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C1306 – February 6, 2013 – Esther
Introduction & Background

Tonight if you'd turn in your Bible to the Book of Esther you'll find a book that never mentions the name of God, Jerusalem, the Temple, the Mosaic Law or the historic feasts of Israel. Can such a book be a part of the canon of Scripture? Further the book centers on a woman who undoubtedly slept with a pagan king in an attempt to win his hand in marriage, who hid her identity as a Jew for over five years and violated the dietary laws of God. Can such a woman be considered a heroine of Scripture? And finally, can a book that ends in the unethical physical slaughter of 75,000 Gentiles be considered ethically valid in the eyes of God? These and other questions led Martin Luther to hate the book because of its "heathen unnaturalities." And yet there is far more here than meets the eye.

The title of the book is Esther because Esther is the most prominent character in the Book. Other books that follow this method of assigning a title include Job, Joshua, Jonah, Ezra, Nehemiah, et. al...And so we find Esther, her Persian name, it means "star." Hadassah is her Hebrew name given to her by her father and mother and it means "myrtle" after the famous "myrtle" trees native to Babylon (2:7). These trees were transplanted to the land of Israel by the returning exiles. The myrtle tree came to be a symbol of the Jewish people living among the Gentiles¹ and Esther became the embodiment of this symbol.

The book of Esther was placed in the OT canon among five books known to the Jews as the Megilloth or the Rolls along with the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations and Ecclesiastes. These books were read at the Feasts of Israel. Esther was read at the Feast of Purim which was established because of the events in this book.

But can this book that doesn't even mention God once be considered a part of the canon of Scripture? First, it is possible that the Song of Solomon does not contain the name of God either, except perhaps in 8:6 where a word is heavily debated as to whether it is a shortened form of God's name or not. Second, even though the name of God is not mentioned once, it is apparent throughout the book that the finger of God is present. Why His name is not explicitly mentioned is a subject of intense debate but the fact that the book presents the "behind the scenes" work of God is agreed upon by almost all. Even Mordecai in chapter 4 detected that God's providential hand may be at work in establishing Esther as Queen. Third, perhaps the fact that the events took place in Persia rather than the land of Israel explains in part why God's name is absent. In the end the difficulty of God's name not being mentioned is not an unconquerable obstacle.

But can a book with such ethical absurdities committed by the main characters of the book be considered a part of God's canon of Scripture? Esther, it must be admitted, desired to spend a night with a pagan king who was an avid Zoroastrian worshipper. Furthermore she hid her Jewish identity from her husband for at least five years. Her uncle Mordecai did not fare much better. He did nothing to stop her from entering the king's harem. However, maybe there is an explanation for why God used these unethical Jews that relates not to them but to Him. Perhaps what is at stake is not them but His own integrity.

But what about the unethical acts of the Jews in killing 75,000 Gentiles? Did the God of the Bible actually endorse this? First, in all actuality the Jews were defending themselves against their enemies and not launching an unprovoked attack. Second, the Jews exercised self-restraint by not plundering their attackers. Third, the lesson of the Flood is that no sinful man deserves to live on the earth. As God has promised His covenant people Israel an everlasting existence so anyone who tries to annihilate the Jews will be defeated.

But can a book that has so many historical errors be considered a part of the canon of Scripture? For example, we are told that secular history never mentions Vashti or Esther or Mordecai or Haman. First, must every person in the Bible be attested to by secular history before we grant their historical existence? Surely such standards are not applied among secular historians

