Beyond Hidden Sovereignty: Towards a Uniquely Dispensational Theology of . . . *Esther*!?

by Paul A. Himes

Introduction

At first glance, one may be excused for suggesting that the very notion of a "theology" of Esther (the only book in the Bible that does not mention God[1]), let alone a *dispensational* theology of Esther, is somewhat oxymoronic. Appeals to hidden providence or sovereignty, while valid, do not totally solve the problem. The deliberate omission of God means that "the persistent hole" in Esther, while "God-shaped," is nonetheless "still a *hole*" that cannot be ignored.[2] The apparently Torah-negligent behavior of her characters, combined with the unique focus on Diaspora Judaism at the expense of Israel, further complicates any attempted theological interpretation.[3]

Yet Dispensationalism's doxological focus on the future of literal and ethnic Israel offers a unique angle that begs to be explored. The themes of hidden providence and the survival of the race intertwine with the apparent spiritual distance of her characters from God to remind us of the unconditional nature of God's promises apart from any merit of His people. Thus Esther 6:13 intermingles canonically with Genesis 12:2–3 and Romans 9–11 in a way that, unlike Esther in other theological frameworks, makes sense of the Jewish race both then *and* now and offers hope for their future.

The Theological "Problems" of Esther

Skepticism about the theological value of Esther finds some support in the dearth of discussion in many OT Theologies, old and new. She is missing, for example, from both the scripture index and subject index of Gerhard von Rad's classic *Old Testament Theology*, not to mention Geerhardus Vos' magnum opus.[4] In the more recent *Theologies in the Old Testament*, by Erhard S. Gerstenberger, Esther is the only book of the Jewish Scriptures not even mentioned once![5] Other examples exist.[6] More disappointing, from a dispensational perspective, is her absence in

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[1] I am assuming here that "a most vehement flame" (שַׁלְהֶבֶתְיָה) in Song 8:6 contains the shorted form of the divine name. Scripture quotations taken from the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

[2] J. A. Loader, "Das Buch Ester," translated into German by Ilse v. Loewenclau, in *Das Hohelied, Klagelieder, Das Buch Ester*, ATD 16/2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 221.

[3] Regarding the focus of Esther on Diaspora Judaism, see J. D. Levenson, "The Scroll of Esther in Ecumenical Perspective," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 13 (1976): 448–9.

[4] Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols., trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1965): 1.479, 481, and 2.435, 455; Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: 1948), 419.

[5] Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Theologies in the Old Testament*, trans. John Bowden (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2002). See pages 210 ("General Index") and 346 ("Index of Biblical References").

[6] For example, Esther is completely lacking in R. E. Clements, *Old Testament Theology: A Fresh Approach*, New Foundations Theological Library (Atlanta: John Knox, 1978)—see pages 210 ("General Index") and 212–3 ("Index of Biblical References"). The book is also absent in the indices of Chester K. Lehman, *Biblical Theology*, vol. 1, *Old Testament* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1971), 467, 478–9. John Kessler mentions Esther once in passing ("Similarly, some view Esther as a wisdom figure"; *Old Testament Theology: Divine Call and Human*

Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum's *Israelology*, notwithstanding his many fine theological observations that would be relevant to a discussion of Esther.[7]

Even worse, when pre-WW2 scholars discussed Esther, they often passed judgment on her as representing the worst element of the Jewish religion, a "particularist tendency" where "faithlessness and deceit, cruelty and violence are permitted, in fact enjoined," in contrast to more acceptable portions of the Old Testament where "the universality of God's kingdom" happily shines through.[8] Heinrich Ewald infamously declared that when we move from the rest of the OT to Esther we find that "Its story . . . knows nothing of high and pure truths, . . . We fall here as if from heaven to earth; . . ."[9] S. R. Driver accused Esther of being a "purely secular" book where survival supplants evangelism.[10] Lewis Bayles Paton, echoing Martin Luther, declared, "There is not one noble character in this book. . . . The book is so conspicuously lacking in religion that it should never have been included in the Canon of the OT., but should have been left with Judith and Tobit among the apocryphal commentaries."[11]

Such perspectives played right into the hands of Nazi theologians seeking to provide justification for their treatment of the Jewish people.[12] The apex of the earlier trajectory found its most abominable expression in an article by Nazi propagandist Julius Streicher, who flipped the script, portraying Haman as a heroic martyr who fought for the welfare of his people, while the Jews were an insidious corruption that Germany, like Persia before her, would do well to beware of.[13] That such a reworking of the Esther story, depicting the Jews as villains and Haman as a commendable martyr, has found a modern supporter in a recent issue of a mainstream journal should give the scholarly community concern.[14]

This is, of course, only one side of the story. Evangelical Christians post-Reformation have almost always embraced Esther, though sometimes promoting bizarre and arbitrary allegorical or typological readings. Yet the best of evangelical scholarship, and even much of

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Response [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2013], 475). Ludwig Koehler devotes one sentence to Esther, albeit with a positive perspective (*Old Testament Theology*, trans. A. S. Todd [London: Lutterworth, 1953], 20). Robin Routldedge only mentions individual verses of Esther in passing (*Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* [Nottingham, England: Apollos, 2008], 185, 216, and 217).

[7] Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2001). See 1034 (the "Scripture Index"). Yet pages 837–40 contain some observations about Israel that are relevant to the book of Esther.

[8] Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 of 2, trans. by J. AA. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 342–5 (Eichrodt, on page 344 fn 6, "Esther *passim*"). Similarly, though more mildly, Gustav Friedrich Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, rev. and trans. by George E. Day (Minneapolis, MN: Klock and Klock, 1978), 428.

[9] Heinrich Ewald, *The History of Israel*, trans. and ed. by Russell Martineau, 4th ed., vol. 1 of 8 (London: Longmans, Green, and Co), 1:197, online: https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001242661.

[10] S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, ITL (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891), 457.

[11] Lewis Bayles Paton, *The Book of Esther: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark 1908), 97.

[12] For a helpful overview, see Tricia Miller, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in Esther and the Church* (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 2015), 3–6.

[13] Julius Streicher, "Die Mordnacht: Das Geheimnis des jüdischen Purimfestes ist enthüllt," *Der Stürmer* 11 (March 1934), http://humanist.de/kriminalmuseum/st-t3411.htm, accessed 3/24/2023. Ominously, Streicher declared, "And in the same way [as Esther's time], those who would sound a warning arose in Germany and proclaimed the struggle [*den Kampf*] against the Jews, just as it was formerly in Persia." Translation by this writer.

