

Esther

Mark Hamilton

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History

My dear brothers and sisters. It's not known for sure who the King Ahasuerus is whose mentioned in the book of the Esther, but it's generally been narrowed down to one of two possible choices, and that is either Darius Hystaspes who's the great Persian ruler who first attacked the Greeks and who was defeated at the Battle of Marathon, or alternatively, probably the greatest I should think of the Persian Emperors, as we might call them, which was Xerxes, who actually succeeded in largely invading by land the mainland part of Greece, and was only ultimately defeated by the Greek navy.

We see from chapter one of the Book of Esther that this ruler, whoever he was, was very very powerful, very wealthy and ruled over Persia at a time when it was at the zenith of this power, ruling an empire which extended from India in the west to Ethiopia in the south, and it meant of course, that Persia at that time controlled Egypt.

This book has been to some extent, the subject of controversy in that doesn't want to mention the name of God, in fact God is not directly referred to once in the book, but nevertheless, when we study it and think about it, is undoubtedly a study in the *unseen* hand of Providence, which is clearly at work behind this record. It also contains amazing types, which I hope to just bring out a little bit this morning, which in themselves are a demonstration that this is an inspired account of a divinely contrived series of events. It's real history, which explains the origin of the Jewish feast of Purim, which we've just read was established by decree of Mordechai and Esther after these events, as recorded in chapter 10 of the Book of Esther, so that the story of Esther is not just folklore and certainly not a lie, but is *real* history.

Just thinking about the opening chapter of this book of Esther, chapter one. In which we have that extraordinary display of the wealth and magnificence of King Ahasuerus and a feast that lasted for no less than 180 days. He can't have been that busy one would think, whatever we think of this and of the slightly drunken demand of King Ahasuerus that his queen Vashti should appear before the male folk of his Empire in order to show off her beauty to the assembled revelers. Whatever we think of her refusal to comply with that request and of its consequences for her, what we can say is that God was using these events to work

out His purpose. God would have known about the uprising, the gradual rise to power in the background of those events of Haman the Agagite, who is almost certainly descended from the royal family of the ancient Amalekite people notoriously antagonistic to the Jews, Jew haters. God knew what was coming, and it was He that arranged for Esther to become queen to counter the rise of Haman.

Ever since the Amalekites - going back in Israel's history - who were descended from Edom, had attacked Israel shortly after they left Egypt, God had prophesied the destruction of that people, if you remember, that they attacked the Israelites as they left Egypt and Joshua had to go out and fight against them, and during the course of the battle, Moses stood on a hill and held up the rod of God, which had been used to bring about the plagues on Egypt and the parting of the Red Sea by the power of God, and when he held up his rod, then Israel prevailed, and if he let the rod drop, then Amalek prevailed. And that of course, was showing to Israel that God was in control of that battle, and after Joshua was successful in defeating the Amalekites, God had these words to say and it's recorded in Exodus chapter 17, He said:

I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven
and then a couple verses later

Yahweh will have war with Amalek from generation to generation
and a little later on, in the book of Numbers, it's recorded that Balaam was inspired to prophesy like this:

Amalek was first among the nations but shall be last until he perishes

And so as Israel's history proceeds, and we come to the time of the Kings and the first King Saul. We find Samuel being inspired to instruct Saul to go against the Amalekites and to destroy them. Which Saul did, not entirely successfully, we know he brought back some of the spoil and he brought back Agag the King of the Amalekites and we see what Samuel did to Agag. Samuel was in no doubt about the need to fulfil that prophecy of Exodus that God had already uttered concerning the Amalekites.

Later on, David did some mopping-up operations we might say, against the Amalekites while he had apparently had gone over to the Philistines and was living at Ziklag and he was under the authority of Achish, King of Gath. David went out, and he said he was going against the south of Judah, actually he was going against the Amalekites and was mopping up some of those who still remained, and we see a bit later on, when David went with Achish against Saul and the Israelites actually at Mount Gilboa, Providence stopped him from actually taking part in that battle, and when he came back to Ziklag he found it had been destroyed and burned to the ground by the Amalekites, obviously taking revenge for what David had been doing to them, and David was able to pursue them and kill many of them again and just a few escaped on camels, and so we see that there's a process going on of God working out this prophecy that he would have war with Amalek from generation to generation, and perhaps in the Book of Esther, we see the climax in the final, destruction really, of the Amalekite people and its royal family.

