the ranks of the women (2:9)¹⁶ and ultimately to her installation as a replacement for Vashti.

Meanwhile, Mordecai also worked as a faithful servant of the empire of Xerxes, being employed at the king’s gate (Esth 2:19). There he uncovered a conspiracy against the king’s life by some of his household officers and reported it to the king through Esther (2:21-23). As a result, the conspirators were hanged (or impaled),¹⁷ while Mordecai’s name was inscribed in the royal annals. In general, the Persian kings were extremely diligent and generous in rewarding those who had served well. In their annals, they kept lists of “the king’s benefactors,” in order that no good deed (from the empire’s perspective)

¹⁵ On the derivation of the names, see Carey A. Moore, *Esther* (AB; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), 19-20. The pattern of exiles bearing dual names is also attested of Daniel and his three friends (Dan 1:7).

¹⁶ Esther didn’t merely “find favor” (מִצָּחַת אֵינֶנִּי) in Hegai’s sight, a more passive idiom; still less was favor in Hegai’s sight given to her as an unsought gift by God, as was the case with Daniel and his three friends in Dan 1:9. Rather, the writer uses an unusual idiom to tell us that Esther “won favor” (נִשְׂחָתָהּ) in Hegai’s sight. See H. Bardtke, *Das Buch Esther* (KAT; Güttersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1963), 303.

¹⁷ Both practices existed in the Persian period. The interest in the height of the gallows, at least in Haman’s case (Esth 5:14) may point toward hanging rather than impaling (Moore, *Esther*, 31). For the Persians, impaling was not generally the means of execution, but a subsequent step, designed to expose the body to public shame.

might go unrewarded.¹⁸ Strangely, though, this particular good deed did go unrewarded at the time.

The opening scenes of the book thus show us these representatives of the exilic Jewish community firmly, and relatively comfortably, enmeshed in successful Diaspora life. On the surface of things, the empire of Xerxes seems to be winning the battle for the loyalty of God's people, who appear to be living without thought for the kingdom of heaven.

II. *The Two Kingdoms in Conflict: The Battle Joined*

In ch. 3 of Esther, the hitherto benign Persian Empire became openly hostile to the citizens of God's kingdom. The battle was initiated when Mordecai refused to bow to Haman, the emperor's new vizier, because he was an Agagite (Esth 3:1-2).¹⁹ There was a sworn enmity between the people of Amalek and Israel dating back to the time of the exodus (Exod 17:16), and God had commanded King Saul to execute holy war on King Agag and the Amalekites as an outpouring of divine judgment (1 Sam 15:2). Saul failed to carry through the task completely, however, as a result of which he lost his kingship (1 Sam 15). As a descendant of Saul's family (Esth 2:5), Mordecai refused to bow the knee to Haman, the descendant of Agag. Such a mark of respect to the old enemy of God and God's people was too much for the empire to ask.

On the face of it, this is a promising development in Mordecai. Mordecai's refusal to bow to this enemy of God's people is the first evidence of a recognition that he was a citizen of God's kingdom first, and secondarily of the empire of Xerxes. Yet we have to ask whether we can welcome Mordecai's action with more than one and a half cheers. His refusal to bow to a son of Amalek simply underlines all the more his failure to stand up earlier against the unacceptable demands of the empire of Xerxes.

The fact that the underlying conflict between Mordecai and Haman is more than a personal disagreement is evident in Haman's response. Haman was outraged by Mordecai's refusal to bow to him and scorned mere personal retaliation, responding with a decree of death for all Jews throughout the empire (Esth 3:6). This is surely "overkill" if it is merely the response to a personal affront; however, as a renewal of hostilities between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God, it makes perfect sense. The conflict in which Cain earlier slew Abel, and Pharaoh murdered the Hebrew boys has resurfaced again. This time the potent resources of the empire of Xerxes were co-opted by Haman to spread the decree to eliminate Mordecai's people.