anywhere other than the Bible. This reveals an anti-biblical bias. Second, it has been shown that the name Vashti could be a transliteration of *Amestris*, the name Herodotus gives to Ahaseurus' first queen. Third, Mordecai is mentioned in 2 Maccabees in connection with the Feast of Purim. Further, the name *Marduka*, from which Mordecai derives, is mentioned in a cuneiform tablet as a high official in the court at Susa during the early years of Ahaseurus' reign. It is unlikely that there would have been two Mordecai's in his government. Also secular historians claim that the statement in 1:19 and 8:8 that "the laws of the Medes and Persians could not be altered" is never confirmed by secular history. However, ancient historian Diodorus Siculus gives an account during the reign of Darius III that evidences the fact that the laws of the Persians could not be repealed. Another claim of secular historians is that Esther was never the queen of Ahaseurus because Herodotus wrote that "the Queen might be selected only from seven of the noblest Persian families" and of course she was a Jew. However, Herodotus also writes "that Xerxes [another name for Ahaseurus] sought consolation in his harem after his defeat at Salamis." This fits well the situation in 2:16 and would set the stage for Esther becoming his Queen due to his banishment of Vashti. A final criticism of the historicity of Esther is the failure of the NT authors to quote the book of Esther. However, several other OT books whose canonicity is never questioned are not quoted in the NT either; Song of Solomon, Obadiah and Nahum being examples.

Positively, in favor of the historicity of the book, the author cites many, many details of names, places, titles, functions of officers, etc...and such details are not customary for someone writing a mythical account. Second, the description of King Xerxes is fitting from all that we know of him from secular history. In the end, isn't it enough that the Lord Jesus Christ endorsed the entire OT canon? For the conservative Bible believing Christian and the orthodox Jew it is enough.

Alright, we've dealt with the title of the book and the objections to the book now we turn to the author of the book. Who wrote Esther? We don't know for sure. The author does not identify him or herself. Nor did the author of Hebrews identify himself. In the case of Esther the author evidences tremendous knowledge. He evidences an intimate knowledge of Persian laws and customs, an intimate knowledge of detailed events that occurred in the king's palace, an exacting knowledge of official government titles, military

titles and what functions each officer was responsible for, the relationship of Mordecai and Esther, the relationship of Haman and his friends, the physical layout of the fortress of Susa, the palace, the court, the king's quarters, the women's quarters, the garden, the courtyards, the treasury and the city of Susa itself including the square and the main street. So while we don't know the name of the author we do know they were very close to these events. First, the Jews postulated Mordecai. This view is seen in the writings of Josephus. The evidence against Mordecai is first, that the last chapter indicates that his career was already completed when the book was written. This objection could be answered by suggesting that 10:1-3 was an emendation by another author much like the last chapter of Deuteronomy was not written by Moses but another. The second objection is that the praise of Mordecai throughout the book is not befitting the character of someone like Mordecai. However, an answer to this objection is that Mordecai's character is highly questionable. Evidence for Mordecai as the author is that he surely meets the requirements of knowing so many details and having intimate access to Esther who was the only one with access to certain events such as Esther 2:15. In any case we don't know for sure that Mordecai was the author though it is possible. Second, others have postulated Esther since she would have had access to all the details included in the book. The chief objection to Esther is that she was a woman and it was not common for females to write in patriarchal societies. However, Esther is stated in 9:29 and 31-32 to have co-authored a letter with Mordecai to all the Jews of the Persian Empire. The Scripture says, "The command of Esther established these customs for Purim, and it was written in the book." So it is possible that Esther and Mordecai co-authored the book. Third, some have suggested Ezra or Nehemiah wrote the book. But the objection is that there are too many linguistic and stylistic differences between the works of Ezra and Nehemiah for them to have written Esther. Fourth, some have suggested a younger contemporary of Mordecai. This is quite probable as this younger contemporary would have access to Esther and Mordecai and therefore be able to record so many intimate details. So probably the author was either Mordecai and Esther or a younger contemporary.

When was the book written? It had to be near to the events because whoever wrote it was either an eyewitness of the events or had direct access to eyewitnesses. From 10:2-3 it may be deduced that the author probably wrote it after the reign of Xerxes had concludedⁱⁱ and Artaxerxes had come to the

throne. Since Artaxerxes came to the throne in 465BC then it was probably written something during his reign from 465-424BC.

When did the events recorded occur? I've given you a chart outlining the Chronology of the Book of Esther. There are three time markers in the book. First, in Esther 1:3 the events begin in the "third year of" the reign of King Ahaseurus. Since Ahaseurus began to reign in 486BC then "the third year of his reign" was 483BC. So the book begins in 483BC. Second, Esther 2:16-17 indicates that Esther married King Ahaseurus "in the seventh year of his reign." The seventh year of his reign was 479/8BC. Third, Esther 3:7 begins the final events involving Haman, this was "in the twelfth year of King Ahaseurus," which was 474/3BC. So the events occurred between 483 and 473BC, a period of about ten or eleven years. The book falls within the 58 year gap between Ezra 6 and 7.

