

Esther (pt. I)

The Hidden Hand in history

*So when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will **hide my eyes** from you.*

ISAIAH 1:15

*For Thou hast **hidden Thy face** from us, and hast delivered us into the power of our iniquities.* ISAIAH 64:7

*Truly, Thou art a **God who hides Himself**, O God of Israel, Savior!*

ISAIAH 45:15

Is Esther out of place in the Bible?

... for many this little book is a puzzle, for it seems to be out of place in the Bible. There is no mention in it of the name of God; there is no reference to worship or to faith; there is no prediction of the Messiah; there is no mention of heaven or hell -- in short there is **nothing religious** about it, **at least on the surface**. [Ray C. Stedman *The Queen and I* 7 (emphasis added)]

The *Name of God* is not found here ... a *Hidden Hand* shifts the scenes. Only the Eye of faith sees the Divine Factor in human history, but to the attentive observer all history is a Burning Bush aflame with the **Mysterious Presence**. [A.T. Pierson, *Keys to the Word* (1887), p. 36 (emphasis added)]

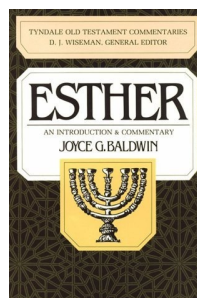
3 PROBLEMS FOR JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES (and other unbelievers!)

1. Why is the Book of Esther included in the New World Translation?

Esther is, among the generality of Jews, the best known of all the Books of the Bible. ... It is a Book which exemplifies, vividly and concisely, the eternal miracle of Jewish survival. [S. Goldman *Esther (Soncino Books of the Bible)* 193]

Not only was the Book accepted as part of the Canon, but it was regarded by many of the Jews as peculiarly sacred. It held a place in their view only second to the five books of Moses. Their great writer Maimonides declares that when Messiah comes only two portions of the Old Testament will survive and be used, these being the Pentateuch and the Book of Esther. [J. Elder Cumming *The Book of Esther (Devotional Commentary)* 37]

From the moral point of view the book has little to commend it to civilized persons enjoying the benefits of peace and freedom, whatever their race. [R.H. Pfeiffer *Introduction to the Old Testament* 747]

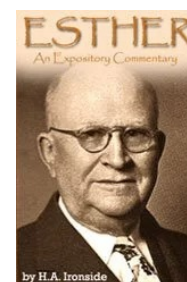


The questionable character and spiritual fidelity of Esther and Mordecai were noticed even by the first translators of the book, who attempted to exonerate them by adding explanation. A translation of the Esther story was made into the Greek language in the second or first century B.C. In the Greek version of the story, Esther announces that she in fact had not violated the food laws and that she abhorred "the bed of the uncircumcised." [Karen Jobes *Esther (NIV Application Commentary)*, ebook 144]

... there has been no lack of detractors, who would recommend its exclusion from the canon. The most famous of these is Martin Luther, who in his *Table Talk* said of 2 Maccabees and of Esther, "I wish they did not exist at all; for they Judaize too much and have much heathen perverseness." [Joyce G. Baldwin *Esther* 51]

2. Were Esther and Mordecai Jehovah's Witnesses? How were Esther, Mordecai and even the writer "contaminated" by pagan connections?

"The names of Mordecai and Esther," says Professor Sayce, "are Babylonian in origin. Mordecai is the Babylonian Marduka 'devoted to Merodach.' Esther is 'Istar,' the name of the great Babylonian goddess, who became Ashtoreth in the West. ... it is clear that Jews who still held Fast to the worship of their national God, were nevertheless not averse to being called after the names of the Babylonian deities. [John Urquhart *The Inspiration and Accuracy of the Holy Scriptures* 185]