The charge that Haman brought against the Jews was that they kept to themselves and did not obey the empire's laws (Esth 3:8). This was indeed an ironic

¹⁸ Lewis B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (ICC; New York: Scribner, 1908), 245.

¹⁹ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 44. The other alternatives that have been advanced are arrogance on Mordecai's part or an affront to monotheism. Yet, as Fox points out, elsewhere in the story Mordecai shows no sign of inflated self-importance, and it is hardly likely that Haman demanded divine homage while Xerxes did not. If there had been an idol involved, as in Dan 3, the text would surely have mentioned it.

charge, given the fact that to this point in the narrative, Mordecai had done everything that the empire demanded, and more, in order to fit in! Yet any refusal to submit to the will of the earthly empire will not be tolerated and must be punished, as Vashti earlier discovered. Haman told Xerxes concerning this people, “It is not worthwhile for the king to leave them alone [or, more literally, ‘to leave them at rest,’ a phrase with strong theological overtones].”²⁰ He also offered the king an enormous bribe in exchange for their extermination (3:8). In return, Xerxes never even asked the identity of the people whose death warrant he was signing, or what “leaving this people alone” was costing him. The dark side of the empire of Xerxes is fully exposed. It may tolerate the citizens of God’s kingdom as long as they are suitably submissive, but if there is a confrontation it will just as happily seek to eliminate them.

When this threat to the existence of the Jews became known, they sought help. But from whom? In the light of the existence of the two kingdoms, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Xerxes, it is instructive to note which king is the object of their appeal. The Jewish community in Susa fasted and put on sackcloth and ashes, normally religious actions, yet there is no mention of any accompanying prayer to God. Even the pagan Ninevites of Jonah’s day combined prayer with their ritual self-abasement (Jonah 3:8), but not so the Jewish community.

Meanwhile, Mordecai implored Esther to go to King Xerxes to seek his mercy and plead with him for her people (Esth 4:8). The language Mordecai uses here of “seeking mercy” and “pleading” before the king is striking because it is precisely the language of penitential prayer with which one would normally come before the Great King, God himself (compare Dan 9:3). Instead of seeking God’s favor and pleading with him for deliverance by means of prayer, it seems that Mordecai was placing his hopes on an intervention at the human level, with King Xerxes.²¹

At first Esther was reluctant to go to Xerxes, since to appear uninvited in his presence meant immediately risking her own life (Esth 4:11). Even if she survived that danger, revealing her own Jewishness would lead to her own probable death at the hands of Haman if she were unsuccessful. Moreover, when she acceded to Mordecai’s request, she evidenced little hope of a positive outcome. She said, “I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And when I perish, I perish” (4:16). This was a statement of resignation to the inevitable, rather than a declaration of bold faith.²²

²⁰ The English “leave them alone” barely captures the theological import of the Hebrew hiphil of נָחַם, which can also mean “to give them rest.” God, the Great King, is the one who really gives his people rest, as key texts such as Deut 12:10, Josh 11:23, and 2 Sam 7:11 affirm.

²¹ Mordecai is not alone in this: the Jewish community too adopted the outward signs of distress—fasting, weeping, sackcloth and ashes—yet there is no mention of any prayer on their part either (Esth 4:3).

²² Paton, *Esther*, 226. For the Hebrew conjunction כִּי־אֵשֶׁר as an expression of resignation, see BDB 455b. See also the comprehensive discussion in Charles D. Harvey, *Finding Morality in the Diaspora? Moral Ambiguity and Transformed Morality in the Books of Esther* (BZAW 328; New York: de Gruyter, 2003), 34.