[14] Temba T. Rugwiji, "A Critical Evaluation of Causalities of the Genocide in Esther 3:8–15: Lawlessness and Revolt of the Jewish Diaspora Community," *HvTSt* 77, no. 4 (2021), 1. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6247.

non-evangelical scholarship, appropriately focuses on the hidden providence and sovereignty of God in the book. This paper will affirm that theme, though I will argue that it is insufficient by itself for a thorough understanding of the theological and canonical value of Esther.

Second, many scholars (including modern Jewish scholars, for obvious reasons) embrace *survival* as a key theme of Esther. This also is often affirmed by evangelicals. Of course, the two themes of hidden providence and survival must intertwine to keep Esther from wandering off from the rest of the Canon on her own merry way into secular nationalism. Yet the survival of the race is, at a minimum, necessary for the coming of the Messiah.[15] Dispensationalists, though, cannot stop here. Esther's theme of survival does not become irrelevant after AD 33 or AD 70.

Third, a satisfactory theological framework for Esther cannot exist without an honest examination of the behavior of her characters. As we will see, neither wholesale endorsement of all their deeds ("I want my daughter to be just like Esther and marry a pagan king after winning a beauty pageant"!), nor strict condemnation ("let's throw the plot out the window and just criticize the characters") fits the perspective of the inspired narrator. I will argue that "spiritual distance" is the phrase that best fits her characters. They are noble and courageous, yet lacking the spiritual vitality indicative of a personal walk with God. This is precisely the point that makes Esther's theme of survival relevant for the Jewish race today.

Those three elements—providence, survival, and characterization—will be fused together within a dispensational framework to demonstrate how Esther makes sense as a valuable part of the OT canon.[16]

Features and Benefits of a Dispensational Theology of Esther

I do not claim that every single book of the Bible needs a unique "dispensational biblical theology." I doubt that an uniquely dispensational reading of Proverbs or Song of Solomon would differ significantly from a conservative Reformed reading. Nonetheless, what I am attempting in this paper is to explore Esther via a dispensational theological orientation, fueled by two key hermeneutical distinctives. First, a dispensational biblical theology of Esther will keep the focus on *the Jewish people*—not a strictly spiritualized Kingdom of God, not the church (though specific points of Esther may be practically applicable to Gentile Christians), not the morality of her protagonists, and not *merely* on the theme of divine sovereignty. Whatever Esther is telling us, it must involve the *literal* Jewish race, distinct from the church and/or the people of God as a whole, with a guaranteed future.[17] Second, a dispensational biblical theology of Esther

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[15] I.e., "The Road to Christmas Kept Open," according to the title of one of Reformed preacher Garrelt Wieske's sermons (https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/author/garrelt-wieske).

[16] In a sense, I am mixing one-part literary analysis with two-parts biblical theology. My own perspectives on the latter have been influenced heavily by Andreas J. Köstenberger, under whom I took the doctoral level class "Biblical Theology." In addition, I have been influenced by G. B. Caird's "Apostolic Conference" description for biblical theology (*New Testament Theology*, ed. and completed by L. D. Hurst [Oxford: Clarendon, 1994], 19).

[17] Here, then, I am reflecting points 1 and 2 of Ryrie's "*sine qua non* of dispensationalism" (Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. and exp. [Chicago: Moody, 1995], 39–40). For biblical and theological backing for Israel's and the Jewish people's future existence, see Kenneth L. Barker, "The Scope and Center of Old and New Testament Theology and Hope," in *Dispensationalism,, Israel and the Church*, eds. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 320; Arthur W. Kac, *The Rebirth of the State of Israel: Is It of God or of Men?*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), 354; Larry D. Pettegrew, "Sovereign Election and Israel," in *Forsaking Israel: How It Happened and Why It Matters*, 2nd ed. (The Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2021), 134.

will highlight how Esther, functioning intra-canonically, reveals the glory of God, not merely the birth of the saving Messiah, as the reason for Israel's existence.[18]

The interaction of these two points must not be downplayed, precisely because, in contrast to other theological systems, a doxological dispensational perspective maintains that "the reality [of] God's glory cannot be reduced to a simple abstraction . . . The biblical concept of God's glory necessarily focuses on—indeed emphasizes—the *display* of that majesty to rational creatures."[19] In other words, the mere existence of the *literal* and *physical* Jewish race continues to be a means of expressing God's glory to the world.[20]

In addition, the dispensational commitment to a literal hermeneutics *vis-à-vis* the literal Jewish race in Esther helps maintain the focus of biblical theology on authorial intent, in contrast to other systems that are forced to squeeze the narrative to fit a particular mode.

Two quick examples will suffice, taken from two different journals of different theological persuasions.[21] First, Michael G. Wechsler takes a strong typological approach, arguing (partially on the basis of Colossians 2:16–17) that the feast of Purim and Esther's fast create "an unmistakable thematic/theological adumbration of the events surrounding the atoning work of Jesus, Israel's Messiah."[22] Thus, "Just as Esther's fast and Jesus' humiliation (ταπείνωσις, Phil 2:8), commenced on the same date, so too Esther's three-day period of fasting parallels the three-day period of Jesus' death."[23] Esther's fast and subsequent approach to the Persian king is the "shadow" of the "substance" of Jesus' death and approach to the heavenly Father.[24] Esther is, ultimately, "a type of Jesus."[25]

Conversely, Iain Duguid takes a "two kingdoms" idealized eschatological approach. The "universal empire" of Persia is juxtaposed with the heavenly kingdom, beckoning the audience "to consider how this empire and its ruler compares and contrasts with the kingdom of God."[26] The "two kingdoms" compete "for the loyalty of God's people," and the audience is invited to consider how Esther and Mordecai struggle to chose which kingdom deserves their principal

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[18] Here I am reflecting point 3 of Ryrie's *sine qua non* (*Dispensationalism*, 40–41). For further elaboration, see Christopher Cone, "*Soli Deo Gloria* as Pinnacle of Dispensationalism's *Sine Qua Non*," in *Formed from Reformation: How Dispensationalist Thought Advances the Reformed Legacy*, eds. Christopher Cone and James I. Fazio (EL Cajon, CA: Southern California Seminary Press, 2017), 497–524; and Luther Smith, "*Soli Deo Gloria* Revealed throughout Biblical History," in *Forged from Reformation*, 525–53.

[19] Douglas D. Bookman, "A Whale and an Elephant," in *Forsaking Israel: How It Happened and Why It Matters*, ed. Larry D. Pettegrew, 2nd ed. (The Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2021), 244.

