

# COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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## ESTHER AND THE COVENANT

The story of Esther occurs between the first and second comings (returns) of the nation Israel to the Promised Land in 521 B. C., after being in captivity since 586 B.C. under the Babylonians. The first coming (return) took place ten years before the time of Esther, when Ezra led a large number of Jews back to the Land to rebuild Israel. But the work of rebuilding a Biblical civilization bogged down and they only completed the Temple. The rest of the city of Jerusalem needed finishing.

The second coming was to rebuild the walls under Nehemiah in the early fifth century, nearly one hundred years after Esther. Through Nehemiah, the task of Biblical reconstruction is essentially finished. Yet, without what happened in Esther, Nehemiah's day would never have come. Her name means star, implying that she leads the way to something.

First, since Esther is a story about the middle period after one return and before another, the book is analogous to life between the two returns of Christ. It instructs us about living between the now and the not yet. It teaches about such struggles as: husbands and wives fulfilling their roles, the relationship between home life and life outside the home, how husbands meet the needs of their wives and how wives should show respect to their husbands, how to approach an ungodly leader and influence him for Christ's glory, and so forth. This is a book about life at home and life away from home, a time when the re-establishment of God's kingdom had begun but still had not been accomplished.

Second, given the fact that Esther leads to the rebuilding of the walls, it tells us how to extend the Temple to the perimeter of life, the world. It informs us how to take our faith from the sacred to the profane. It shows us how to rebuild what once was, in our case, a Christian civilization.

For our purpose, the means of accomplishing these first two purposes in Esther is the Biblical covenant. The book clearly follows the covenant pattern, organizing its parts around each facet of the Biblical structure of relationship, having five parts. The first segment of the covenant is a transcendent statement about the suzerain or lord of the covenant. The second part addresses the hierarchy of the covenant community. The third element develops the ethics of the covenant by way of stipulations. The fourth aspect involves a ratification or renewal of the covenant by an oath in terms of the sanctions (cursing and blessing) of the covenant. The final section of the covenant presents the succession of the suzerain, stating who inherits and who is disinherited. Let us now consider the covenant in Esther, seeing how the book follows this fivefold pattern.

### Transcendence: The King in His Garden (1:1-9)

The story begins with a description of a great suzerain, Ahasuerus. He is not presented as just any suzerain. He

is described in a transcendent fashion. First, his kingdom is worldwide, from India to Ethiopia (1:1), implying that he transcends all known boundaries.

Second, Ahasuerus is described as having a sacramental presence. He symbolically feeds the whole known world. He holds a great feast for his coronation and invites representatives from every province where they could "be in his presence" (1:3c). The text also emphasizes that this "feast" lasted for six months ("one hundred and eighty days": v. 4), indicating that he would continuously feed them with his food.

Third, this story begins in a garden (v. 5), reminding of the first garden. In fact, the scene is nearly identical to Adam's and Eve's. King Ahasuerus is analogous to the Lord who has placed his subjects in a near perfect environment. He calls for his bride (Vashti) to comply with his command, to come (1:10ff.). She rebels just as Adam and Eve refused to come to God when He called in the Garden (Genesis 3). As a result of the rebellion, the entire empire is placed in jeopardy. The king casts out his wife (1:19). Thus, Ahasuerus appears as the great transcendent and even immanent suzerain of the world in need of a new bride.

### Hierarchy: A New Representative (2:1-23)

The second chapter of the book tells how Esther replaces the rebellious bride of chapter one and becomes the new representative. God puts Esther on the throne. She is specifically revealed as God's choice for the new hierarchy by the unique circumstances under which she comes to the throne. No other explanation can be provided.

First, she is an orphan (2:7). The orphan theme is prominent in the books of the Old Testament that deal with Israel outside of the land. She has been cut off from her "father and mother," meaning she has no home. But, it also means that she has a true father in the Lord. He provides for her better than any other and He takes care of her better than any other, as demonstrated by the sequence of events in the book.

Second, God gave her the beauty to appeal to the earthly ruler Ahasuerus. Esther wins a worldwide beauty contest. She beats all of the competition. She could have done so only if God had especially enabled her to win. She had what was needed at the right time because of the providence of the Lord.