Having committed herself to intercede on behalf of her people, however, Esther set in motion a complex strategy designed to “win favor” with King Xerxes, or at least to manipulate him into a favorable response, through inviting him to a series of feasts. She had apparently discerned that the best way to extract something from Xerxes was to place him in a context where alcoholic beverages were served. Yet what she needed to ask for, the reversal of a decree that he had signed personally and which had come from his most powerful advisor, was a subject too delicate to be approached directly. Her strategy therefore involved encouraging Xerxes to commit himself repeatedly to offer her anything she wished. Once she had made it impossible for him to deny her request without losing face, she would finally reveal what her request was. It was a long shot, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

III. *The Two Kingdoms in Conflict: The Battle Won*

In the end, the victory was not won by Esther’s appeal to King Xerxes—at least, not directly. The real turning point in the course of the book occurs at the beginning of ch. 6.²³ It was not Esther’s bold action that changed the fate of her people, but the simple matter of the king spending a sleepless night. Unlike King Nebuchadnezzar, who was kept awake at a key moment by a dream from God (Dan 2:1) and King Darius, who was so troubled by Daniel’s likely fate in the lion’s den that he found no rest (Dan 6:18),²⁴ there was no obvious reason for Xerxes’ lack of sleep. There were no dreams, nor was he apparently troubled—as he surely ought to have been—by his genocidal edict. Perhaps it was the noise from the construction of the gallows on which Haman was planning to hang Mordecai that kept him awake. That would certainly have been an additional fitting irony for a chapter filled with fitting ironies, but the text itself gives no reason for Xerxes’ inability to sleep. On a profound level, there was no reason for his sleeplessness, except for God’s sovereign purpose to deliver his people. The kingdom of heaven was on the move.

Yet a sleepless night by itself would not have been enough to deliver the Jews: it also required several additional “coincidences” to achieve a transformation in the fortunes of God’s people. First, out of all of the various options available to an emperor, the king responded to his sleeplessness by asking for a reading from the royal annals (Esth 6:1). This is not perhaps the most obvious form of diversion, although as a cure for insomnia it has its attractions. Then, the place chosen for the reading was the account of how Mordecai’s message had saved the king’s life. Third, the king had uncharacteristically failed to reward Mordecai earlier for his faithful service. Finally, Haman was present in the courtyard at just the right moment to suggest the perfect reward for “the man the king delights to honor” (6:4). All of these “coincidences” were necessary to turn the story around and

²³ As Karen Jobes’s literary analysis clearly demonstrates. See her *Esther* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 154-58.

²⁴ The phrase in Dan 6:18 is exactly parallel to Esth 6:1, only in Aramaic.

start the fortunes of Haman on a dizzy descent, while the fortunes of Mordecai and the Jews experienced an equally meteoric rise.

Ironically, it was Haman's own advisors and wife who first recognized the importance of this shift in fortunes. They said to him, "Since Mordecai is from the seed of the Jews, before whom you have begun to fall, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall" (Esth 6:13). Strikingly, the confession of the security of the seed of the Jews is found on the lips of the Gentiles, long before it is acknowledged by the Jews themselves. The pagans could see that once the kingdom of God had entered the action, the preservation and final triumph of the seed of the Jews was assured.

Their words were prophetic. Esther's strategy had now been given the time needed to play itself out, and it did so successfully. Haman was hung on his own gallows and replaced as vizier by Mordecai, who issued a counter-edict authorizing the Jews to organize themselves against their enemies. The most poignant transformation of all, however, is surely the concluding note of the chapter that many of the people of the land declared themselves to be Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them (Esth 8:17). No sooner had Esther conquered her fear and revealed her true identity with respect to her Jewishness than many of the pagans around her apparently chose to pretend to be Jewish, motivated by precisely the same fear.²⁵ From that point on, the outcome of the struggle was no longer in doubt. On the very day that Haman had sought their destruction, the tables were turned on their enemies, and the Jews triumphed over those who hated them (9:1). Their mourning and distress were turned to rejoicing and hope.

IV. *The Two Kingdoms in Conflict: Redemption Not Yet Complete*

If this were a Hollywood movie, the story would be essentially over at this point. You could cut straight to the closing titles as the narrator intoned, "And so Mordecai and Esther, and all the Jews in the kingdom of Xerxes, lived happily ever after."²⁶ What more is there to add after such a comprehensive triumph? Yet the biblical book, in keeping with its structural balance around the center of 6:1, has a lengthy conclusion after the dramatic tension has been resolved, a conclusion that establishes the feast of Purim, and reviews the *status quo* after all has been said and done.