[20] See Bookman, "A Whale and an Elephant," 246–7 for further elaboration on this point.

[21] I cannot help but mention in passing the popular-level self-confessed "allegorical" approach of W. Ian Thomas—"Before Mordecai could come into the life of the king, he had first to come into the life of Esther, just as the Holy Spirit must first be restored to the human spirit before He can begin to take control within the human soul. Esther, the queen, will represent the human spirit, just as Ahasuerus, the king, represents the human soul" (*If I Perish, I Perish: The Christian Life as Seen in Esther* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1967], 37).

[22] Michael G. Wechsler, "Shadow and Fulfillment in the Book of Esther," *BibSac* 154, no. 615 (1997): 277.

[23] Wechsler, "Shadow and Fulfillment," 280.

[24] Wechsler, "Shadow and Fulfillment," 284.

[25] Wechsler, "Shadow and Fulfillment," 280. For a helpful critique of typology as a hermeneutical methodology that nonetheless affirms individual types, see Michael J. Vlach, *Dispensational Hermeneutics* (Sun Valley, CA: Theological Studies Press, 2023), 45.

[26] Ian M. Duguid, "But Did They Live Happily Ever After? The Eschatology of the Book of Esther," *WTJ* 68, no. 1 (2006): 88.

allegiance.[27] The ending of the story does not completely fulfill expectations, because Xerxes is still king and the Jews long for a king who will fulfill Psalm 72.[28]

There is nothing wrong *theologically* with either of these two perspectives, and Duguid's portrayal of the characters' struggle with where their allegiance should truly lie has merit, though it has been articulated elsewhere more convincingly as a struggle between their Jewish identity vs. their Diaspora Persian identity.[29]

Both perspectives, however, err in forcing the characters of the story to fit a particular mode that they were not intended to fit. Regarding Wechsler, it boggles the mind that a woman who married a pagan king, and who fasts but doesn't necessarily pray, can somehow typologically represent Jesus Christ's being raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of the Father.[30] Like many other popular typologies (e.g., Abraham's servant typologically representing the Holy Spirit going to find a wife for Jacob, who typologically represents Jesus Christ), it raises more problems than it solves. At a minimum, the characterization of Xerxes/Ahasuerus in the text does not give credence to the idea that he typifies the Father, as heavily implied in Wechsler's model. Esther, first and foremost, "represents" a Jewish woman, and Xerxes, first and foremost, "represents" a pagan emperor.

Ironically, Duguid can be critiqued for the same reason: The pagan king is forced to fit a mode he was never intended to, and so much the worse for the actual data of the text. For example, Duguid argues,

> The rulers of these two kingdoms also invite comparison and contrast. Again, the text makes a verbal connection: The word for wrath (קצף) that is ascribed to Xerxes is elsewhere almost exclusively used to describe God's wrath. Yet once again the differences are more significant than the similarities.[31]

In other words, קצף apparently functions as a key motif to contrast the two idealizations.

Yet this is problematic. Leaving aside Esther 1:12, the *only* place where the word is used to refer to Ahasuerus, of the 33 other times in 31 verses that קצף occurs in the Hebrew Bible[32], the word refers to *human* anger a total of 11 times (Pharaoh—Gen 40:2, 41:10; Moses—Exod 16:20, Lev 10:16, Num 31:14; the Philistine leaders—1 Sam 29:4; Naaman—2 Kgs 5:11; Elisha—2 Kgs 13:19; the Jews in general—Isa 8:21; Jewish leaders—Jer 37:15; Esth 2:21—

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[27] Duguid, "But Did They Live Happily Ever After?", 89–90.

[28] Duguid, "But Did They Live Happily Ever After?", 96.

[29] See the fascinating discussion in Ayelet Seidler, "Jewish Identity on Trial: The Case of Mordecai the Jew," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 17 (2017), especially pages 2, 19–21. Having said that, a *prima facia* reading of the story does seem to indicate that from the narrator's perspective the Jewish people, though "exposed and vulnerable," can still rigorously maintain their ethnic identity while being a part of Gentile society to some degree; after all, "the story of Esther ends with a scene of Jewish-Gentile harmony" (Levenson, "The scroll of Esther," 443, 448).

[30] Mentioning fasting without explicitly mentioning prayer need not imply the absence of the latter (cf. 1 Sam 7:6). Nonetheless, surely Carey A. Moore has a point when he states, "Regardless of physical setting, one would have expected *some mention* of prayer, for unlike the Song of Solomon, in Esther the perilous situation of the Jews demanded it" (*Esther*, ABC [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971], xxxii). Yet this must in turn be balanced with the point that fasting in of itself surely indicates a desperate awareness of a higher power who can influence events (Levenson *Esther*, 19). After all, nobody in ancient times fasted merely to get slimmer!

[31] Duguid, "But Did They Live Happily Ever After?", 88.

[32] Gen 40:2, 41:10; Exod 16:20; Lev 10:6, 10:16; Num 16:22, 31:14; Deut 1:34, 9:7, 9:8, 9:19, 9:22; Josh 22:18; 1 Sam 29:4; 2 Kings 5:11, 13:19; Isa 8:21, 47:6, 54:9, 57:16, 57:17 (x2), 64:5, 64:9; Jer 37:15; Zech 1:2, 1:15 (x2), 8:14; Psalm 106:32; Eccl 5:6; Lam 5:22; Esth 2:21. Lexical searches performed with *Accordance* 11.2.4 (OakTree Software, 2016).

Ahasuerus' two servants which attempted to assassinate him). Sixty-seven percent is hardly "almost exclusively," and the fact that the two occurrences in the Joseph narrative refer to Pharaoh should give the reader pause, in light of the possible intertextual allusions in Esther to the Joseph story in Genesis.[33]

The fact is, Ahasuerus is neither a villain nor a hero, and thus should represent neither God nor the devil. He is a "buffoon"[34] who allows Haman to manipulate his "stupidity and mental laziness."[35] Even the beginning of the story paints a picture of an emperor given to hysterical over-reaction over Vashti's refusal.[36]

On the other hand, Ahasuerus' "spontaneity and malleability" caution us from treating him as "a villain like Haman. He is passionate and thoughtless at points, but never the calculating manipulator in the manner of Haman."[37] Respecting the authorial intent in his development of character is key to developing a dispensational theology of Esther, and it is to this topic that we shall now turn.