There is no reason to believe that this [Purim] was a divinely instituted festival, like the seven feasts of Jehovah in Lev. xxiii. It was simply the grateful remembrance of a rejoicing people for signal mercy vouchsafed at a time of deepest distress. Naturally the Jews in the land did not as readily observe it as those scattered among the heathen. History tells us that it was some years ere it became a universal season of festivity among the Hebrews, and many more elapsed before a distinctively religious character was given to it. But, as commanded by Mordecai and Esther, all was in perfect keeping with the times. In full accord with their Lo-ammi [*not my people* -- Hosea 1:9] condition, God's name is in no wise connected with it. [Harry Ironside *Notes on the Book of Esther* 108]

The verses in Esther (ix. 19,22) which declared it a "*yom-tob*," a "good day," also add that it became one of feasting, and of sending gifts one to another. Indeed, it may be maintained that the observance of Christmas has been largely moulded on the customary keeping of Purim by the Jews. It became the Jewish Carnival -- men masquerading as clowns and as women, with semi-religious plays, and ending often by the burning in effigy of the enemy, Haman. [J. Elder Cumming 41-42]

Even if the manner of celebration reveals some pagan links, this would in no wise deny the historicity of the event that Purim celebrates, any more than certain pagan accretions to the Christmas and Easter observances disprove the historicity of the events these two days celebrate. [F.B. Huey, Jr. *Expositor's Bible Commentary* Vol.4 792]

Those who, in modern times, deny any Christian interest in political processes cannot have read with sensitivity the stories of not only Mordecai, but also of Joseph and Daniel. A conflict of interest may indeed come, and *has* come to many. But each of us, until it does, can take to ourselves the exhortation which in God's name the prophet Jeremiah addressed to the exiles in Babylon to 'seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you.' (Jer. 29:7) [J.G. McConville *Daily Study Bible - Esther* 164]

3. Whose faithfulness is the Subject of the Book of Esther?

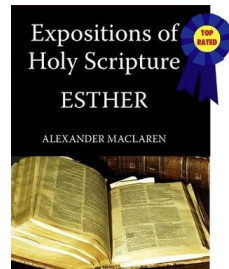
The book implies that even when God's people are far from him and disobedient, they are still the object of his concern and love, and that he is working out his purpose through them (4:14). [F.B. Huey, Jr. 794]

This book is a striking record of the divine providence. In the foregoing books [Ezra-Nehemiah], we learn how God watched over the Jews who returned from captivity. This tells us how those who remained still in exile, scattered through the great heathen

world, were marvelously preserved. Though the name of God does not occur in this book, yet his hand is everywhere manifest. ... verily our God sometimes hides himself. [F.B. Meyer *Bible Commentary* (rep. 1979) 210]

Yet even if the names of Esther and Mordecai are theonymic and allude to their assimilation into Babylonian culture, the outcome of the story suggests to the Babylonian pagans that Marduk and Ishtar are subservient to the purposes of the unnamed God of the Jews. The victory of the Jews in this story would then function as a polemic against the pagan deities. [Karen Jobes *Esther (NIV Application Commentary, ebook 133)*]

There is not much audible religion in either, but in this lesson Mordecai impressively enforces his assurance that Israel cannot perish, and his belief in Providence setting people in their places for great unselfish ends; and Esther is ready to die, if need be, in trying to save her people, and thinks that fasting and prayer will help her in her daring attempt. These two cousins, unlike in so much, were alike in their devotion to Israel; and though they said little about their religion, they acted it, which is better. ... Success or failure is an alternative that must not be thought of when we are asking ourselves, 'Ought I to do this?' ... we do what we know to be right. [Alexander Maclaren *Esther (Expositions of Holy Scripture)* 287, 291]



ATTACKS BY MODERN (AND POST-MODERN) CRITICS

This herding of virgins offends our modern sensibilities, and feminist critics especially see it as a demeaning and sexist affront to women that the biblical author should have denounced. However, Herodotus also reports that five hundred young boys were gathered each year and castrated to serve as eunuchs in the Persian court. One might argue that the young women actually got the better deal. The gathering of the virgins, whether consensual or not, is not sexism. It is a brutal act typical of how power was used in the Persian court. Everyone, whether male or female, was at the disposal of the king's personal whims. [Karen Jobes *Esther (NIV Application Commentary, ebook 133)*]