At first sight, the feast of Purim proves the "earthly" focus of the Book of Esther. It was established as an ordinance by edicts from Esther and Mordecai (Esth 9:20-22, 29-32), not from God. In it the Jews, both far and near,²⁷ bound themselves to feast, rejoice, and give presents to one another and gifts to the poor, remembering Haman's plot and the king's intervention to deliver them

²⁵ Some may indeed have been genuinely converted, motivated to join God's people by the fear of the Lord. But others were probably motivated more by the fear of the Jews than the fear of the Lord (Esth 8:17). See Frederic Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (WBC; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1996), 449.

²⁶ This is essentially the reading of Esth 10 suggested by Berlin, who titles it "All's Well That Ends Well" (*Esther*, 93).

²⁷ Here there may be an explicit allusion to Isa 57:19, with its promise that God would heal his people and provide peace to all, both far and near. On this, see further below.

(9:24-25). Yet there is no obvious word about God's people binding themselves to praise the Lord for his deliverance or to remind their children of this demonstration of God's faithfulness. Unlike a feast such as Passover, where the whole focus is on the Lord, it seems as if the Jews could have obeyed Mordecai and Esther's edict about Purim to the letter and still have gone through the whole day without thinking about God once. They could simply have given their neighbor an "Esther is the Reason for the Season" T-shirt and then settled down at the table with family and friends for the big meal.

Yet to celebrate the feast of Purim in that way would be to miss the whole point of the festival. The heavenly dimension is hidden in the feast of Purim, just as the work of God is hidden in the Book of Esther as a whole. To begin with, Purim challenges its observers to see beyond the visible and recognize the redemptive hand of God in the hidden workings of history. How could anyone possibly remember the turning of darkness into light and sorrow to joy without thinking about God? As in Ps 113, the poor who are raised from the dust and the needy who are lifted out of the ash heap and seated with princes should need little urging to join in praising the Lord (see Ps 113:5-9).

This heavenly focus is not simply a general observation that should come from reading the Book of Esther, however. It is actually what Mordecai wrote in his letter to the Jews establishing Purim. Esther 9:24-25 literally says:

For Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and he had cast the Pur (that is, the lot) to harass them and to destroy them. But when it²⁸ came before the king, he said in writing "Let his evil plot which he has plotted against the Jews return upon his head"—so they impaled him and his sons upon the tree.

These verses have caused commentators some difficulty, because they raise the question, "When exactly did Xerxes issue this supposed decree to deliver the Jews and return Haman's evil upon his own head?" This version doesn't seem to square with the portrayal of events in the previous chapters, in which it was Mordecai who issued the decree that saved the Jews, without much assistance from King Xerxes. This observation has led some scholars to think that what we have in Esth 9 is a "cleaned up," public version of events, designed to give more credit to Xerxes than was really his due.²⁹ But perhaps the jarring mismatch between the letter and the events of the story is actually another hint to think more deeply about which king is in view in Mordecai's letter. Xerxes' name is nowhere in the letter, because Xerxes was not the king whose intervention changed the course of history and saved the Jews! It was the Great King, God himself, who reversed the fortunes of Haman and the fortunes of the Jews. His decrees, written in the heavenly scrolls, were the ones that truly could not be reversed!

²⁸ The feminine pronoun here could refer either to the plot or to Esther. Since Esther is not mentioned in the immediate context, I have taken it as referring to the plot. See Joyce Baldwin, *Esther* (TOTC; Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 108-9.

²⁹ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 119-20.