Characterization in Esther: "Noble, yet Spiritually Distant"

We will start with a discussion of the characters first, because it overlaps with the two theological themes that we are also discussing.[38] We have already briefly touched on the role of Ahasuerus in Esther, as paradigmatic of problems that arise when a literal reading of the text, including giving due diligence to authorial intent, is not wholly embraced. The same problem occurs with Haman as well, when ideologically driven authors attempt to rehabilitate him as a martyr, or at least somebody that should be treated more sympathetically.[39] The inspired author tells us that Haman is a villain, and so he should remain a villain.

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[33] For helpful discussions on Esther's possible use of the Joseph narrative, see Berg, *Book of Esther:* 123–165, 174–77; Gabriel F. Hornung, "The Theological Import of MT Esther's Relationship to the Joseph Story," *CBQ* 82 (2020): 567–81; Gary Edward Schnittjer, *Old Testament Use of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 613–6.

[34] Frederic W. Bush, "The Book of Esther: 'Opus non gratum' in the Christian Canon," *BBR* 8, no. 1 (1998): 44.

[35] Alexander Green, "Power, Deception, and Comedy: The Politics of Exile in the Book of Esther," *Jewish Political Studies Review* 23, no. 1–2 (2011), 65. For similar discussions of Ahasuerus as less of a villain and more of a comedic figure or an emotionally feeble figure, see also Elliot B. Gertel, "Divine and Human Anger and Grace: The Scroll of Esther and Exodus 32–34," *JBQ* 40, no. 3 (2012): 155; Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther*, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 71; Robert D. Bell, *The Theological Messages of the Old Testament Books* (Greenville, SC: Journeyforth Academic, 2010), 191; Levenson, *Esther*, 48.

[36] As Moore states, "That the king should have been infuriated at his queen's defiance is just as understandable as his subsequent removal of her as queen; but that he should have brought into full play the communication system of the entire Persian empire for such a purpose is ridiculous. Then again, drunken men sometimes are ridiculous" (*Esther*, 14).

[37] W. Lee Humphreys, "The Story of Esther and Mordecai: An Early Jewish Novella," in *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature*, ed. George W. Coats, JSOTSupp 35 (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1985), 108.

[38] Regarding the controversial topic of the genre of Esther, I am content to follow the lead of Forrest S. Weiland that it is "heroic narrative literature" ("Historicity, Genre, and Narrative Design in the Book of Esther," *BibSac* 159, no. 634 (2002): 158. I am also open to John F. Klem's suggestion that it should be understood as "covenant history" (Klem, "An Investigation of Esther as an Episode of Covenant History in a Foreign Court," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 7, no. 1 (2003): 81.

[39] See Rugwiji, "Critical Evaluation," especially pages 1, 4–6.

Yet we are now forced to ask the more difficult question, how do Mordecai and Esther function in the text?[40] We have already noted that the more liberal perspectives of the 1800s and early 1900s, goaded on by the ghost of Martin Luther, offer scathing critiques, to the point of denying the entire books' value in the canon.[41] Such treatments can be dismissed outright for our purposes.

On the other side of the coin, wholesale positive treatments of the characters are rarer in modern academic treatments, compared to sermons or devotional books, but they do exist. Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman is assumed by some to be due to "his monotheistic faith."[42] Consequently, Mordecai must be "a true Jew, who clung tenaciously to his kindred, who refused to render to any man the honour and worship due only to God, and in whose character is no trace of vanity or worldly ambition, . . ."[43] Esther, then, "is presented a young, beautiful and patriotic Jewess, who risked everything for the sake of her oppressed people."[44] In contrast to "the corruption of the Persian court of Xerxes," Esther manifests high "standards of devotion and self-sacrifice."[45] Indeed, her activity implies a deep faith: "Her life, she clearly understood, was in God's hands . . ."[46]

Such perspective may be correct, in theory, but they do not answer the difficult questions that are raised by the text itself. We see no clear indication that Mordecai's refusal to bow involved refusing worship (though this interpretation goes back as far as Josephus, at least).[47] Both of the words used to describe what Mordecai refused to do (כרע and חוה) are used in positive contexts, where a character bows out of respect to another human, not out of worship—e.g., Gen 23:7, 12; Gen 27:29; Ruth 2:10; 1 Sam 20:41; 2 Sam 18:21; 2 Kings 1:13.[48] The narrator simply does not say *why* Mordecai did not bow, though the author may be hinting that Mordecai's Jewish identity may be clashing with Haman's Agagite (a.k.a. Amalekite) identity.[49] Some suggest that what we have in 3:1 is merely a political rivalry, though this also reads too much into what is not clearly stated.[50]

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[40] For a helpful overview of the competing positive and negative perspectives on the book's characters, see Chloe Tse Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence: Studies in the Song of Songs and Esther* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2021), 274.

[41] To be fair, despite his disdain for the book, Martin Luther never tried to rehabilitate Haman (see the helpful discussion in Isaac Kalimi, "Martin Luther, the Jews, and Esther: Biblical Interpretation in the Shadow of Judeophobia," *Journal of Religion* 100, no. 1 [2020]: 42–74). For a helpful dispensational overview and critique of Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies*, see Brian Moulton and Cory M. Marsh, "How Dispensational Thought Corrects Luther's View of Israel," in *Forged from Reformation*, 189–194 and 205–209.

[42] Eugene H. Merrill, "A Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther," in *A Biblical Theology of the Old Testament*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 202.

[43] W. Graham Scroggie, *The Unfolding Drama of Redemption: The Bible as a Whole*, 3 vols. in 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1972), 472.

[44] Scroggie, *The Unfolding Drama*, 472.

[45] J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962), 349.

[46] Merrill, "Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther," 202.

[47] See *J. A.* 11.210.

[48] Contrast this with, e.g., Josh 23:16; 1 Kings 8:54; 1 Kings 19:18. Clearly context indicates whether the text is indicating *worship* or *respect*.

[49] E.g., Charles D. Harvey, "Probing Moral Ambiguity: Grappling with Ethical Portraits in the Hebrew Story of Esther," *SBJT* 2, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 67; André Lacocque, "Haman dans le Livre D'Esther," *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 121, no. 3 (1989): 310; Moore, *Esther*, 42.

[50] Jonathan Magonet, "The God Who Hides: Some Jewish Responses to the Book of Esther," *European Judaism* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 113.

Regarding Esther, surely anybody familiar at all with the Torah must squirm in discomfort at her marrying a pagan, especially considering the book's LXX (and modern) canonical placement directly after Ezra and Nehemiah (see especially Neh 13:25–27). The objection that she had no choice (a common objection with my students!) rings hollow. The narrator does not give the impression that she was being raped, and surely God does not force His children into a position where they have no choice but to sin.[51] Again, the possibly deliberate parallel with Joseph (who resisted a similar temptation) is worth considering.[52] Simply giving Mordecai and Esther a free pass on their actions raises canonical red flags, at a minimum.