Chronology of the Book of Esther	
483BC	King Ahaseurus' military planning session in Susa (Est 1:3)
482BC	Vashti deposed
481BC	King Ahaseurus' unsuccessful military conquest against Greeks begun
480BC	Esther's arrival in Susa
479BC	Ahaseurus return to Susa and Esther's coronation as Queen (Est 2:16)
474BC	King Ahaseurus' Two Decrees (Est 3:7)
473BC	Jews defend themselves and establish Feast of Purim

As far as an outline is concerned the book divides easily into two parts. Chapters 1-5 record the Danger to the Jews, chapters 6-10 record the Deliverance of the Jews. Some authors have recognized a chiastic structure to the book that highlights God's providential "behind the scenes" work.ⁱⁱⁱ

- A** The stage set (1)
- B** The king's decree to destroy the Jews (2–3)
- C** Haman's plot to gain ascendance over Mordecai (4–5)
- D** The night the king could not sleep (6:1)
- C'** Mordecai's ascendance over Haman (6–7)
- B'** The king's decree to deliver the Jews (8–9)

A' The stage closed (10)

The center of the chiasm (**D**) is the night in which the king could not sleep. That very night the chronicle concerning Mordecai's benevolent act toward the king wherein he revealed the plot to assassinate him was read to him. When the king heard it he wondered what had been done for Mordecai. When it was revealed that nothing had been done he decided to bestow honor on him. This night turned out to be the night before Haman had decided to execute Mordecai. According to many the book hinges on this dramatic night where God's providence is most clearly seen.

The style of writing, often called genre, is narrative or historical narrative, that is, it is telling a story. Some consider Esther from the literary point of view to be one of the most outstanding examples of narrative art ever written. It moves from scene to scene and keeps the reader guessing in a dramatic unfolding of twists and turns.

Alright, now for the historical background. The book opens in the period of the Persian Empire with King Ahaseurus, also known as Xerxes ruling on the throne from the city of Susa. Persia was the second Gentile kingdom in Daniel's times of the Gentiles. The Babylonian kingdom had already passed from the scene and Cyrus the Persian, the first king of Persia had enlarged his kingdom from the Indus River in the East to Ethiopia in the West. In 538BC he granted the right of the Jews to return to the land and rebuild the Temple (Ezra 1). About 50,000 Jews returned in those early years to rebuild the Temple and establish a life in the Promised Land. These Jews were obediently identifying themselves with the theocratic program of God. However, most Jews did identify themselves with this theocratic program. Most of them remained outside the land and absent from Temple worship. They had become prosperous under the Babylonian kingdom and continued to live their lives in luxury in Persia rather than make the arduous journey to Israel. These Jews were living in disobedience to God and unconcern for God's theocratic program. This is the situation we find Mordecai and Esther living in. They were among the Jews who were living in disobedience to God and unconcern for God's theocratic program centered in the land of Israel and the Temple in Jerusalem.

They lived in the city of Susa, the winter capital of Persia where King Ahaseurus had built an elaborate winter palace. King Ahaseurus had taken the throne just three years before the events of Esther 1. Now that his throne was established he began to plot to avenge his father Darius' defeat by the Greeks at the Battle of Marathon that had occurred in 490BC. Esther 1:3 is a description of his planning session involving "all his princes and attendants, the army officers of Persia and Media, the nobles and the princes of his provinces." The 180 day banquet was where he planned to raise an army of 180,000 as well as a naval fleet to conquer the Greeks. After the planning session was complete he held a 7 day banquet for all the people. On the last day of the banquet he requested Queen Vashti's presence. When she refused he deposed her at the advice of Memucan who warned that if this rebellion was permitted by the king then women all over the Persian Empire would rebel against their husbands. The king agreed and deposed her before beginning his campaign against the Greeks. His campaign occurs between Esther 1 and 2. Initially he was successful at the famous Battle of Thermopylae where he defeated the much smaller but powerful Spartans. Then he went on to burn Athens. However, his fleet was defeated at Salamis and shortly thereafter he was defeated again at the Battle of Platea. He returns in Esther 2 a defeated king. When he remembered Vashti and what had been decreed against her the king's attendants suggested a beauty pageant including all the beautiful young virgins in Persia in order to find a queen. This aligns well with Herodotus who said that the king upon returning from defeat sought consolation in his harem. As we know from the story Esther was chosen to be queen in place of Vashti.