What is more, Purim was explicitly a memorial of the time when the Jews got rest from their enemies (Esth 9:22). The theme of receiving rest from one's enemies is a motif with rich overtones in the OT. It was a prerequisite laid down for the building of the temple in Deut 12:10 and the sign of the completion of the conquest under Joshua (Josh 11:23). These themes came together in 2 Sam 7 where, when the Lord established David's kingdom and gave him rest from his enemies all around, David started thinking about building the temple. In the dynastic oracle given to David in that chapter, the Lord promised to establish the kingdom of his seed, to give his people a settled place in their own land, free from oppression, and rest from all of their enemies. How could anyone possibly remember the receiving of rest from one's enemies without thinking about God, and more specifically about God's promise to David of rest for Israel and peace while they dwelt in their own land?

The subject of "rest from their enemies" therefore invites us to go back and reconsider the extent of the reversal that has happened for the Jews. Yes, the Jews have received rest from their enemies all around . . . except for one enemy, Xerxes himself. It was his callous indifference that enabled Haman's edict to be signed into law in the first place. Haman received his just deserts, and God the Great King intervened to give his people the rest that King Xerxes would have denied them. Yet King Xerxes himself remained untouched, still in charge of his empire, still exercising his power and might in his own interests.³⁰ This theme is underlined in a tiny detail in the closing verses of the book, noting that King Xerxes imposed tribute throughout the empire, to its most distant shores (Esth 10:1). In this last act recorded of Xerxes, just as in the first, his own personal interests remained paramount, no matter the cost to his loyal subjects.³¹ In fact, the imposition of taxes on the empire is itself yet another reversal, but this time a negative one. At the time of Esther's coronation as queen, there was a general remission of taxes (2:18). Now, even though Esther is more queen than ever, the earlier blessings are reversed. The more things change, the more they stay the same in the empire of Xerxes.

To sum up then, it was surely good news for God's people that Haman's edict had been thwarted. It was good news that Mordecai was now second in rank to Xerxes, in a place where he was able to seek good for his people and speak peace to all his seed (Esth 10:3). The position once filled by the enemy of the Jews was now occupied by their friend. This was good news, but it was not yet

³⁰ Even more troubling is the fate of Esther herself. She has saved her people, but as Berel Lerner points out, at the end of the story she herself "remains trapped in the palace and bedroom of a drunken Persian king" ("No Happy Ending for Esther," *JBQ* 29 [2001]: 11).

³¹ Some commentators try to put a positive spin on the notice of new taxation by seeing a parallel with the taxes that Joseph imposed on the Egyptian economy after he was elevated to power (Gen 47:13-26). According to them, the point of the note is that taking care of the Jews is actually good for the royal economy (so Jon D. Levenson, *Esther* [OTL; Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 1997], 132). However, it is one thing to celebrate the taxation of the hated Egyptians and quite another to be happy about a new imposition on your own back. This is especially true when it is clear that the money raised will be spent not on education and the public welfare of the people, but on the personal interests and whims of the emperor.

the best of news. A major crisis had been resolved but the consummation had not yet occurred. When they truly had rest from their enemies all around, their king would surely no longer be named Xerxes, but would be a king who embodies the virtues described in Ps 72, especially the pursuit of justice and righteousness. True rest would come when the one who seeks their good and speaks their peace was not a descendant of Saul who was *second in rank* to anyone but the promised seed of David, reigning as the true king.

In other words, the text itself shows us that the great reversal of the Book of Esther is not yet the Great Reversal of all of history. It was not yet the inbreaking of the heavenly kingdom on earth. It was a great deliverance to be sure, a mighty victory of God against the kingdoms of this world, but any deliverance that rests on the influence of a single individual who must inevitably grow old and die, in an empire that has not been radically transformed, was at best only partial and temporary. The Book of Esther demonstrates the need for a greater reversal yet, one which would result in the coming of the true king, the Prince of Peace, whose reign will never end!

V. *Esther and the Coming of the Kingdom*

The Book of Esther, when properly understood, is thus more than just a reminder to God's people of his past ability to intervene decisively in the lives of his people while remaining hidden to all but the eye of faith. As a book with a distinct eschatology, it always pointed beyond itself to show us the need for a greater deliverance yet to come. The events celebrated by Esther's generation and their descendants provided a foreshadowing within history of the judgment of the wicked and the deliverance of God's people, but neither of these was comprehensively accomplished in their time. Even though more than seventy-five thousand of the enemies of God's people were slain, and Mordecai and Esther rose to positions of considerable influence and power in the world, at the end of the day the power of the empire was left largely intact.