Many modern scholars take a significantly dimmer view of the morality of the characters (though evangelical scholars obviously do so without jettisoning the inerrancy of the book itself). Bruce Waltke and Charles Yu speak for many when they argue that "the dispersed Jews in this book are only nominal covenant people"; indeed, the fact that Esther keeps her ethnic identity secret "is entailing that, contrary to the Law of Moses, she does not separate herself from pagan practices, unlike Daniel and his three friends."[53] Ronald W. Pierce, for one, devotes about seven pages to excoriating our heroes for their "compromise."[54] Even the more sympathetic Sidnie White Crawford notes bluntly, "There is no indication that either Esther or Mordecai is obedient to the Torah; in fact, quite the opposite is true. Esther is married to a Gentile, eats non-kosher food, and appears to be so thoroughly assimilated that her husband and his court are unaware that she is a Jew."[55]Thus, while it may be true that "quick and condemning conclusions" against Esther should be avoided, this does not dispense with the fact that she does seem, from a biblical perspective, at least somewhat remiss in certain areas.[56]

And yet . . . Something is amiss, as soon as we bring the failings of the heroes, as legitimate as they may be, onto center stage. The following statement by Karen Jobes is *apropos* here:

> The divinely inspired author of the Book of Esther refrains from passing moral judgment on his hero and heroine, though he could easily have done so (and we might wish that he had!) The ambiguity of their spiritual and moral state is purposeful and contributes an important element to the book's message. Despite their questionable decisions and

[51] Regarding the former point, the reader should simply compare the language of Esther 2:12–18 with 2 Sam 13:11–15. It is also worth noting that the word used in Esther 2:8 (לקח, "taken") is the same word used in 2:15 to describe how Mordecai "had taken" Esther to be his daughter (I am indebted to Forrest S. Weiland, "Literary Clues to God's Providence in the Book of Esther," *BibSac* 160, no. 637 [2003]: 41, for bringing this point to my attention). There is nothing inherently violent in the word itself, though contextual clues can obviously supply the implication of violence.

[52] Karen H. Jobes points out how Esther 2:17 and Genesis 39:9 together create a troubling contrast ("'For Such a Time as This': A Defining Moment in Christian Ministry," *Faith and Mission* 14, no. 1 (1996): 3–4.

[53] Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan,, 2007), 767.

[54] Ronald W. Pierce, "The Politics of Esther and Mordecai: Courage or Compromise?," *BBR* 2 (1992): 82–88. Similarly, Titus Kennedy, "God's Message through Secular Society in the Book of Esther," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 14, no. 1 (2009): 25–30.

[55] Sidnie White Crawford, "The Book of Esther," in *Kings–Judith*, The New Interpreters Bible vol. 3 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999), 866.

[56] Harvey, "Probing Moral Ambiguity," 70. Again, though, some take the criticism too far, especially older scholars. It is absurd, for example, to attribute to Esther's fasting a "delusive formalism which is substitute for true religion" (so Charles Edward Smith, "The Book of Esther," *BibSac* 82, no. 328 [1925]: 398).

behavior at the end of the story both Mordecai and Esther are renowned for their leadership of God's people.[57]

We must concede her point. The narrator does not condemn the protagonists. Furthermore, the protagonists end up in a considerably better situation at the end than at the beginning, in contrast to Samson, for example. How can a story possible teach the moral of "don't be like the protagonists" when the protagonists end up in a better situation at the end then they do at the beginning? This would be akin to Wilhelm Busch's infamous "Max and Moritz" hooligans if, rather than being ground in the mill after one too many pranks, they suddenly discover a hidden treasure and run away to live in luxury.

Where does that leave us? Mordecai and Esther are heroes, but they are heroes who remain oddly distant from almost everything sacred in the Torah.[58]

They are heroes because the inspired author portrays them as fighting a great evil, facing a fate that is obviously not God's will (the annihilation of the Jewish race), and then triumphing in the midst of adversity.[59] In other words, they are heroes, not just protagonists, because when they accomplish their task the world is a better place and the Jews, God's people, are safe.

The book clearly ends on a positive note in this regard, because the narrator inextricably links Mordecai's greatness with the welfare and the peace (*shalōm*) of his people (10:3).[60] This constitutes an unambiguously positive portrayal by the narrator, one that is too hurriedly swept under the rug by any perspective that focuses almost-exclusively on the protagonists' failings (as this professor has done in the past!).

Furthermore, from a strictly literary perspective, the narrator unashamedly focuses on "human wisdom, initiative, and action."[61] Indeed, even granting that the author assumes the existence of God and his intentions to protect the race, nonetheless the story "indicates that the survival of the people of Israel depends upon the actions of individual Jews who willingly identify themselves as members of a Jewish community."[62] In other words, the self-initiated actions of Esther and Mordecai are highlighted as the key to the happy ending. This stands in stark contrast to the ending of Judges, where everybody's "initiative" in seeking out their own will underscores a miserable ending that can only be alleviated by the coming king (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25).

In the midst of human heroism, however, the absence of the divine name is troubling, and is *deliberately meant* to be troubling.[63] Granted, there may be hints that Mordecai and/or Esther recognized a divine force behind history (we will discuss this below). Yet F. B. Huey is not

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[57] Jobes, "For Such a Time as This," 5. Similarly, Weiland, "Literary Clues," 38.

[58] I am content here with a simple definition of "hero" that reflects common usage: "A hero is someone who has done something brave, new, or good, and who is therefore greatly admired by a lot of people." Collins' English Dictionary, s.v. "hero," definition #2, online: https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/hero, accessed 7/17/2023. For a discussion of the complexity of defining "hero," especially in the book of Esther, see Kevin McGeough, "Esther the Hero: Going Beyond 'Wisdom' in Heroic Narratives," *CBQ* 70 (2008): 51–7.

[59] Similarly, Weiland appropriately speaks of the "heroic features" of the plot ("LIterary Clues, 35").

[60] Gertel, "Divine and Human Anger and Grace," 157.

[61] Loader, "Das Buch Ester," 225; similarly, Crawford, "Book of Esther," 867–8.

[62] Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure*, SBLDiss 44 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1979), 184; Similarly, Baldwin, *Esther*, 38, and Andrews J. Köstenberger and Gregory Goswell, *Biblical Theology: A Canonical, Thematic, and Ethical Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 314.

