

ESTHER AND HER GOD

Roger L. Dudley

The Biblical book of Esther is one of the most dramatic books in the Bible. It has all the elements of a suspense thriller—a beautiful heroine in a desperate situation, a wicked villain, a murderous plot against an innocent people, a serendipitous hero, a chance discovery that will change the final outcome, and a surprise deliverance for a triumphal outcome. No wonder it has been the basis for a number of dramatic productions including the evening meetings at the “Courage to Stand” Pathfinder Camporee of 2009.

Yet, Bible readers over the years have been puzzled that it is only one of the two sacred books of the Bible that does not mention the name of God. Nowhere is there any reference to the divine although the action and miraculous deliverance certainly implies supernatural intervention. The closest the record comes to prayer is to report that Esther and her maids would fast (4:15-16).

This omission has long been a mystery to me and others. But then recently I decided to read the Apocrypha, and when I came to the expanded book of Esther, a whole different and inspiring story opened up to me.

The Apocrypha consists of fifteen books or parts of books that were not included in the Hebrew Scriptures when that canon was formed in the inter-testament period. Thus, they are not part of the Old Testament as it appears in most Protestant versions of the Bible. However, with one exception, they were included in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, known as the *Septuagint*. As such they were accepted as Biblical by the first-century church and were studied and quoted by early Christian writers. The Greek Old Testament was the Bible of Jesus and the

apostles. Today these books are generally included in Catholic versions of the Bible and some others. My reading came from their inclusion in The New English Bible published by the Oxford University Press in 1970.

The individual books vary in quality. Some are mainly historical like First Esdras (much like Ezra) or the history of the inter-testament period like Maccabees. Some resemble the wisdom literature of Proverbs and Ecclesiastics like The Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus. Others are quite fanciful such as Judith, Daniel and Susanna, and Bel and the Snake. I make no defense for their inspiration and do not argue that they should be included in the canon. Here I am interested only in Esther and her relationship with God.

The NEB includes in the Apocrypha those portions of Esther that do not occur in the Hebrew Scriptures, but in order to make sense of the narrative, it has given the entire text as found in the *Septuagint*. To allow comparison, the NEB has kept the chapter and verse arrangement found in traditional Bibles and has integrated the additional text into the proper place in the story, giving that text chapter and verse numbers from chapter 11 to 16. These do not necessarily follow the same arrangement as in typical Bibles, however. For example, the book begins with 11:2-12; 12:1-6. I will cite references using the NEB system. A number of the terms reflect British spelling.

The Greek version has minor differences from the Hebrew one. For example, Mordecai is named Mardocheaus, Xerxes becomes Artaxerxes, and queen Vasti is labeled Astin. But the main story is the same and easy to follow. My sole purpose is to look for references to God and prayer.

To begin with, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days to celebrate his marriage to Esther. “But Esther had not disclosed her country—such were the instructions of Mardocheaus; but she was to fear God and keep his commandments just as she had done when she was with him” (2:19-20).

When Haman launched his plot to destroy the Jews, and Esther agreed that she and her maids would fast for three days, and she would go to see the king, “Mardocheaus prayed to the Lord, calling to mind all the works of the Lord. He said, ‘O Lord, Lord and King who rulest over all, because the whole world is under thine authority, and when it is thy will to save Israel there is no one who can stand against thee; thou didst make heaven and earth and every wonderful thing under heaven; thou art Lord of all, and there is no one who can resist thee, the Lord. Thou knowest all things; thou knowest, Lord, that it was not from insolence or arrogance or vainglory that I refused to bow before the proud Haman, for I could gladly have kissed the soles of his feet to save Israel; no, I did it so that I might not hold a man in greater honour than God; I will not bow before any but thee, my Lord, and it is not from arrogance that I refuse this homage. And now Lord, God and King, God of Abraham, spare thy people; for our enemies are watching to bring us to ruin, and they have set their hearts upon the destruction of thy chosen people, thine from the beginning’” (13:8-16).

“Then Queen Esther, caught up in this deadly conflict, took refuge in the Lord. . . . And so she prayed to the Lord God of Israel” (14:1-3). “O my Lord, thou alone art our king; help me who am alone, with no helper but thee: for I am taking my life in my hands. Ever since I was born I have been taught by my father’s family and tribe that thou, O Lord, didst choose Israel out of all the nations” (14:3-4). “But now we have sinned against thee , and thou hast handed us over to

our enemies because we honoured their gods; thou art just, O Lord. But they are not content with our bitter servitude; they have now pledged themselves to their idols to annul thy decree and to destroy thy possession, silencing those who praise thee, extinguishing the glory of thy house, and casting down thy altar. They would give the heathen cause to sing the praises of their worthless gods, and would have a mortal king held in everlasting honour.