Third, Esther is presented as a woman in submission to authority. She listens to and obeys her Uncle Mordecai who tells her to conceal her identity. She is like Sarah who submitted to Abraham when he protected his wife from the Egyptian king, Abimelech. And, Esther is also the one who tells the king about the assassination plot that was discovered by Mordecai (2:19-23). Thus, Esther is an authority under God's authority, the perfect representative.

Chapter Two ends with Esther and Mordecai in positions of power. She is queen and he is near the king. By her beauty and purity, Esther made her way to the throne. Beauty and purity are not in conflict in the Bible, nor do they have to be. Yet, the Church often thinks ugly is pure and beauty is corrupt. This is not necessarily the case, as Esther demonstrates.

We discover in chapter two that God exalts a to a high position of leadership, higher even than Mordecai. Why is Esther the real heroine of the book? Why is the book named Esther, after the woman, and not after Mordecai? Why is Mordecai in such a secondary role? I think we begin to see why in the second chapter and we more clearly discover the answer to these questions in chapter three.

As a general pattern in Scripture, however, the woman is never placed above a male figure unless something is wrong with the male leadership. Remember, God told Eve, "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16). Eve's "desire" would be for what? To rule over the man. God's promise was that the man would rule her, the ultimately referring to Christ, the God/Man. This proves to be the case in the last days of Christ's ministry when Israel, His bride, will not accept Barabbas as a substitute. They give Christ over. They "rule" Him by crucifying Him. Yet, He would not be ruled except for a moment while the Son of Man is in the until the Resurrection occurs.

This "in the tomb period explains those times in Biblical history when the woman is allowed to rule. *It* time symbolically or really. Deborah is a classic example (Judges 4:1-24). She was a Judge of Israel. Why? Barak would not lead. Even when invited to lead he would not lead except on the condition that Deborah go with him. Deborah, therefore, *had* to lead. She did so in a rather wise way.

Deborah actually obeyed Barak in her leadership! She never did anything but that she told Barak to do it first. When Barak refused, he actually stated the conditions for his participation in the form of a command (Judges 4:8). When she consented to go with Barak as a kind of "security blanket," she did so at Barak's request. But, when the time came to finish off Sisers, commander of the Canaanite army, she pulled away from leadership, allowing Barak to take his God-ordained place.

Interestingly, since the victory was certain, Barak was not afraid. He destroyed the army but allowed Sisers to escape. God raised up another woman, Jael, to exercise wise Biblical means by putting a peg through the head of Sisers (Judges 4:17-22). After Sisers was dead, she ran out to meet Barak, the picture again being one of the woman in submission to the man. So, where the woman finds herself in leadership because of the default of the man, not out of

By way of application, Genesis 3:16 unfolds a tension in the woman. She wants to rule and yet finds herself thwarted in this desire. Why, because she is inferior to the man? No, she may in fact be quite superior in many respects. Rather, she is called to submission to her husband by the Apostle Paul as the Church is to (Ephesians 5:22). The only time this is not the case is when the man is out meaning the woman is allowed to lead on a temporary basis. She can be successful and have great ministry. I should add, however, that in every case I know about the ministry has needed a man's hand after the woman had finished, in the same way every ministry needs the woman's touch to complement the man's leadership! Again, the principle is that the woman never leads unless it is in submission to the man.

I believe that the principle surfaces in Esther, as indicated by the fact that she is the central figure and by the simple observation that the book is named after her and Mordecai. I think Mordecai gives bad advice in chapter two. He did not need to deceive as did Abraham. Remember, deception can work both ways, good and bad. It can be used to rescue or it can be used to destroy. The key is The same word for "cunning," used to refer to the Serpent (Genesis 3:15), is also found in Proverbs to describe wisdom. The difference is wisdom, a difference that will become all too apparent in chapter three.

### Ethics: Mordecai Breaks the Law (3:1-15)

Mordecai falls in this chapter. He proves himself to be unfaithful to the Abrahamic promises. He breaks the law of God as we shall see as we proceed through the early verses of the chapter.

v. 1: Another major figure is introduced, Haman. He is an Agagite. Agagites were descendants of Esau (Genesis 36:12). Mordecai was a descendent of Jacob and specifically of the house of Benjamin (2:5). The relationship of Haman and Mordecai is a picture of the classic conflict between Jacob and Esau.

