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Esther: Historical & Chronological Comments (I)

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The book of Esther is one of the most neglected of the books of the Bible. To be sure, sermons are preached on it, and commentaries have occasionally been written on it, but almost without exception Esther has been interpreted in isolation from the rest of Biblical history, chronology, and theology. Even many conservative commentators tend to view the events in Esther as minor occurrences that have been inflated in the narrative in order to make the point of the book. This is because they make the wrong assumptions about the dates of these events, and because they do not understand the importance of the events in Esther to the progress of revelation and redemption.

Because these considerations are intertwined, we want to look at Esther the same way we looked at Daniel, dealing with the context of the book, its teaching, and its timing. First of all, let me provide some introductory remarks to put Esther in Biblical context and perspective.

1. Introductory Considerations

A. The Oracle Against Elam (Jeremiah 49:34-39)

The prophecies of Jeremiah against the nations flow from Jeremiah 25:9, where God says that He will give all the nations to His servant Nebuchadnezzar. With Daniel as his right hand counsellor, Nebuchadnezzar did indeed take over all these nations. Starting in Jeremiah 46, one nation after another is given to Nebuchadnezzar. But when we come to the oracle against Elam, nothing is said about Nebuchadnezzar. Thus, the commentators have suggested that the defeat of Elam is the defeat of Persia later on, after Persia conquered Babylon and then fell into ruin before Alexander the Great.

Without exception, the commentators fail to consider that this passage is most likely a prediction of the events in Esther. Susa was the capital of Elam, and Daniel was "in the citadel of Susa, which is in the province of Elam" when he was given his vision in Daniel 8. In that vision, Daniel was shown the ram of Persia conquering, and then the male goat of Alexander defeating him.

More to the point, however, is the fact that here we are expressly told of the link between Susa and Elam, which is important since the events in Esther take place in the royal city of Susa, capital of Elam-Persia from the time of Darius the Great onwards.

God begins in Jeremiah 49:35 by saying that He will break the bow of Elam, and it is worth bearing in mind that the Persians were great bow-wielding horsemen. God then says "I shall bring upon Elam the four winds from the four ends of heaven, and shall scatter them to all these winds." Here is where the commentators go astray, because the four winds are not a symbol of a military invasion but of a Spiritual one.

Zechariah 2:6 states that God has dispersed His people as the four winds of the heavens. This is, of course, after the return from exile, when Persia ruled the world, but the symbol is here identified. Zechariah 6:5 shows the saints as the four winds of heaven riding forth on horses to bring God's Spiritual conquest to the world of that day. The world, at rest in Zechariah 1, will now be shaken up because God's Temple has been restored and the Holy Spirit is flowing out into the world (Zechariah 4).

The four winds are the human expression of the great Wind of the Spirit; in Hebrew, "spirit" is "breath." Ezekiel, writing at the same time as Jeremiah, speaks of the four winds in his famous resurrection chapter, Ezekiel

37. There the nation of Israel is pictured as dead corpses scattered all over the valleys below the idolatrous high places. "Can these bones live," Ezekiel is asked? "Not just any bones, but the bones of the apostates, the idolaters, that God Himself has scattered (Ezekiel 6). Can *they* live? This passage does not deal with individual resurrection but with the resurrection and restoration of apostate, idolatrous Israel as God's priest to the nations. Ezekiel is told to prophesy to the bones, that the Breath (Spirit) of God should come upon them. Specifically, Ezekiel is told to say, "Come from the four winds, O Breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to life." In other words, Israel will not be restored by some mysterious blast of the Spirit that comes from the clear blue sky. She will be restored when the righteous people, especially the prophets, bring the Spirit to her. It will be the four winds, God's holy people, who restore Israel after the exile is over. This is a prediction of the events in Zechariah that we have just looked at.

Similarly, when Daniel sees the four winds of heaven stirring up the great gentile sea in Daniel 7:2, it is a picture of the evangelistic work of God's people in the world. That evangelistic work brings forth four great cherubic guardians for Israel, great monsters who bare their teeth against the enemies of the Jews. When each monster stops doing his job, he is replaced by the next.

Daniel 8:8, which speaks of the four successors of Alexander as "four conspicuous horns pointed toward the four winds of heaven" is usually taken as the four Greek empires to the north, south, east, and west of Israel. But it is more likely that the horns of power and protection are pointed toward the four winds in the sense that they are pointed toward Israel. First they protect Israel, and then later on one of them, the little horn, turns against her.