Thus we have the ethical dilemma of Esther and Mordecai and here I want to start dealing with this dilemma in conjunction with the dilemma of why God's name is not mentioned in the book. Now most Christians interpret Esther and Mordecai as heroes of the faith. Esther is said to be a moral woman who stood up for the rights of her people, fasting for three days and putting her life at stake by going in before the king unannounced. And every careful student of the text will observe this example of high moral character.

However, does high moral character mean someone is a believer? Jews in Christ's day spent much of their time in fasting and they were not a part of the believing remnant. And there are many Jews today of high moral character. Politically Benjamin Netanyahu has stood strong in defending his

nation as well as holding an occasional Bible study in his home. Does this make him a Jew who has accepted God's Messiah? Or nothing more than a modern Mordecai? Militarily his brother Jonathan Netanyahu, the only Israeli soldier killed in the 1979 Raid on Entebbe to rescue Jewish hostages in Uganda was a strong moral protector of his people. Does this make him a believer in God's Messiah? Or a mere modern Mordecai?

And what are we to make of the many recorded instances of Esther's ungodly activity. Already noted was the fact that she and Mordecai were living in disobedience to God and His theocratic program for Israel which centered in the land of Israel and the Temple in Jerusalem. They had little or no concern for God and thought only of continuing their luxurious lives in Persia while climbing the political ladder right into the royal house. In 2:8 Esther willingly goes to the palace with all the other young virgins to be taken into the king's house with intent on becoming the wife of a pagan king who was an avid Zoroastrian worshipper. This was contrary to the Law of Moses showing she did not respect the authority of God's Law. In 2:9 she violates the dietary laws by eating unclean foods showing again no respect for God's Law. She is no Daniel! In 2:14-16 she willingly takes her turn to go in and sleep with the king after who knows how many other virgins. In 2:20, after becoming his wife, she conceals her Jewish identity from her husband for over five years. We can only draw the unthinkable conclusion that she must have worshipped in the Zoroastrian way! It is because of these and other failings that Martin Luther said, "I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities." And while most Christians have not been so critical, they nevertheless remain, understandably, quite confused.

Further, there are no references to the Law of Moses, no references to the Temple or Jewish worship, there is but one reference to Jerusalem in 2:6 in passing, there is no mention of prayer, there is one reference to a fast and one to a feast and both are quite general. These observations show that the Jews living in disobedience outside the land and without concern for God's theocratic program maintained only a few religious habits.

And it is here that I think we find the very reason God's name is not found in the book. They did not concern themselves with God but God was concerned

with them. God had made covenant promises to them. God is faithful to His covenant promises made to Israel in the Abrahamic Covenant even when Israel is in unbelief. And it must be remembered that the extent of the Persian Empire included the land of Israel, all Jews whether they had identified themselves with God's covenant program in Israel or not and lived out among the Gentiles in the Persian Empire. So if the king made a decree for His entire kingdom it would affect all the Jews in the inhabited earth.

