

A Reflection on the Book of Esther

On January 6, 2021, an insurrection occurred in the United States. It was an attempt by right-wing people to overturn a lawful election and install their “loser,” Donald Trump, as President. Fortunately, the attempt failed and those who participated were severely punished. That’s the story that any American on the street would hear. It’s the official narrative. But there’s an inside story. It’s this: the Democrats in Washington planned and staged the event to block President Trump from being re-elected. A half dozen Representatives in Congress were planning to introduce motions to delay certification of the election, which would allow certain of the states to reverse their electoral votes. So Congress would then have to choose the President, and Republicans had the winning number of votes. The “insurrection” was really a pre-planned event so an emergency could be called to block any motions, so Biden could be declared President.

There’s an inside story to almost everything that happens. Nothing just spontaneously happens. Whatever happens, happens because somebody planned it and caused it to happen. A lust for power necessitates schemes, and then lies and deceptions are needed to hide the schemes. The “inside story,” when it gets told, reveals the truthful narrative. The Book of Esther is an inside story. In miniature, it shows how our sovereign God controls all history. The Book reveals the “inside story.” In a sense, the entire Bible is itself an “inside story” revealing God at work in human history to fulfill His purposes. Most regular church-attenders are familiar with the Esther narrative. A very brief review here will suffice.

The story takes place in Persia in the 400’s B.C. during the reign of Xerxes, where captive Jews were living in exile. It happened that an incident arose resulting in alienated Gentile Queen Vashti getting deposed. And it happened that lovely Jewish Hadassah, aka Esther, was chosen to replace her. Esther had been raised (?adopted) by a Benjaminite Jew named Mordecai. It happened that Mordecai learned of a conspiracy to assassinate the king. Mordecai told Esther who told the king, saving his life. It also happened that the prime minister of Persia, Haman, outraged that the Jew Mordecai wouldn’t honor him, plotted to have not only Mordecai but all Jews everywhere put to death on a certain day. Mordecai petitioned Queen Esther to use her status to deliver her people from annihilation. Esther’s beautiful words are memorable, “I will go to the king. . . And if I perish, I perish.” While she was planning how to do that, it happened that one night the king couldn’t sleep, so he asked for boring court records to be read to him. He then learned how Mordecai had saved his life and desired that Mordecai be honored. Incredibly, Haman thought the honors were supposed to be for him and suggested appropriate honors. But Haman was humiliated and outraged when he learned it was Mordecai being honored. At a banquet, Esther revealed that Haman had plotted to have her people annihilated. In a rage, the king left the table while Haman begged Esther for mercy; but it happened that in so doing, he fell onto her! At this very moment [!!!] the king re-entered and saw Haman *on* Queen Esther, and he had Haman hanged. Mordecai wisely suggested to the king a plan to prevent the murder of all Jews, and the plan was successful. Mordecai was made Prime Minister of Persia.

There were several points in time when the existence of the people of Israel hung by a thread. One was when Pharaoh’s army approached the fleeing people of Israel trapped against the Red Sea. Another was when Jezebel’s daughter, Athaliah, the queen of Judah, attempted to destroy the entire royal family, the line of David; but one, Joash, was hidden and saved from Athaliah’s demonic rage. And another was when the Maccabees revolted against Antiochus, emperor of Syria. Another was when Jesus, the promised King, hung dead on a cross. And another was this story in the Book of Esther. In each instance, God intervened powerfully yet invisibly to save His people.

What to make of this story? A lot! First, let’s recognize that it is eschatologic. It anticipates the yet future great rescue of the Jews from the demonic Anti-Christ at the end of the Great Tribulation when Christ returns. Second, it teaches that weakness and reliance on God is how we win; we don’t win by forceful self-defense. Death was a real possibility for courageous Esther; she put herself in real mortal danger to save others. But God is trustworthy and has purposes to be fulfilled. Our role is simply to trustingly obey Him – and be thrilled to watch Him at work. Third, it teaches that blessings and cursings of the Gentile nations are determined by their attitude toward the Jews, in fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12:3). Although Israel is under discipline and in exile, the Abrahamic covenant is still in effect. God is always watching over His beloved chosen people to protect them because He has a role for them in the future, and because He has made promises that He faithfully keeps. He expects the Gentile nations to honor Him and His people. Fifth, Esther reminds us of the role of the seed of the woman who crushes the head of the Serpent (Genesis 3:15). Esther is the woman and Haman is the serpent’s offspring. The major person God used in this salvation narrative is . . . a woman. A woman at the outset of history got humanity into trouble; here a woman gets us out. And who does Esther represent? If anyone, it would have to be the Nation of Israel, from whom came the Savior, the new and obedient Israel. Sixth, the submissivity of the woman Esther is on display; yet the power she yields is astonishing. Unlike Vashti, who proudly got her way and lost her

status, Esther willingly and humbly submits to Mordecai and to the king, and as a result all the Jews *everywhere* are saved from destruction.