Mordechai

Thinking now about the characters who come to our notice, especially in the Book of Esther, and starting with Mordechai. Mordechai's name means '*a little man*', and yet this little man came to represent his people in the King's gates, he had an important position because the king's gate controlled access and egress to the King's palace. It obviously was important for the right people to get in, but not for the wrong people to get in, and as we know from the record, Mordechai reported on a plot against King Ahasuerus that he heard there, and those who were guilty were hanged, and of course ultimately that stood to Mordechai's account with the king, stood him in good stead. Now we're not told specifically that Mordechai was even a religious Jew in this account, but the fact that he refused about Haman tells us he knew about those prophecies concerning the Amalekites that I've already mentioned to you. Why else would it be that he risked everything, risked life really and nearly lost it, refusing to bow to Haman the Agagite? Why else do you think it was that he did that if it wasn't because he was a religious Jew and knew what God had decreed concerning that people.

Mordechai's behaviour was as I've said, an act of the faith, and it *apparently* led to his, or was to lead to his destruction, to the destruction of the his people, and the low point of the story of Mordechai's life is at the end of chapter five, when having become aware of Haman's decree and having undertaken with Esther to fast and to pray that God would deliver them from that, Mordechai behaves 'as one dead' before Haman as he enters the gate, and Haman responds to that act of contempt by preparing to crucify Mordechai. Alright, *note* that, because this is all typical, as I said and ultimately of course, that was overturned and Mordechai was elevated to the right hand of King Ahasuerus. He left his presence wearing a robe of blue and white and a great crown of gold. A robe of blue and white, blue represents God's covenant, and white represent righteousness, again, this is all typical. Mordechai exalted to the right hand of the king, given great power and glory. Who does that remind us of?

Haman

Now let's think about Haman himself. As I said, the Amalekites were descended from Esau. In fact, Amalek was a grandson of Esau, and the Edomites in Scripture come to represent *sin incarnate*. It's interesting, we just read from the little prophecy of Obadiah just the other night didn't we, we read from Obadiah, it's just a single chapter, and in that prophecy we have a classic example in prophecy of the Edom coming to stand for all those nations that oppose God's people and God's purpose. Obadiah, and we'll just pick a few verses from it. It's a prophecy against Edom as you will remember, verse 10

because of the violence done to your brother Jacob [Esau] shame shall cover you
and you should be cut off forever

verse 15

for the day of The Lord is near upon all the nations

See how it now widened, it's not just Edom that's being talked about here, Edom as it were, is *typical* of all nations

As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head. For as you have drunk on my holy mountain, so all the nations shall drink continually; they shall drink and swallow, and shall be as though they had never been. But in Mount Zion there shall be those who escape, and it shall be holy, and the house of Jacob shall possess their own possessions. The house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau stubble; they shall burn them and consume them, and there shall be no survivor for the house of Esau, for the LORD has spoken.

so God decreed destruction for all of Edom, the descendants of Esau, not just for Amalek, but in this chapter and elsewhere in prophecy it's sort of typical of the opposition of all the nations against God's people.

verse 21 you see the contrast: Saviours, Esau to be destroyed, but...

Saviours shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau, and the kingdom shall be the Lord's

so when Esau, typical of those who opposed God's people, are put down, and Zion is adopted, then the Kingdom of God is established, and there's a similar prophecy in Malachi, and there's other examples of it in Ezekiel too.

So Haman represents in this story of Esther *sin incarnate*, battling against, seeking to destroy, God's people and frustrate the purpose of God which revolves, of course, about that people. Haman nearly succeeded in destroying both Mordechai and the people of Israel. But God turned the tables upon Haman so that *Haman* was destroyed and Mordechai was elevated from near death to glory.