[63] As Gregory R. Goswell notes, "The omission of any mention of God is deliberate and must be viewed as an authorial strategy" ("Keeping God out of the Book of Esther," *EvQ* 82, no. 2 [2010]: 99).

being unreasonable when he suggests that the book may be intended "to show that God's displeasure may be manifested by his silence."[64]

Lest we forget, it is not merely God's name that is lacking, but also "Jerusalem, the Temple, the Law, the Covenant, sacrifice, prayer, love, forgiveness"; almost everything that is sacred in the Old Testament![65] We know that Esther, at least, violates the Torah in acting out a key plot point (marrying a pagan). In addition to that, in light of Esther 2:10, one may suggest that Esther and Mordecai thought that revealing Esther's ethnic and spiritual identity would cause them problems, hardly a faith-filled attitude.[66] Appeals to their survival instinct ring hollow, in light of Daniel and Nehemiah. If Daniel could *openly* obey the Torah and not be executed (cf. Dan 1:8–16 and 6:4–23), why not Esther and Mordecai?

Furthermore, while we dogmatically assert that the inspired narrator believed that Yahweh, the sovereign, unique God of the universe, was working behind the scenes to protect the Jewish race, this is an entirely different issue from the question of how the narrative portrays what the *two protagonists themselves* believe. The best we can assume from a fair reading of the text is that they believe in a "hidden force" that looks out for them.[67] This is not the divinely-inspired author's perspective, obviously, but it is the author's divinely-inspired presentation of the characters.[68] In other words, simply because our canonical consciousness informs us that the *narrator* has the right view of God, this does not mean that *Mordecai* or *Esther* do.

We must conclude three things, then: (1.) Esther and Mordecai act heroically; (2.) Esther and Mordecai show virtually no awareness of spiritual matters (notwithstanding a few possible exceptions); (3.) Consequently, the narrator portrays Esther and Mordecai acting heroically while existing at a spiritual distance from God and his word.

Esther and Mordecai, then, are like David Ben-Gurion. They are worthy of our praise, but they are not spiritual role models, nor should they be pressed into that mold. They are similar to many Jews today, whom God sovereignly protects while silently watching in the shadows.

The Hidden Sovereignty of God

God sovereignly works behind the scenes in Esther. This statement is rightly taken for granted *theologically* by virtually all evangelicals, and we dogmatically assume that the divinely inspired narrator of Esther would agree. Furthermore, God is sovereignly working even when He providentially makes use of flawed human beings rather than miracles.[69]

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[64] F. B. Huey Jr., "Esther," in *1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra,, Nehemiah, Esther, Job*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 780.

[65] John C. Whitcomb, *Esther* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 20.

[66] Weiland, "Literary Clues," 42.

[67] Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 21. I believe Levenson errs when contrasting the theology of the *narrator* of the book of Esther with the rest of the OT authors. Yet he is surely correct to contrast the "theology" of the *characters* of the book with the rest of the OT.

[68] If I may offer a snarky opinion, to see authentically pious Jewish faith in the narrator's description of Esther and Mordecai is analogous to suggesting that Thomas Jefferson was a born-again Christian, or that Erasmus was one short step removed from being an Anabaptist.

[69] Crawford, "Book of Esther," 873.

Arguably the strongest reason for glimpsing God behind the scenes in Esther is that the sheer number of "coincidences" surely "strain the law of probability."[70] For one example of many, how lucky it was for the Jews that Ahasuerus just so happened to lack sleep one night, just so happened to decide to have the court chronicles read to him, and it just so happened that the servant started reading about Mordecai![71] In addition, arguments for allusions to God in Esther can be made, e.g., 4:14, though these are debatable.

While the theme of hidden sovereignty obviously exists in Esther, it cannot qualify as the *unassisted* primary theme precisely because of the author's deliberate choice not to include God's name. This silence speaks volumes, because "choice implies meaning."[72] The author deliberately chose not to include any direct reference to God, when direct reference to God could very easily have advanced the theme of sovereignty, even hidden sovereignty.[73]

For example, many scholars point out that Esther contains parallels to the story of Joseph, probably deliberate parallels.[74] The Joseph narrative arc obviously focuses on divine sovereignty, even hidden sovereignty to a certain degree, since other than the dreams, God does not speak to Joseph directly, yet is constantly orchestrating events behind the scenes for the welfare of Joseph, his family, and even Egypt. Nonetheless, Moses deliberately chose to invoke the divine name quite often, beginning with 39:2.

Similarly, Job clearly grapples with God's hidden workings and plans (Job 13:24); whereas the audience is privileged to know what is going on, Job never receives an explanation. Yet obviously God is explicitly mentioned quite frequently. Equally obvious is the fact that God is in some way hidden from Job, even at the end (Job never understands why he suffered).

The point, then, is that the absence of any direct reference to God in Esther begs for an explanation beyond simply "hidden sovereignty," since "hidden sovereignty" could still function as a theme even with direct references to God.

I propose that this theme can only properly be understood when studied alongside the the characters' spiritual distance from God. God sovereignly works *in spite of* the lack of spiritual relationship with His people. Why? Because the survival of the race brings Him glory.

The Survival of the Jewish Race

This then brings us to the third leg in the three-legged stool of a dispensational Esther, a theme that takes seriously the continuation of the Abraham Covenant and the *unconditional* survival of the race.[75]

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[70] Berg, *Book of Esther*, 104. Also helpful is Bell, *Theological Messages*, 192–3, where he demonstrates how the "coincidences" are so intertwined that "if even one link is missing, the plot would fall apart." Alva J. McClain speaks of "this complex of causation" in the book of Esther where "the unseen 'finger of God' . . . always brings the final decision in the affairs of the universe" (*The Greatness of the Kingdom: An Inductive Study of the Kingdom of God* [Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1974], 28).

[71] Weiland, "Literary Clues," 44.

[72] A common refrain of discourse analysis, e.g., Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2000), viii; Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 5.

[73] As Goswell notes, "The books' repeated portrayal of sudden changes of fortune could easily have become a theology of God's providence, but the author does not allow this to happen" ("Keeping God Out," 102).

[74] See footnote 33, above.

[75] One of the best treatments of the theme of survival in Esther can be found in Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 491–6.