“Yield not thy sceptre, O Lord, to gods that are nothing; let not our enemies mock at our ruin, but turn their plot against themselves, and make an example of the man who planned it. Remember us, O Lord, make thy power known in the time of our distress, and give me courage, O King of gods, almighty Lord. Give me the apt word to say when I enter the lion’s den. Divert his hatred to our enemy, so that there may be an end of him and his confederates.

“Save us by thy power, and help me who am alone and have no helper but thee, Lord. Thou knowest all; thou knowest that I hate the splendour of the heathen; I abhor the bed of the uncircumcised or of any Gentile. Thou knowest in what straits I am: I loathe that symbol of pride, the headdress that I wear when I show myself abroad, I loathe it as one loathes a filthy rag; in private I refuse to wear it. I, thy servant, have not eaten at Haman’s table; I have not graced a banquet of the king or touched the wine of his drink-offerings; I have not known festive joy from the time that I was brought here until now except in thee, Lord God of Abraham. O God who dost prevail against all, give heed to the cry of the despairing: rescue us from the power of wicked men, and rescue me from what I dread” (14:6-19).

“On the third day Esther brought her prayers to an end. She took off the clothes she had worn while she worshipped and put on all her splendour. When she was in her royal robes and had invoked the all-seeing God, her preserver, she took two maids with her” (15:1-2) and went to

see the king. The Apocrypha expands this encounter with the king. "Then God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness" (15:8) so that he is very concerned for her and loving. She makes her request to hold a banquet with the king and Haman, and the developments with which we are familiar follow their course.

Finally, Artaxerxes realizes the plot, has Haman hanged, and promotes Mardocheaus, on Esther's recommendation to prime minister. The king authorizes Mardocheaus to send a letter under the royal name to every part of the empire allowing to Jews to defend themselves and destroy those who threatened them. Chapter 16 is a copy of the letter which also talks about God.

"We find that the Jews, whom this triple-dyed villain had consigned to extinction, are no evil-doers; they order their lives by the most just of laws, and are children of the living God, most high, most mighty, who maintains the empire in most wonderful order for us as for our ancestors.

"You will therefore disregard the letters sent by Haman son of Hamadathus, because he, the contriver of all this, has been hanged aloft at the gate of Susa with his whole household, God who is Lord of all having speedily brought upon him the punishment that he deserved. . . . For God, who has all things in his power, has made this a day not of ruin, but of joy, for his chosen people" (16:21).

As in our traditional versions of Esther, the thirteenth of Adar arrived, the enemies of the Jews perished, and no one offered resistance to the Jews because the people were all afraid of them. The great triumph was to be memorialized by the feast of Purim. "Mardocheaus acted for King Artaxerxes; he was a great man in the empire and honoured by the Jews. His way of life won him the affection of his whole nation" (10:3).

As a summary, Mardocheus gave this interpretation for the whole experience. "All this is God's doing. For I have been reminded of the dream I had about these things; not one of the visions I saw proved meaningless. . . . The nations are those who gathered to wipe out the Jews; my nation is Israel, which cried aloud to God and was delivered. The Lord has delivered his people; he has rescued us from all these evils. God performed great miracles and signs such as have not occurred among the nations. He made ready two lots, one for the people of God and one for all the nations; then came the hour and the time for these two lots to be cast, the day of decision by God before all the nations; he remembered his people and gave the verdict for his heritage.

"So they shall keep these days in the month of Adar, the fourteenth and fifteenth of that month, by gathering with joy and gladness before God from one generation of his people to another, for ever" (10:4-13).

I will never read the book of Esther in the same light after having read this version. It contains further insights into the character and dedication of Esther herself. But more than this, it shows that the book is deeply religious. Rather than the usual puzzle as to why a story this rich makes no mention of God or prayer, the narrative is saturated with both. God's providence and care dominates the tale. We are thrilled to see Him working behind the scenes to thwart evil and carry out His benevolent purpose.

Is this record as inspired as the one in our standard Bibles? I don't know. But it makes sense to me that the drama could never have unfolded as it did, without God's guiding hand. And it is almost impossible to conceive that Esther and Mordecai would not have done some earnest praying. I have been inspired and deeply blessed as I have studied this ancient story. That is its real value.

Roger L. Dudley is director of the Institute of Church Ministry at Andrews University, Theological Seminary and Emeritus Professor of Christian Ministry. This article was published in the March-April issue of Adventist Today.