Esther and Mordecai's first actions distinguish them significantly from other biblical heroes and heroines, who would rather risk death than compromise their obedience of the Torah. Rather than stand up for their faith in the one, true God, Mordecai instructs Esther to conceal her faith, and she complies. This compliance is viewed by some as a godly example of female submission to male headship. But the author does not commend Esther, and it is certainly questionable that a woman should obey male authority if and when that means violating the Word of the Lord. [Karen Jobes *Esther (NIV Application Commentary, ebook 138)*]

FOR NEXT STUDY: Meditate on:

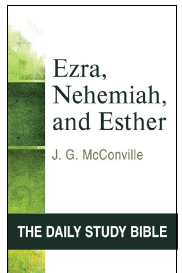
1. Why is the NAME missing from an inspired book?
2. Is the 'invisible presence' only since 1914?
3. Are the Abrahamic covenant blessings curses cancelled by Israel's disobedience?

Divine Name not upon them, but Divine Hand is!

The silence about God is quite deliberate, *not* to make the point that he is inactive in human situations, but on the contrary, that **he is hidden behind all events**. This is the implication of the numerous coincidental occurrences in the book. The story can become, therefore, a powerful statement about the reality of God in a world from which he *appears* to be absent. [J.G. McConville *Daily Study Bible - Esther* 153, bold emphasis added]

From our record ... it would be impossible to prove that they remembered the Lord in it all, and gave the glory to Him. This, however, is but in keeping with the character of the book. There can be no question as to their hearts going out in gratitude to the God of their fathers who had so mercifully interfered on their behalf; but in describing their joy, as in making known their former sorrow, His name is unmentioned in the record, because they are not where He can publicly own them. How loudly does this very silence speak to every opened ear! God could do all we have been noting in our study of this book for His people who **refused to gather to the place where He has set His name** (and where a few "afflicted and poor" ones were trying amidst many discouragements to rebuild His ruined temple and to order their ways according as "they found it written"), but though He so graciously watches over them in His providence, and loves them unto the end, He nevertheless takes care that the inspired record of it all shall not so much as mention His name. ... It is the unique evidence of God's unfailing care to a faithless people. [Harry Ironside 106,115]

These Jews in Persia apparently showed no desire to return to Palestine. They did not wish to leave Persia and set out again for the promised land. **Their theocratic spirit**, we may say, **was weak**. Yet they were still God's chosen people. It was not through them, however, that the promised salvation was to come to the world, but despite that fact, God had not rejected them. He would still watch over them and protect them from their foes and from unjust oppression. And from them there would come the great feast of Purim. But, since these Jews were no longer in the theocratic line, so to speak, the *Name* of the Covenant God is not associated with them. The book of Esther, then, serves the purpose of showing how Divine Providence overrules all things; even in a distant, far country, God's people are yet in His hands. But since they are in this distant, far country, and not in the land of Promise, His Name is not mentioned. [E. J. Young *An Introduction to the Old Testament* 349, bold emphasis added]



* * *

'Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?' Esther 4:14

The source of all endowments of position, possessions, or capacities, is God. His purpose in them all goes far beyond the happiness of the receiver. Dignities and gifts of every sort are ours for use in carrying out His great designs of good to our fellows. Esther was made queen, not that she might live in luxury and be the plaything of a king, but that she might serve Israel. Power is duty. Responsibility is measured by capacity. Obligation attends advantages. Gifts are burdens. All men are stewards, and God gives His servants their 'talents,' not for selfish squandering or hoarding, but to trade with, and to pay the profits to Him. ... A soul that dares death in obedience to His will and in dependence on His aid, demonstrates its godliness more forcibly in silence than by many professions. [Alexander Maclaren *Esther* 289, 290]