Chapters 1 and 2 in Esther set up the major conflict in the plot, a conflict that is racially charged. Haman's reaction to Mordecai's personal slight threatens an entire race, but only because others had revealed to him who Mordecai's ethnic kinsman were.[76] Michael Fox's characterization is *apropos*:

> [Haman's] motive is simple and petty: revenge for a personal insult. Haman excels only in the magnitude of his drives. In his arrogance, he must do things, however petty, in a grand way, so he decides to exterminate *all* of Mordecai's people in Xerxes' *entire* kingdom.[77]

The narrator further describes Haman's manipulation of the king. When Haman declares to the king that "there is a certain people" (v. 8, NKJV; עַם־אֶחָד), he in effect "makes them into an anonymous people without personality," counting on the cluelessness and lethargy of the king; after all, why should Ahasuerus care if "one insignificant people" are killed off?[78]

Chapter 4 further makes clear the frightening reality of the king's decree. Verse 3, especially, focuses on the universality of the decree and its potential ramifications, along with the immense distress it caused the Jewish people.[79]

Despite the danger, however, Esther provides clues as to the "inviolability of the Jewish people."[80] As Berg notes, the theme of Jewish survival *as a race* begins even with Mordecai's genealogy in 2:5–6.[81] In 4:14, Mordecai, presumably reflecting the narrator's view at least to a certain degree, expresses a strong hope (dare we call it *faith*?) that the Jewish race will survive regardless of what Esther does.[82]

More significantly, in 6:13, when Haman tells Zeresh and his friends that he has been one-upped by Mordecai the Jew, they in turn express a sentiment that could arguably be taken to represent the central truth of the entire book: because Mordecai is a Jew, Haman will surely fail.[83] The book of Esther constitutes a warning of *lex talionis* to any Gentile that would attempt to harm God's people.[84]

In fact, although Haman is initially depicted as speaking to his wife and all *his friends* (אֹהֲבָיו), in the second *way-yiqutol* clause, the narrator waves his wand and transforms Haman's "friends" into something different: "His wise men" (חֲכָמָיו), a word which only occurs elsewhere in Esther in 1:13. The narrator presents us with a subtle message: one who recognizes the futility of opposing the Jewish race is a wise man.[85]

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[76] See 3:6, כִּי־הִגִּידוּ לוֹ.

[77] Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 46.

[78] Green, "Politics of Exile in the Book of Esther," 65. Loader similarly notes that Haman seems to be deliberately concealing the identity of this group ("Das Buch Ester," 242).

[79] This fear of annihilation is not unique to Esther, as Psalm 83:4 indicates. See Isaac Kalimi, "Furcht vor Vernichtung und der ewige Bund: Das Buch Ester im Judentum und in jüdischer Theologie," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 62, no. 4 (2010): 345–6.

[80] Goswell, "Keeping God out," 102; Berg, *Book of Esther*, 103.

[81] Berg, *Book of Esther*, 103–4

[82] Berg, *Book of Esther*, 104.

[83] Loader well states, "Damit ist ausgesagt, daß Juden grundsätzlich nicht bezwungen werden können" ("Das Buch Ester," 259).

[84] William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 541.

[85] Mervin Breneman, however, suggests that the author is being "ironic" since "they were only wise after Haman started to fall; earlier they advised him to make the gallows for Mordecai" (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NAC [Nashville, TN: B&H, 1993], 346). His suggestion and mine are not mutually exclusive.

The Intersection of the Three Elements

The themes of survival and hidden sovereignty both play an essential role in understanding Esther's theology, and the author's portrayal of the characters helps us understand the canonical significance of those themes. All three points are essential for a dispensational theology of Esther.

Focusing on the theme of hidden sovereignty exclusively, with Esther merely a bump on the highway to Christmas, robs us of the opportunity for God's greater glory revealed in His mercy to an unmeritorious people. In other words, God does not merely keep Israel alive for producing the Messiah and so He can offer salvation (a soteriological focus); He also keeps Israel alive because He receives glory by staying faithful to his covenant with a nation that has collectively taxed his patience and lost all right to claim his grace (a doxological focus).[86] Sometimes this rescue is accomplished subtly, with God hidden behind the stage; sometimes it is accomplished openly and dramatically, as when our Jewish Messiah returns at the end of the Tribulation.

Yet when the theme of hidden sovereignty is combined with an overly-optimistic view of the characters, viewing them as *spiritual* role models, we lose sight of the incongruous nature of sovereign protection.[87] The narrator deliberately and blatantly avoids any attempt to elevate the characters as *spiritual* role models, at least if the Old Testament canon is to be our guide.[88] Nonetheless, they are plucky and courageous and worthy of our praise; they are *not*, however, "worthy" of God's rescue (but then, nobody is).

On the other hand, the theme of survival, combined with the author's *intended* characterization but at the expense of hidden sovereignty, would leave us with a plucky and lucky race surviving strictly on their own grit and skill, because God, if he ever existed, has retreated into the shadows.[89] Canonical awareness prohibits such an understanding.[90]

Fortunately for the Jewish people their own survival against hateful Hitlers and Hamans does not depend on their own ingenuity and a whole lot of luck. Behind the roll of the dice, bizarre beauty pageants, and sleepless nights for gullible Persian kings exists the throne of Yahweh, who keeps watch over His own.

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[86] I am not a theologian, and thus I confess my indebtedness to three sources here for helping me think through this key theological distinction: Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*; Cone, "*Soli Deo Gloria* as Pinnacle of Dispensationalism's *Sine Qua Non*," and Smith, "*Soli Deo Gloria* Revealed throughout Biblical History."

[87] I am drawing here from John M. G. Barclay's use of this term ("incongruous") in *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 554.

[88] I acknowledge that Robert Gordis has a point when he declares, "It is fundamental to the Jewish world-outlook that the preservation of the Jewish people is itself a religious obligation of the first magnitude. . . . Jewish survival is not merely an expression of the human instinct of self-preservation, but a Divine commandment" (*Megillat Esther: The Masoretic Text with Introduction, New Translation and Commentary* [New York: Ktav, 1974], 13). Nonetheless, it is not a duty expressly commanded in the Torah, though undoubtedly it is implied.

[89] Some a perspective exists—e.g., the Jewish philosopher Emil Frackenheim z'l (see the discussion in Magonet, "The God Who Hides," 115).

[90] Brevard Childs aptly argues that Esther precludes "all attempts to spiritualize the concept of Israel," but that also "the canonical shape of Esther has built into the fabric of the book a theological criticism of all forms of Jewish nationalism which occurs whenever 'Jewishness' is divorced from the sacred traditions which constitute the grounds of Israel's existence under God" (*Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1979], 606–7).