All of this serves to make clear that the symbol of the four winds of heaven is a symbol of the evangelistic work of God's people, not a symbol of gentile armies invading a land. Elam will be conquered by the gospel, by the action of the Jews, not by an enemy army.

Pagan Elam will be shattered before their enemies. God will send the sword after them until He has consumed them. But then God will set up His throne in Elam (Jeremiah 49:37-38), and will restore the fortunes of Elam (v. 39).

So, when were these things fulfilled? They were fulfilled in the events of the book of Esther. Haman organized the Persian Elamites who hated the Jews to attack them. But God reversed the fortune of His people. The Jews were allowed to put to the sword those who hated them. Many of the Elamites converted to the true faith (Esther 8:17) before the massacre of the wicked Elamites happened (Esther 9). Thus, as predicted, the four winds of evangelism came first, and then the sword of destruction. After that, Esther and Mordecai became great in the land, and God's throne was set up there.

B. Zechariah's Prophecy (Zechariah 2:6-11)

Zechariah's night visions come in the second year of Darius the Great, who as we shall see is the King in Esther. In these visions, Zechariah is shown that God's people have returned to the land, and are rebuilding His altar, thus casting down the four altar-horns of idolatry (Zech. 1:18-21). This is exactly what is going on at the time Zechariah has his visions: the Temple and Altar are being rebuilt.

Then, in Zechariah 2 the prophet is shown that the result will be that Jerusalem will be inhabited without walls. Of course, the walls were actually rebuilt, as the book of Nehemiah shows. Symbolically, though, God's people would be protected by a wall of fire, which was the protection of the Persian empire, the second cherub-guardian beast.

Zechariah 2:6-7 are contradictory if read literally. The people are told to flee from the land of the north, to flee Daughter Babylon, because they have been spread out as the four winds of heaven. First, Babylon is already gone, and second, if they are spread out by God, why do they need to congregate in Jerusalem? The resolution of this problem is to see that it is a spiritual, not a geographical separation that is being enjoined upon the people. They must leave the Babylon of sin (pictured in Zechariah 5:5-11) and function throughout the world as God's four evangelistic winds.

God says that He will be the Glory in the midst of Jerusalem. In verse 8, He says that "after the Glory" He will send His Angel against the nations that have plundered the people. The phrase "after the Glory" has to mean "after the Glory has returned to the Temple," an event pictured in Zechariah 4, an event that happened when the Temple was rebuilt and worship restored in the sixth year of Darius (Ezra 6:15). God made Esther Darius's queen the following year, setting in motion the fulfillment of Zechariah's prophecy.

In Zechariah 2:9, God tells Zechariah, "I will wave My hand over them (the enemies), so that they will be plunder for their slaves." The Jews are the slaves, living in an oppressed situation in Persia. The events of Esther 9 show the slave-Jews plundering their enemies.

Zechariah 2:11 predicts that many nations will join themselves to the Lord in that day and become His people. We have already seen that this is fulfilled in Esther.

C. The Battle of Gog and Magog (Ezekiel 38-39)

The battle of Gog and Magog is found in Ezekiel 38-39. Ezekiel presents the destruction of Jerusalem as simultaneously a judgment on the whole world (Ezekiel 24-33). After this, he prophesies that the people will return to the land. Sometime after this there would be a time of trouble, and the land would be invaded by an army made

up of many peoples under the leadership of Prince Gog. In my book *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* I followed many older commentators in referring this to the invasion of the land by Antiochus Epiphanes.

After this huge battle, a new Temple is built out of the spoils. This follows the pattern of victory followed by housebuilding that we see everywhere in the Bible. The Tabernacle was built of the spoils of Egypt, and the Temple of the spoils of the Philistines. Ezekiel's Temple is described in a vision of sacred geometry, but it was intended to apply to the Restoration era. The actual building erected by Joshua and Zerubbabel (Haggai 1-2; Zechariah 1-6) and glorified by Ezra was the literal fulfillment of the visions of Ezekiel 40-48. The changes in sacrificial administration set out in these visions were implemented in the Restoration Temple. I noted in *Through New Eyes* that this was the view of Adam Clarke, Matthew Henry, Matthew Poole, and E. W. Hengstenberg.