There's more. Xerxes is a fool, from the beginning to the end. The text mocks him. The "Times of the Gentiles" is a time when godless pagan rulers and godless pagan people have been given authority on earth. And what they do with their authority is laughable. But there's another Kingdom, the invisible Kingdom of God, and that's the real power on earth. Nevertheless, respect to the king is due him. There's a great conflict going on in Esther, indeed in the whole Bible: an earthly kingdom versus a heavenly one. And although to finite mortals it appears that the earthly one is the only and the powerful one, in reality it's the heavenly one that sovereignly rules. The conflict is actually more of a holy war: It's God against all those who have declared themselves to be His enemies by refusing to honor Him and/or rebelling against Him or His will.

And there are the reversals in this story (lots of them). Xerxes reversed his decision. The very one Haman despised, Mordecai, is the one Haman had to honor. Haman got the reverse of what he desired: he was hanged on the very gallows he had built to have Mordecai hanged on. Instead of being hanged, Mordecai got to be Prime Minister. The Jews were saved instead of being annihilated. The ones determined to wreak evil on the Jews suffered the evil themselves. Because God is sovereign, His will is imposed on earth regardless what humans will. God's great purposes for His creation are necessarily fulfilled, whatever we finite people suppose is how things should be. However bleak and despairing circumstances may be for God's people, God is in control and He is able to save. He rights all wrongs. He blesses in the end.

But let's discuss "inside stories." God is doing a secret work in the Esther story. The Book of Esther refers to Xerxes almost 200 times, but not once to God. There's not once any mention of the Mosaic Law, nor of prayer to God, nor of *anything* supernatural. Yet the supernatural is there, hidden between the lines of every page. The Jews in Persia at the time would have had no idea what was going on in the palace. Those in the palace had no idea what was going on either, because God's will is invisible. How did Haman just happen to fall onto Esther? Was he pushed? Who pushed him? How did the king just happen at that very moment to return to see Haman lying on Esther? The only way we know is because of this revelation, the Book of Esther. God silently, unobtrusively, not only observes and superintends all history, He controls all history with split-second timing.

What appears to be one kind of story turns out, when we know the "inside" part, to be a totally different story. The whole Bible is like that. What appears to the person who doesn't know Scripture to be one kind of story, a story such as that known by Hindus or animists or Western atheists, etc, is totally different than what we know from understanding the Bible. The Bible is a revelation; it reveals the real, true, inside story, a story that's from God's perspective. Indeed the Book of Esther is like the Bible, having first a prelude that includes prosperity, then rapidly descent into conflict and tragedy and disaster, which occupies most of the story, but then it has a totally happy ending. I'm arguing that just as the Book of Esther reveals the inside story, a story of God's providential grace, of His miraculous if invisible workings in human events, and of His love and care for His beloved people, so is the entire Bible. If we didn't know the Bible's story, we'd never know the true, inside" story. We'd be in total darkness.

Now back to January 6. What concerns me the most about that "inside story" is that all the Republicans in Congress knew it but (and it's now years since the event) refused to say a word to anyone. They kept it a secret from the public. Huh? Does truth not mean anything? In my estimation, the Republican congressmen are just as contemptible as those Democrats in power who planned the event. Their silence makes them participants in that whole sordid affair. I mention this because Christians who know the Bible's true story, especially the really great and wonderful part that we call the Gospel, yet who keep silent about it are just as contemptible as those silent Republican congressmen. Does truth not mean anything? We know that God has exquisite control over all the details in history. Yet we keep God's workings in history a secret. He's invisible, but we know from the revelation in Scripture that He's there and what He does. Worse, we keep the Gospel of salvation to ourselves. We know that true story about Jesus; and we've received super-wonderful blessing by knowing it. But we don't care about anybody else, whether they know it or not or receive blessing or not. We don't care that a loving God *wants* His inside story made public. What's wrong with us? May God have mercy on us.

And hey, by the way: Can we accept as God's will, as His deliberate intervention in human affairs, that Joe Biden was elected President in 2020? But . . . Someone will protest: "Just as God used Esther and Mordecai to accomplish His will, we do our part by being engaged in politics." My response is No, that's not correct. God sovereignly uses whomever He chooses, however He chooses, to control the flow of history. And the direction that history takes in this, the Church Age, is His *un-revealed* will. God's revealed, express will for the Church is Gospel outreach. Besides, America is not Israel.