And therefore I take it that God raised up two ungodly heroes to save His people from utter annihilation. As one author put it, "they were raised up by God, but they were not godly." When God raises up such Jews as He has done even in our modern times He does not associate His name with them, rather He works providentially, behind the scenes for their preservation in view of the covenant and ultimate deliverance! As Matthew Henry said, "...though the name be not in it, the finger of God is, directing many minute events for the bringing about of his people's deliverance."^{iv}

The book of Esther gives us a blueprint for the doctrine of providence. Think of all the details that demonstrate the finger of God in this book. Why did Vashti refuse the king's request to appear if not to pave the way for Esther to receive the crown? Why was Esther born with such remarkable feminine beauty if not to make her the most delightful virgin in the entire Persian kingdom? Why was Mordecai at the gate the day the king's conspirators revealed their plot if not to later effect Mordecai's exaltation? Why was the king unable to sleep the very night before Haman planned to execute Mordecai if not to have the chronicle of Mordecai's good will toward the king read to him? Is all this just happenstance or is all of this the finger of God bringing about the deliverance of His people in accordance with His covenant purposes through two ungodly Jews?

This is why I think the true hero of the book is not Esther or Mordecai at all, but the unsung, unnamed Hero, God Himself! And the doctrine He reveals is providence; the idea that *God is at work "behind the scenes" in all the details of life in order to bring about His perfect plan whether humans acknowledge Him or not.* And while many Christians deny this saying God is only concerned about the big things in life and not the little details how does that statement comport with the message of the book of Esther? Was it a little detail that King Ahasuerus happened to be drunk when he called for Vashti?

Was it a little detail that Esther was so beautiful? Was it a little detail that Mordecai overheard the plot to kill the king? Were all these little details really unimportant to God? When we ask that question in light of Esther we are left with how obviously fallacious that notion is of God. And worse, is that not the notion of the pagans of their gods? Cicero said, “The gods are concerned with weighty matters and ignore what is inconsequential.” And yet how many times have you heard Christians say the same thing about God. The kind of thinking that God cares about the weighty matters but not the inconsequential ones is wildly contrary to Scripture. Instead the Book of Esther is dedicated to the sole purpose of proving that God works “behind the scenes” in all the little details of life in order to bring about His perfect plan. What we may think is an unimportant detail may be a critical detail in bringing about God’s plan for history. And who are we to decide what is weighty and what is inconsequential? We are in no position to decide these things. Surely the book of Esther is a warning against thinking God doesn’t really care about the little things.

Now this doctrine of providence is, as I said, God’s behind the scenes work for his nation while they are in unbelief. This, I would argue, is the way God is working among the nation Israel today. They have returned to the land of Israel but they are in unbelief. The vast majority don’t really care for God but God does still care for them. He has made His Abrahamic Covenant with them. And therefore on all five occasions when Arabs attacked them God providentially gave them victory. This is the way God rules the nation Israel when they are in unbelief. He works behind the scenes such that what appears to be a natural victory is actually more than that. This is how He preserves the nation Israel until His ultimate deliverance.

So in conclusion tonight, the book is not really about a heroine named Esther or a hero named Mordecai, it’s about the unnamed God who is providentially working “behind the scenes” for the preservation of Israel according to His Abrahamic Covenant. God is faithful. The application for us is that *we should recognize that God is providentially in control of all things in history whether great or small to us*. This does not mean we should go crazy trying to decide whether to wear red socks or green but rather the simple worshipful recognition that every detail of life really is important in some way unknown to us but known to God. This is a truth to be celebrated.

“The writer composed the book in order to accomplish several purposes. First, the book was written in order to reveal God’s faithfulness to His people despite their disobedience.

Third, the book was written to provide a general record of God’s preservation of His people living outside the land during the postexilic era. Fourth, the book was written in order to provide an explanation for the Feast of *Purim* (3:7; 9:24, 26; 2 Macc 15:36).^v Such an explanation was needed since *Torah* nowhere mandated this feast (Lev 23). Fifth, the book was written not only to explain the origin of this feast but also to encourage the Jews to regularly celebrate it. Sixth, the book was written to serve as a warning against anti-Semitism.”

ⁱ Constable, T. (2003). *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Ne 13:30). Galaxie Software.

ⁱⁱ Xerxes was assassinated in 464BC.

ⁱⁱⁱ Constable, T. (2003). *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Ne 13:30). Galaxie Software.

Andy Woods, *Esther Argument*.

^{iv} Constable, T. (2003). *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Ne 13:30). Galaxie Software.

^v This feast derives its name from the Assyrian word for “lot,” which is *puru*.

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