The relationship of Haman and Mordecai also tells of the conflict between the Benjaminites and the Agagites. The king of the Agagites was captured by Saul. The King of Israel failed to carry out the command of the prophet, representative of the unfinished work of the people of God (1 Samuel 15:8). Haman represents an old skeleton out of Israel's closet literally come to life. He comes back to haunt the people of God because they had been previously unfaithful in exterminating the wicked.

Haman also represents a future enemy of God who would also be destroyed. The phrase, "Haman the wicked" (Esther 7:6), has a numerical value of 666. The number 6 is the number of man, symbolizing the day on which he was created. The numbers 666 are repetitions of the number 6 never coming to fulfillment. They appear at times when Israel enters covenants with the Gentiles, literally selling out to the unbelievers (1 Kings 10:14; 1 Samuel 17:4 & 7). The one in Revelation is the suzerain to Israel. He is none other than Significantly, his full title analogous to Haman is having a numerical value of 666.<sup>1</sup>

Of further interest regarding Nero, he was the Caesar of Rome at a time when the Apostle Paul wrote, "Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore, he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves" (Romans 13:1-2). This is precisely what happens to Mordecai. He rebels against the "powers that be," and as such finds himself rebelling against God.

w. 2-6: Mordecai refuses to "bow" before Haman. He thought the righteous did not have to honor wicked leaders. He was wrong and to be considered a covenant-breaker for four reasons.

First, "bowing" was simply a gesture of honor or submission. It was not necessarily anything more. Examples abound in the Old Testament of godly individuals bowing to others (Genesis 23:12). The classic example relevant to our passage is Jacob's bowing to Esau (Genesis 33:3). Remember, Haman was a descendant of Esau. Mordecai should have bowed before the new Esau to make peace, for the Word of God always does better in times of peace

1. David Chilton, *Paradise Restored* (Ft. Worth: Dominion [1985] 1987), pp. 181-184

than in times of war (1 Timothy 2:2). Instead, Mordecai rebelled. And this is perhaps the whole issue involved. Mordecai was supposed to be a true "Jacob," by bowing to his Esau. If he had, he would have been a covenant-keeper and been blessed.

Second, Mordecai was wrong not to bow because his reason was ethnic not spiritual. Notice that he defends himself by saying he did not have to bow because he was a "Jew" (3:4). He says nothing about idolatry and so forth. He is simply too proud to bow before a wicked man.

Third, Mordecai was wrong because he placed the whole nation in jeopardy as a result. Neither Abraham nor any leader of Israel ever created such an effect by any act. He brought the nation to the point of extinction, which meant that he allowed the Messianic line to be threatened.

Fourth, Mordecai was wrong because he had to repent in chapter four. Neither Abraham nor any other is ever found repenting after their deception. Abraham didn't have to repent because he correctly applied Biblical deception; and Sarah certainly does not emerge as the heroine, even though she is to be commended for her faithful submission. Abraham is the patriarch.

So, I believe that Mordecai rebelled against the human authorities. And, on the basis of Romans 13, I think that he was in rebellion to God! For this, he was severely judged!

#### Oath: Repentance and Judgment (4:1-7:10)

w. 4:1-2: Mordecai becomes a **living sacrifice** (Romans 12:1-2), thereby repenting and taking a new oath before God. The meaning of the word **living sacrifice** explains his actions. This material was actually a garment of black goat's hair. The same Hebrew word is used in passages that mean "black goat's hair" (Isaiah 58:3; Revelation 6:12). Mordecai literally wore the skin of a black goat and tore it in the front, symbolizing the **death of animal**. He did on his person what was done to the animals that Abraham cut in half before God, portraying the curse of the covenant, being torn in half. He took the curse on himself by wearing the animal ripped in half. He wore the sacrifice on his person, indicating that it was a living sacrifice.

What kind of sacrifice did Mordecai become? There were five different sacrifices in the Old Testament. First, the **"Guilt" or "Reparation"** sacrifice was offered to atone for violating any consecrated or holy thing or area (Leviticus 5:14-26). For example, if someone were unclean and he entered the holy area of the Temple, he actually had to be **excommunicated**. He was under curse because he had defiled himself (and maybe his whole family) by entering a zone that was not spiritually compatible with his condition. He did not sacrifice any particular animal. He had to pay **the price of the sin** because he was considered to have stolen the holiness of God. He would have to exchange an animal for silver and to pay the sacrifice. If the offense were serious enough, he would have to be put to death, such as was the case of Achan (Joshua 7).

