

## Esther, Judges, the Jewish People, and the Church

The Hebrew Scriptures (that is, the books of the Old Testament) are essential reading for the modern evangelical. But we need to think deeply about them, not merely try to read thru them quickly to get the story line. Two books in particular are exceedingly relevant today. I need to discuss this because there's massive ignorance—in the Church!—as to what's going on in the world with reference to Israel. I'll do the Book of Esther first, then Judges.

1. We too easily misread the Book of Esther. We see it as a glorious narrative of God's sovereign, providential although silent work to preserve His people while they're in Exile; and its narrative explains the continuing celebration of the feast of Purim. So yes, all that is there. But that's not the reason this book is in the Bible. There's something vastly more important on this scroll.

The Jews in Susa, Persia, are there as punishment. The Nation of Israel was no more. The Jews had been thrown from their land and from the presence of their God because of persistent idolatry and wickedness. They're in Exile, scattered among the pagan Gentiles of the world, there to suffer persecution and hatred. In the Book of Daniel, certain of the Jews remained faithful to God, and God not only preserved them but revealed precious truths to them about the future. Not so, though, in Esther. Here, the Jews are assimilated. (Note that they abandoned the feast of Passover.) They don't even know to be dependent on God. They are concerned only with their own preservation. And so they put human-invented strategies into effect and cared not that it resulted in massive killing of (not innocent) Persians. Their concern was selfish: Survival. And their national identity as Jews is what emerges as the theme of this book. At the end, the Jews of Persia were celebrating with feasting and drinking – exactly what Daniel refused to do in order to be faithful to God.

Why review all this? Because this story explains what happened when the Son became incarnate and visited His people. Jews rejected Jesus because they continued to be concerned about their national identity. They still knew nothing of being dependent on God—not for survival nor for salvation. What began in Susa, as narrated in the Book of Esther, fully blossomed at the time of Christ with the gravest mistake, the most serious failing in all history, rejecting their own God.

And so it continues today. There are two aspects to it: (i) The people of Israel are at war with their (not innocent) Arab neighbors, killing them, putting their human might on full display. They are not dependent on God to preserve them for they know nothing of such humility and faithfulness. Their concern is their national identity. They have no concern for God's purpose for their existence, which is to take the knowledge of the Creator God and His offer of blessing to the world of Gentile nations; they don't even know that this is their calling. As at Susa long ago, they just want to party.

And (ii), Jews in the Western world today are also fully assimilated. Their concern is their national identity. They know nothing of being dependent on God. It's the Book of Esther being re-enacted in the here-and-now. They don't have a clue what Exile is or means. When anti-semitism erupts, Jews are shocked, asking "Why is this happening?" They do not and cannot grasp why God had called them into existence and preserves them. They want only to party, to live as they please.

2. The Book of Judges is sordid, tragic. I have difficulty reading it. It's a story of unfaithful Israelites who are repeatedly attacked by the surrounding Gentile nations. Why? Because they failed to obey Torah. They failed to honor their God who took them as His own beloved people. So God sent Gentile marauders to discipline them. Yet, each time in desperation they called out to God for deliverance, and He responded with *chesed*, that is, with mercy and covenant faithfulness. And He delivered them. They didn't deserve deliverance. But God did it anyway, out of love and for His own Name's sake.

The Nation of Israel today, as faithless as ever, is in the very same situation as back in the days of the Judges, being attacked by their Gentile neighbors. But there's no unique person, no "judge," to deliver them now. They're struggling, doing what they can. But it will get worse. As the Book of Judges documented Israel's

failures, we can anticipate that modern Israel too will fail. The prophet Zechariah, probably reflecting on the Book of Judges, prophecies that when things get really desperate, and their very existence could end, they will call out to God for deliverance, and Jesus then will return to deliver them.

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The Jews in Germany in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were happily assimilated into that society. Those Jews even were proud of their German-ness. It never occurred to them what would happen in just a few years under Nazi rule. It was a reprise of the Book of Esther, with Hitler as another Haman; only this time it was without God's miraculous deliverance. It was also a reprise of the Book of Judges, only without a deliverance. Why should assimilated Jews in America today expect something different? And how about assimilated Christians? They too are proud of their American-ness. If they refuse to heed the warnings of Scripture, why should they expect anything different? God is dangerous.

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The Gentile nations of the world are in rebellion against God. They're in the iron grip of Satan and His wicked minions. Violence, hatred, idolatry and wickedness characterize all of them, including America. (If Christians in America can't see that, it's because they're too busy partying.) But God has certain ones, the elect, among the Gentile nations and He desires that they know Him and be blessed. And in the future, when Jesus, Israel's Messiah/King, returns, all the Gentile nations will be under His rule and be wonderfully blessed. The call of Abraham was for this purpose, and Abraham's offspring fulfill it.

Israel is now in Exile. Israel will remain in Exile until Jesus comes, that is, returns. Yes, Israel exists today as a nation, but their God is not with them. And they're not a fully autonomous nation; their existence is precarious. But Jews have to be there in the land for end-time prophecies to be fulfilled. Jews must be there for Jesus to return to! And return He will, and it'll be soon. But what does this mean for us, besides watching and waiting for His Return?

Let's understand that Jesus is the embodiment of an ideal, perfect, obedient Israel. The Son came to earth as Israel to fulfill the purposes for which Israel was called. So He came to live the righteous life Israel was to live and to deliver Gentiles from Satan and so to defeat Satan. And He came to take upon Himself His nation's sins so that they could dwell in God's presence and be blessed. And so the followers of Jesus imitate His Person and His work. His followers are here to continue His mission of reaching out to the Gentile nations of the world with the invitation to enter the future Kingdom for eternal blessing, which is what Israel was called to do. His followers are Jesus' hands and feet to go obediently into the world of Gentile nations—despite the risk—to fulfill God's desire of saving His beloved humanity from sin and judgment. His followers are not here to party.

Dear Reader: The Church in America is not as it should be, just as the Jews in Persia were not as they should have been. And assimilated Jews everywhere today are not as they should be. The will to party, to enjoy this life, and the indifference to God's purposes are appalling. Christian, beware! Assimilation is deadly. It results in spiritual blindness and God's just discipline. The Book of Esther is a farce, a tragic farce. Let's not repeat that in our evangelical churches.

The Church in America also is increasingly being assaulted by an ungodly world system and by ungodly people, just as the Israelites were in the time of the Judges. It'll soon get much worse. But believers striving for godliness, for Christlikeness, have a deliverer! Jesus. Let's not fear the onslaught but count it a privilege to suffer along with Jesus and so, by trusting in God, be eventually vindicated. Israel, during the period of the Judges, had to await the advent of their king, David, for them to enjoy the blessing of being in the Land with their God. We too must wait for Jesus, the ultimate King, to return to earth to enjoy blessing. In the meantime, there's much blessing to be had in faithfully serving Jesus as He commanded, despite whatever sacrifice is needed or whatever loss or suffering may result. May we be faithful to our calling.