Tying It All Together in a Canonical Package with a Dispensational Bow

Any orthodox theological perspective on Esther must take seriously the significance of Genesis 12:1–3.[91] As Weiland aptly declares, "Haman's plot struck at the heart of the Abrahamic Covenant."[92]

Yet dispensationalists should further view Esther through the lens of Romans 9–11. The Jews in Esther, the Jews in Paul's day, and the Jews today (together with all of us!) are unworthy of God's grace (this keeps us from naive hagiography *vis-à-vis* the modern state of Israel). Nonetheless, God still refuses to totally abandon them. In the immortal words of C. E. B. Cranfield,

> We shall misunderstand [Romans 9–11] if we fail to recognize that their key-word is "mercy." . . . It is only where the Church persists in refusing to learn this message, where it secretly—perhaps quite unconsciously!—believes that its own existence is based on human achievement, and so fails to understand God's mercy to itself, that it is unable to believe in God's mercy for unbelieving Israel, and so entertains the ugly and unscriptural notion that God has cast off His people Israel and simply replaced it by the Christian Church.[93]

The dispensationalist views the Abrahamic Covenant through the lens of Romans 9–11 and believes that it must apply even to a race that has drifted away spiritually. This, after all, is precisely why Babylon, God's instrument of judgment, is judged in Jer 50:15–18. Those who harm the Jewish race, especially those who attempt to annihilate it, will be cursed, *regardless of the Jewish race's collective spiritual consciousness at that time*.[94]

Yet the converse is also true: "I will bless those who bless you." We see this in a number of ways in Esther. First, in 2:18, Esther's rise to power is depicted as immediately benefitting the provinces. In Michael V. Fox's words, "The author is hinting that when things go well with the Jews, others benefit too."[95] Second, in 2:19–23, Mordecai's intervention, from a position of authority granted to him by a pagan, against would-be assassins, benefits the empire. Third, the book is far from anti-Gentile, and at multiple points throughout the book Jews and Gentiles exist in a tolerable, perhaps even cordial, relationship.[96] Fourth, the closing of the book inextricably links the greatness of the king (and thus the empire) with the greatness of Mordecai (10:2). Ahasuerus, and so Persia, remain great because of Mordechai, and Mordechai becomes great because of Ahasuerus (and Persia).[97] Even the taxation Ahasuerus enacts is not meant to be

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[91] E.g., Sun, *Conspicuous in His Absence*, 268.

[92] Weiland, "Literary Clues," 45–46.

[93] C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 of 2, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979): 662–3; similarly, Michael J. Vlach, *He Will Reign Forever: A Biblical Theology of the Kingdom of God* (Silverton, OR: Lampion, 2017), 145; Douglas Harink, *Paul among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003), 179.

[94] No matter what point in history we are at, then, the Jewish race occupies "a special place in divine purpose" (Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 296–7).

[95] Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 38.

[96] Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 219; Crawford, "Book of Esther," 869.

[97] Jon D. Levenson suggests that the idea that Jews can even "benefit Gentiles kings" is a part of the main point of Esther (*Esther*, 21–22).

viewed negatively, as if it were the opposite of 2:18, but rather the normative sign of power, subsumed under v. 2's mention of "all the acts of his power and his might" (NKJV).[98]

In other words, Esther points us to Israel's continued special role, even today (*without* affirming her perfection), and also teaches us that if we allow the Jewish people to flourish, we may benefit as well. Conversely, the potential Hamans of this world would due well to remember that the Jewish race, both then and now, survives against all odds at the expense of their attackers.

The reason for this is that Israel's preservation, now as in Esther, gives glory to God, despite her distance from God (Ezek 36:32–38). To deny the ultimate survival and rescue of the Jewish race is to deny God the opportunity at greater glory. Moses' objections in Exod 32:11–13 would ring even more true today.

The Diaspora Jewish people in Esther are analogous to the Jewish race today (both in Israel and abroad)—courageous and intelligent, devoted to survival, with the potential to benefit Gentile nations, yet, sadly lacking a personal relationship with God and his Son, Jesus Christ.[99] Their survival as a race is guaranteed, culminating in their collective conversion in Rom 11:26–27, regardless of their current spiritual condition.

Conclusion

Esther's contribution to canonical theology, let alone dispensational theology, remains generally unappreciated today. The book's theological, ethical, and historical difficulties have dissuaded many of the brighter theological minds in history from giving it a fair shake, though this very point promises to pay dividends to any serious and fair student.[100]

A dispensational reading of Esther affirms hidden divine sovereignty as a significant theme, yet does not shy away from an honest appraisal of her characters or the centrality of the survival of the race. Indeed, the hiddenness of God is amplified by the spiritual distance of her characters from God, and yet, *despite* all this, the Jewish race survives against all odds.

Consequently, the temporary silence of God in Esther does not ultimately detract from His glory. God does not, of course, "need" the Jewish race, since the Messiah is already born. Yet God has chosen to preserve the Jewish race as the instrument of manifesting his glorious mercy and covenant-faithfulness, not merely as the instrument of his salvation.

Furthermore, God's silence *today* as the Jews fight for survival is even more significant than his silence back then, because it promises even more "incongruity" when we finally see the

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[98] We would do well to hearken to the words of T. E. N. Pennell, writing during WW2: "Knowledge and appreciation of the contribution of Judaism to our present good must be made widespread. Jewish experience has been one of the major factors determining European history, civilization, and culture" ("Esther and Antisemitism," *The Expository Times* 55, no. 9 [1942], 240).

[99] In that sense, the book of Esther remains relevant in regards to the Jewish race today regardless of whether or not they are dwelling in the land (though I agree with Craig Blaising that "the modern nationalization of Israel" is "a preconsummate act of God" (Blaising, "Biblical Hermeneutics: How Are We to Interpret the Relation between the Tanak and the New Testament on This Question?," in *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 99. In addition, our affirmation of the special nature of the Jewish race should not prevent us from inviting them to the Messiah. They are, in many ways, "'stranded,' knowing their identity and yet finding little positive satisfaction in it" (Baldwin, *Esther*, 39–40). For a helpful, though dated, discussion of the secular nature of Jewish society in Israel, see Kac, *Rebirth of the State of Israel*, 93.

[100] Bardtke, "Das Buch Esther," 243.

fulfillment of Romans 11:26a.[101] The credit that has not yet been given to God in preserving the Jewish race, whether it be from the machinations of Haman, Hitler, or Hezbollah, will be repaid him a million-fold at the Parousia.

> Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him? For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen (Rom 11:33–36).

[101] Again, see the discussion on Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 554.