Second, the **"Sin"** sacrifice was offered to atone for any particular sin against God or man (Leviticus 4:1-5:13). This involved the actual killing of an animal. The blood of the animal had to be shed and sprinkled around the altar, symbolizing the need to purify the effect of sin on the environment of the body (The Temple was an architectural body.). The animal remains were taken outside the Temple and burned, representing the taking away of sin outside the camp.

Third, the **burnt offering** was as the name sounds. An animal was brought and the **whole carcass** was burned up (Leviticus 1). This offering symbolized the whole being given back to God.

Fourth, the **meal** ("Cereal" or "Grain") offering was a

mixture of grain, oil and spices (Leviticus 2). The grain was from the crop, symbolizing a man's **work**. The oil and other spices represented the anointing of the Holy Spirit. The grain offering was brought by the hand and thrown into the altar-fire as a picture of the man's giving his consecrated work to the Lord.

Fifth, the **peace offering** was an animal brought to be eaten with the priest and the offerer's family (Leviticus 3). It symbolized a meal with God where peace was re-established among God and His people.

Thus, from this brief overview, Mordecai made himself into two kinds of living sacrifice. He became a living **living sacrifice**. He wore a divided or cut animal and he stood outside the gate; he could not enter, meaning sin was kept outside of the camp through his repentance.

Mordecai also became a **living sacrifice**. Notice that verse one says he put "ashes" on his head. These "ashes" represent being burned up by God's fire. He is making a statement that the judgment of God is on him.

v. 3: His actions lead to national repentance. There was **repentance**. This practice was not done for health reasons. It was a **spiritual way of separating from the world** literally. The other people followed, also becoming living sacrifices to God. They activated the promise of God: "If My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14).

#### Renewal of Oath By Feasts

The progression of thought in chapters five through seven centers around food, specifically two feasts. Esther gains access to the king to invite Haman to a feast, where she intends to set up his destruction at a second feast. The book deliberately ties Esther's feast to her coronation feast which was actually a replacement of the Vashti feast that was never consummated. Esther's feast in the fifth chapter is essentially the same as the first two feasts mentioned in the book. I call her feast in chapter five, therefore, the first feast. But, the progression is the following: feast-fall-feast. The first feast sets up the fall through the revelation that the king receives through the chronicled report. The second feast is actually of a different kind from the other feasts heretofore. It is the culmination of the destruction of the wicked and the deliverance of the righteous.

The progression of feasts points to the work of the two Adams in Scripture. The first feast of Adam established the fall of man and the second feast of the Second Adam brought about his salvation. In Christ's ministry, there was the Last Supper first, by which His fall occurred. Second there was the Lord's Supper after the Resurrection, symbolizing the disinheritance of the wicked and the salvation of the righteous.

The progression of feasts does not stop with two feasts, however. It expands to a third great feast in the Book of Esther. After the second feast, the righteous are given rule and then comes the great and final feast at the end of the book, totalling three feasts. They can be called: alpha feast, beta feast, and omega feast. This progression anticipates what Christ accomplishes in the New Covenant. I have already explained the alpha and beta feasts. The New Testament also speaks of a great final banquet feast in the Book of Revelation (Chapter 22), after the saints have been allowed to ride in the king's chariot and exercise rule.

#### The First Feast (5:1-8)

v. 1: Resurrection is anticipated in the language of the first verse, which says, "Now it came about on the day." The third day in Scripture points to a death and res-

urrection of some sort whenever it is used.

v. 6: The text emphasizes that they drank **Why?** Wine is the drink of death and resurrection. Grapes are crushed to provide juice. But non-fermented juice is a drink of death. It is liquid that remains in the state of death. Fermented juice on the other hand is the result of not only crushing but rising, expanding. The fact that the text calls attention to their drinking of "wine" is very theologically important. They drink the drink of restoration as they seal a new covenant that will result in the salvation of the people of God.

### **Covenantal Realignment (5:9-14)**

v. 9: Haman leaves the first feast unsuspecting of his own demise and he expects Mordecai to show him honor a second. Yet, Mordecai does not stand to greet Haman. Is Mordecai wrong? In *this* context, I don't think so. There are three possible explanations.