I wasn't quite happy with this, since it puts the battle of Gog and Magog out of sequence. Antiochus Epiphanes invaded the land years after the Temple was initially rebuilt and then made glorious. Is there another event that better fits as the fulfillment of Ezekiel 38-39? I believe there is. I suggest that the book of Esther describes the fulfillment of the battle of Gog and Magog.

Let me make a detour into Zechariah. Zechariah sees the Kingdom in the form of a grove of myrtle trees (Zech. 1:8). It is significant that Esther's original Hebrew name, Hadassah, is the word for "myrtle" (Esth. 2:7). Moreover, Zechariah prophesies the events of Esther in Zechariah 2:8-9. He states that after the Glory of God had moved back into the Temple, the nations would seek to plunder Israel. God would wave His hand over them, however, so that they would be plundered by their slaves, those they were oppressing: Israel. This event would be a confirming seal to them that God had indeed reestablished the Covenant with them.

Of course, it is in Esther that we see a conspiracy to plunder the Jews, which backfires with the result that the Jews plundered their enemies. This event is then ceremonially sealed with the institution of the annual Feast of Purim. The book of Esther is frequently overlooked in the Old Testament, and its meaning has been widely debated. If my suggestion is correct, however, we now have a good idea of its purpose and place in the canon.

With this in mind, we can look back at Ezekiel. Ezekiel 34 states that God will act as Good Shepherd to Israel, and will bring them back into the land. He continues this theme in Ezekiel 36, saying that God will make a new covenant with Israel. The inauguration of this new covenant, which we can call the Restoration Covenant, is described in Zechariah 3, where God removes the filth from Joshua the High Priest and restores the Temple and priesthood. Of course, Ezekiel's language in Ezekiel

36:25-27 is picked up in the New Testament and applied to the New Covenant, but we need to understand that the first fulfillment of his words was in the Restoration Covenant, which was of course a type of the New Covenant.

Ezekiel continues in Ezekiel 37 with the vision of the valley of dry bones. The Spirit of God would be given in greater measure than ever before (though of course not as great as at Pentecost in Acts 2), and the result would be a restoration of the people. No longer would there be a cultural division between Judah and Ephraim, but all would be together as a new people. (Their new name would be "Jew.")

At this point, Ezekiel describes the attack of Gog, Prince of Magog, and his confederates. Ezekiel states that people from all the world will attack God's people, who are pictured dwelling at peace in the land. God's people will completely defeat them, however, and the spoils will be immense. The result is that all nations will see the victory, and "the house of Israel will know that I am the Lord their God from that day onward" (Ezk. 39:21-23). This is the same idea as we found in Zechariah 2:9, "They you will know that Yahweh of hosts has sent Me," which I argued above most likely refers to the events of Esther.

Chronologically this all fits very nicely. The events of Esther took place during the reign of Darius, after the initial rebuilding of the Temple under Joshua and Zerubbabel and shortly before rebuilding of the walls by Nehemiah.

Nehemiah established a social polity among the people and rebuilt the physical walls of Jerusalem. Since Ezekiel 40-48 is concerned with the fullness of the Temple and also with the reconfiguration of the social polity of the land, it is possible to maintain that the central fulfillment of Ezekiel 40-48 is found in the labors of Nehemiah. It should be noted that the prophecy of Ezekiel 40-48 came in the first month of 572 B.C., exactly 70 years prior to Nehemiah's request to Darius to go to Jerusalem. This fact should not be discounted, for there are several 70-year predictions operating in this period of history, as we saw in our studies in Daniel.

Thus, the interpretive hypothesis I am suggesting (until someone shoots it down) is this: Ezekiel 34-37 describes the first return of the exiles under Zerubbabel, and implies the initial rebuilding of the physical Temple. Ezekiel 38-39 describes the attack of Gog (Haman) and his confederates against the Jews. Finally, Ezekiel 40-48 describes in figurative language the situation as a result of the work of Nehemiah.

Looking at a few details, we see that the victory of the Jews over their enemies in Esther resulted in the deaths of 75,310 people (Esth. 9:10, 15, 16). This number of deaths is commensurate with the extent of the slaughter pictured in Ezekiel 38-39. The Jews were told that they might plunder those they slew (Esth. 8:11), but they did

not take any of the plunder for their personal use (Esth. 9:10, 15, 16), which surely implies that it was regarded as holy and was sent to adorn the Temple.