Esther

Let's now turn our attention to Esther, whose name is given to this book. Esther is actually the Persian name of this lady, but her Hebrew name is Hadassah. She was, of course an orphan as she's introduced to us in chapter two, brought up by her cousin Mordechai, who are both captives in Persia. The king's edict to gather the beautiful young women so that he might pick a new queen, much like a beauty contest of today, was a reflection upon the character of this rather vulgar pagan monarch. But it was an edict, which could not be refused, imagine Esther, would she want to marry such a man, in fact it was country to the Law to marry a pagan, nevermind a pagan monarch, Esther was a captive. She was *forced* to make the best of the circumstances imposed upon her by the king.

So we see her making the best of this situation that she finds herself in. And just thinking about this, you know, I don't think we can draw the conclusion that God brought this about directly as it were because why would God do something contrary to his Law. His Law was that Jewish women should not marry pagans, but what we *can* say is that God used this situation for His own ends. We could also further say that this happens sometimes in our own lives, God allows things to happen to us, sometimes not pleasant, but He uses them to test us, and to develop character, to work out His purpose with us. So if bad things happen to us, things that we don't like happen to us, that we have to make the best of, well,

we're in good company with Esther and we take these things in faith and don't give up as a consequence.

And as I've said, Esther's Hebrew name is Hadassah, which means '*a myrtle*', now the myrtle tree is a fruit tree actually which grows to about 20 feet high, it was grown in the Middle East, still grown today actually, but it was grown in Bible times for beauty. It had beautiful green shining leaves, it had snow white flowers bordered with purple, which exuded a perfume. It was a pretty, aromatic tree, and it was also grown for the spice which could be derived from its seeds, the seeds were not eaten, but there was a spice that was derived from them which was also aromatic. So we can see that this is a fitting symbol of this beautiful character Esther, who is clearly a woman of intelligence, a woman of faith, a woman of integrity, as well as being beautiful of form.

Her Persian name, Esther, means '*hidden*' and she was hidden, wasn't she, at least as far her nationality was concerned, at the command of Mordechai, until such time as it was appropriate and useful for her to reveal the fact that she was Jewish. Some would say perhaps that might have prevented the decree of Haman from coming out in the first place, but God was in control of these things, and it worked out for the best in the end, didn't it, that Esther concealed her national identity until the appropriate moment.

What we can say is that Esther being put in this situation in which she was taken into the royal hareem, with a view to the king choosing who was to be his next queen, she made the best of that situation, she used her charm, her obvious charm, to good effect, firstly, to bring about a position of prominence in the hareem under Hathak, the King's Eunuch, and then she used her charm upon the king himself, to bring about her exaltation to become queen. Yes a remarkable young woman.

Well Mordechai, whether he actually took it upon himself, certainly as far as Haman was concerned, Mordechai came to represent the Jewish people in his eyes, he *deigned* didn't he, to lay his hand upon Mordechai only, but he wanted to kill all the Jews, as he saw Haman, sorry *Mordechai* as representative of them, of their attitude I suppose, towards him. Well when Haman's terrible decree was published and became known to Mordechai and then to Esther, Mordechai *devolves* that responsibility of representing the nation of the Jews upon Esther. So she has to literally take her life in her hands and enter unbidden into the presence of the absolute ruler, her husband King Ahasuerus, to which she was really little more than a chattel and a servant, although she'd been exalted to become queen. We notice that before Esther did that, before she appeared before the king unbidden, she announced a three day fast, the fast was to be for her and for her young ladies and also for all the Jews headed up by Mordechai, to engage in.

It doesn't tell us that they also prayed to God, but surely they would have been praying to God, would they not, what with such a crisis, a national crisis for Israel, with their very lives being at stake, and I've heard it said, 'it [scripture] doesn't say they prayed', well, do we need to be told that in such circumstances? What we can say is that in Scripture both in the Old and in the New Testament, when a Jew engages in a fast, it also means that they pray, the two go together hand-in-glove, just take an example, this is from Psalm 35, a Psalm of David, this is David complaining about his enemies and saying that because he

was sick, they hoped he would die, whereas by contrast, David himself:

... but I, when they were sick — I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting;
I prayed with head bowed on my chest

so he fasted and he prayed, the two went hand in hand, and again, if you have a look at the example of Daniel in chapter nine, we have a similar reference, this is Daniel becoming aware that the 70 Years prophesised by Jeremiah had come to an end and he said in the first year of the reign of King Darius:

I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes

See how these things go together, Mordechai put on sackcloth and he fasted and we can be absolutely sure that he prayed to God too, even though the record doesn't tell us that. And again, if you go to the New Testament, you might remember after the transfiguration, when Jesus came down from the mountain, he found his disciples arguing with someone because they'd been unable to throw out, cast out, a demon, probably epilepsy from a young boy, and Jesus cast it out, and the disciples asked him, 'Why couldn't we cast it out?' And he said, 'This kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting', so in the mind of Christ, prayer and fasting went together. So my point is, that Esther was a religious Jewess. You mustn't just skate over the surface and not notice the things that are implicit underneath.

Providence

Now let's think about the hand of Providence working in this account of the book of Esther. As I've said, God used the situation in which Esther was taken into the royal hareem, and Esther became elevated to become queen at the appropriate moment, and even Mordechai realised that there was significance in it. If we go back to chapter four of the book of the Esther, this comes out in verse 13, this is Mordechai requiring Esther to go to King Ahasuerus and plead for the life of her people, and he says to Esther, verse 13 of chapter four,

Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

Mordecai could see that the hand of God had been working couldn't he, to bring Esther into this position of prominence at such an appropriate and important time. Certain it is that the hand of Providence intervened to give King Ahasuerus a restless night, just at the very appropriate moment, when things were coming to a head. The very next morning, Haman was gonna come into his presence and demand that Mordechai be hanged on the gallows, but during the night, Ahasuerus has a restless night, he calls for the king's chronicle, and he just happens to read about Mordechai, having done that good deed for him and not being rewarded, I don't think that just happened, do you? It was the hand of providence at work

there, and what an exquisite irony it brings about on the next morning when Haman comes into the king's presence and the king says 'what shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honour?' and Haman thinks to himself, who would he like to honour more than *me*, and then the king says 'go and do that to Mordechai the Jew'. I think the Angels were having fun at the expense of Haman, don't you? We could be sure the hand of God worked out those events, they did not happen by chance.

Even Haman's so-called wise men and his wife Zeresh, recognise in chapter six that God's hand is beginning to work against Haman after he's forced to honour Mordechai, chapter six, verse 13:

And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him

how he'd been forced to honour Mordechai and parade him through the city on the horse proclaiming before him "thus shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honour"

Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him."

They could see the omens were not good. They could see that God was working against them, couldn't they?

Had God used this whole scenario, dear brothers and sisters, to continue his war from generation to generation against the Amalekites, maybe to finish the job off, perhaps so, certain it was that His purpose continued to work out, 'I will have war against this people from generation to generation.' It's a terrible thing, isn't it, to fall foul of the Living God?

Types

Now let's turn away from that and think about some of the typical significances of this story of the Esther. Well, I think we can clearly see that Mordechai himself is a powerful type of Christ in this record, one who was able to save God's people, to deliver them from destruction by his own near death at the hands of Satan incarnate in the person of Haman. We clearly see that, as we see in the sacrifice of Christ, that the flesh must be put to death before salvation is possible.

It's something we have to learn on their own lives isn't, that we've died with Christ, we've been baptised into him, we've risen to a new life, from now we try to put the flesh to death and develop the thinking and the habits, the way of life of the Spirit.

Esther in this record is typical of the Ecclesia, chosen to be married to our soon coming King. The King that *we* hope to be married to, is even more, much more merciful we should say perhaps than, King Ahasuerus ever was. If we throw ourselves upon *His* mercy, guaranteed by the sacrifice of Christ, and appeal to Him to forgive us our sins, which must be a constant requirement surely as sinners, He will, as it were, hold out the golden sceptre to us, and give each of us a place in His kingdom.

If we follow the examples of Mordechai and Esther, live a life of faith, stand up for our principles, refuse to bow to the power of sin, and rather exalt worship of God, then Christ will redeem us, as Mordechai was able to redeem his people from all evil.

Mark Hamilton