First, it could be argued that Mordecai was wrong this time too. His rebellion was still apparent. But he now has an intercessor in the person of Esther. Her faithfulness would therefore cover his unfaithfulness.

Second, perhaps there was no law requiring Mordecai to stand whereas there was definitely one for bowing. After all, Haman does not go back to the king and report Mordecai's insubordination. But, in all fairness, Haman probably thought that Mordecai was a dead man anyway.

Third, Mordecai did not have to stand and show respect because a new covenant had been established between Esther and the king, a new arrangement that would place Mordecai at least equal to or above Haman. The text even seems to indicate that Mordecai either had knowledge of Esther's success or he was so confident of her success that he no longer had to show reverence. The passage says, "He did not stand or move from." Mordecai went beyond not showing reverence. He wouldn't move out of Haman's way. It is quite likely that Mordecai knew of Esther's success because if she had failed her body would have been carried out of the gate after her execution. I believe that Mordecai knew Haman to be a "Judas" under the sentence of death. He was actually moving Haman out of his way, a demonstration of legal civil disobedience.

v. 14: The text mentions Haman's wife's (Zeresh) counsel. It does so to demonstrate that Zeresh had entered with her husband into the covenant of rebellion against God's seed. We are told this information so that we will later understand why such harsh judgment falls on her and her children. The principle is that the woman is not judged with her husband if she does not stand with him in his rebellion. There are several examples but the most noted New Testament example – lest we think this is an "Old Testament" principle – is the account of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-6). The woman is supposed to rebel against her husband if he asks her to sin against God!

The woman's refusal to enter into the husband's rebellion will come back for her own protection. I saw this illustrated in a negative way. A man walked out on a church after being in rebellion against the elders. He simply "resigned" his membership, of which there is no such thing

in Scripture; the only way to move from church to church in the Bible is by transfer of letter (Philemon). His wife left with him. When he later started to beat her and violate his marriage covenant, she had no Biblical process by which to appeal for help from the elders. She had left and was literally under her husband's judgment instead of the elders whom she had thought were so insignificant in her life.

Thus, the final section of Esther five presents a covenantal realignment. Mordecai's status has been changed and Zeresh has entered into league (covenant) with her husband. New covenants and new oaths have been made on both sides.

### **The Second Feast (7:1-10)**

v. 2: The feast takes place on the second day in anticipation of another *third* day resurrection. It is at this feast that the sanctions of the new oath are applied. How?

v. 4: The queen makes clear that she is not objecting to servitude. She objects to extermination. She indicates by this statement that she realizes that Israel deserves to be sold into slavery because of its disobedience. She does not claim "equal rights" only

The fall of Haman takes place in a

Haman falls on Esther for mercy only to be seen as the king returns. The king probably perceived Haman as even trying to seduce his queen. Haman was misperceived because he was not faithful. The righteous can be misperceived too but they will be vindicated as Mordecai's life demonstrates.

v. 8: Haman's head was covered in fulfillment of Genesis 3:15. The promise was to the destruction of the "seed" of the seed of the serpent. Haman's head was symbolically removed.

v. 9: *Harbonah* means "ass-driver." The picture is one of a eunuch leading an "ass" to the gallows. This further demonstrates that Haman is an Esau, who was called a "wild ass of a man."

v. 10: The term "gallows" literally means "tree." This too is a fulfillment of curse. The law says "cursed is a man who hangs on a tree" (Deuteronomy 21 :22-23).

In conclusion, Haman is destroyed on his own gallows, literally "hung by his own petard." The wicked man sets a snare for himself. The bigger the trap he builds for the righteous the bigger he will fall into his own trap. This happens time and again in Scripture and in life. Can you think of other examples?

### **Succession: New Inheritance (8:1-10:3)**

The last three chapters explain the new inheritance of the people of God. They receive position. Mordecai is made the second in command to the king. He gets to ride in the king's chariot and rule in the place of the king.

The people of Israel receive adoption. Mordecai is given the king's ring which had his seal, specifically his image. Thus Mordecai was the image bearer of the king, a role that only an adopted heir could live.

The people of Israel received wealth and land. As a result of Esther's faithfulness, the people were saved and they were able to benefit from Haman's wealth and fall. They eventually got to return to the land.