Another interesting correspondence lies in the fact that the book of Esther repeatedly calls attention to the "127 provinces" of the Persian Empire, and in connection with the attack on the Jews, speaks of the "provinces which were from India to Cush" (Esth. 8:9). This goes well with the way Ezekiel 38 starts out, for there a number of nations are mentioned from all over the world, all of which were within the boundaries of the Persian Empire (Ezk. 38:1-6). In other words, the explicit idea that the Jews were attacked by people from all the provinces of Persia is in both passages.

Another possible cue is found in the prominent use of the Hebrew word for "multitude" in Ezekiel 39:11, 15, and 16. That word is *hamon*, which is spelled in Hebrew almost exactly like the name Haman. It was Haman, of course, who engineered the attack on the Jews in Esther. In Hebrew, both words have the same "trilateral root" (*hmn*). Only the vowels are different. (Though in *hamon*, the vowel "o" is indicated by the letter vav.) According to Ezekiel 39:11 and 15, the place where the army of Gog is buried will be known as the Valley of Hamon-Gog, and according to verse 16, the nearby city will become known as Hamonah. It seems to me that if I were a Jew living during the intertestamental era, I would be struck by the correspondence between Haman and Hamon-Gog, and it would cause me to consider whether or not they are related.

Yet another corroboration, to my mind, lies in the fact that Haman was an Amalekite. He was an "Agagite," a descendant of the Amalekite king Agag who was captured by Saul and hacked to pieces by Samuel (1 Sam. 15; Esth. 3:1). What Esther records is the last great attack upon Israel by Amalek, and the final destruction of Amalek. Now, Numbers 24:20 states that "Amalek was the first of the nations, but his end shall be destruction." The term "nation" is more closely associated with the Japhethites than with the Hamites or the Shemites. We don't know which "nation" Amalek was, since it is not listed in Genesis 10, but it would seem to have been a Japhethite one.

At any rate, what is striking about Ezekiel 38 is that the nations listed as conspiring against Israel are Japhethite

and Hamite nations seldom if ever heard from outside the primordial list of Genesis 10. Magog, Meshech, Tubal, Beth-togarmah, Tarshish, and Gomer are all Japhethite nations from Genesis 10:2-4. Cush, Put, Sheba, and Dedan are Hamite peoples from Genesis 10:6-7. Thus, the notion is of a conspiracy of primordial peoples against the true remnant of the Shemites. This certainly squares well with the fact that Haman was the preeminent representative of Amalek, the first of the nations.

Moreover, Amalek is the name of one of Esau's grandsons, a mighty chieftain (Gen. 36:16). As Genesis 36 shows, Esau's sons and grandsons completely merged with the Horites of Mount Seir to become the semi-Canaanite nation of Edom. From Genesis 14:6-7 we learn that the hill country of the original Amalekites was close to the Horites of Mount Seir. By giving his son the name Amalek, Eliphaz, son of Esau, was clearly forging another link. Thereafter, the Amalekites are not only gentiles, but also Edomites. Haman in Esther is not only a spokesman of the gentile opposition to God, but also of the continuing hatred of Esau for Jacob.

The main argument against my hypothesis would be that Ezekiel 38-39 picture an invasion of the land of Israel, whereas the events of Esther happened throughout the Persian Empire. At present, this argument does not have much force with me because of the fact that this entire section of Ezekiel is so highly symbolic in tone anyway. Chapter 37 gives us the vision of the valley of dry bones, after all, and chapters 40-48 are a thoroughly geometrical vision of the Restoration Covenant. Thus, I can see no difficulty in assuming that Ezekiel is picturing the final world-wide attack of Amalek and his cohorts under the imagery of an attack on the land, imagery derived from the book of Judges (cp. Jud. 18:7, 10, 27 with Ezk. 38:8, 11, 14).

Moreover, since the land of the Jews was part of the empire of Ahasuerus-Darius, and the attack on the Jews took place throughout the empire, it is clear that the Jews in the land were under assault in Esther. Thus, even if someone wants to press the idea of an invasion of the land of promise, Esther still portrays it. God's people throughout the empire, including those in the land, were under assault.

(to be continued)

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