What we have not yet seen in Esther's day, then, is the complete fulfillment of the prophecy of Isa 57:19-20, alluded to in Esth 9:20:

"Peace, peace to those far and near," says the Lord, "and I will heal them." But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. "There is no peace," says my God, "for the wicked."

In the Book of Esther, we see the tossing sea temporarily driven back through God's grace and providence but not yet finally stilled. We see the judgment of "no peace" enacted on wicked Haman and a measure of peace for the Jews, but not yet the final declaration of peace for all of God's people. That awaited the coming of one greater than Mordecai, the one who would be the Prince of Peace, for whom Isaiah looked. This coming one would still the raging sea of wickedness once and for all, and would proclaim a full and final peace to those who were far away and to those who were near, as Paul put it in Eph 2:17.

Yet he did so not by waging comprehensive holy war against the Gentiles, as Esther and Mordecai did, but rather by destroying the ancient enmity between the Gentiles and God (Eph 2:14). In his incarnation, Jesus came not as a mighty warrior to destroy the empire of Xerxes but as the Prince of Peace to claim many of its inhabitants as his own. In Christ, former Amalekites and former earthly-minded Jews are now brought together into the glorious peace that flows to the one new people of God.

That peace was purchased at a great cost, far greater than anything Esther ever risked for her people. Our peace was established by God declaring holy war on his own Son, putting him to death and impaling him on the cross. There at the cross, God the Father laid upon Jesus the guilt of all of the sins of those who would become his people (2 Cor 5:21). All of the ugliness and pain of the entire history of holy war were distilled into six hours of awful agony and the burning darkness on the cross, as God the Father poured out the full measure of his wrath against sin upon his son. His body was not merely tortured and brutalized by the Romans but was exposed to cosmic shame by being hung on the cross. Like Haman and his sons, Jesus' body was hung on a tree, the ultimate sign of God's judgment curse (Deut 21:23). On the cross, Jesus bore God's curse upon sin in full so that we might receive peace through his righteousness, have rest from all our guilt and sin, and access into the life-giving presence of God.

To be sure, life often still looks like it did in the days of Mordecai and Esther. The conflict between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God goes on, and we are often tempted to respond in the same way as the Jews of their generation did, without reference to God and without thought for eschatology. At times, we appear to be in the midst of an endlessly tossing sea and in imminent danger of being overwhelmed by the mire and the mud. The kingdom of Xerxes seems to threaten our personal destiny, and so we weep and wail. Then things turn around and a Mordecai and an Esther appear for us and life becomes better, so we feast and celebrate. But the eye of faith recognizes that the ups and downs in our personal fortunes in this world are not simply part of an eternal cycle, the circle of life. The course of history is going somewhere, towards a future in which the kingdom of this world will finally become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ (Rev 11:15). The eye of faith is therefore constantly looking beyond our visible circumstances in this world to the unseen heavenly reality, where even now Christ is enthroned for us.

As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, it is part of our experience of this world that we don't yet see everything in subjection to God. Like Esther and Mordecai, we see a world in which God's presence and actions are often veiled. Yet we also see Jesus, once humbled to the point of death on the cross but now exalted above every name and crowned with glory and honor (Heb 2:8-9). Because of his death and resurrection and ascension into glory, we know that we have peace with God, a peace that transcends any peace this world has to offer. We know that we may rest in our High Priest and intercessor Jesus, who

brings us constantly into the presence of the King of kings, and whose kingdom will never pass away. We know that whatever trials we go through in this world, we have the assurance that in the end in him we will truly live “happily ever after.”³²

³² For a fuller exposition of these themes, see Iain Duguid, *Esther* (Reformed Expository Commentary; Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2005).

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