

418 Israel and Iran

Following on from last week's brief survey of some key issues for us to keep our Christian eyes on in 2021, this time we home in on Israel and Iran, formerly known as Persia. Because both nations are located in the highly volatile Middle East, with America, Russia and China jostling for dominance, the Iran-Israel conflict is pivotal in our times and involves at its heart the old, old clash between God's truths and Satan's lies.

In the Book of Esther is the marvellous account of God's protection of His covenant people the Jews from the threat of extermination by the Persian regime: nothing new there then. One of the ironies of the Book is that there is not one mention of the Lord God from start to finish, yet His protective presence is sensed throughout. The year is around 515 BC, when some of the Jews under Ezra have returned to Jerusalem but many remain in exile in Babylon, now conquered by Persia. In the account we have a powerful, silly king, Ahasuerus (1.1); a righteous, caring Jewish citizen, Mordecai (2.5-7); a proud, ambitious, scheming villain, Haman (3.1-2); and Hadassah, Esther, a beautiful young Jewess, the adopted daughter of Mordecai, and now the newly-made queen in the highly-dangerous Persian court (2.15-23). The scene is thus set for the clash between God and His covenant people on the one hand, and Satan and his worldly lackeys on the other.

The plot thickens as Haman argued before the king concerning the Jews that "it [is] not for the king's profit to suffer them" (3.8end, KJV). A decree was duly sent out "into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day ... and [to take] the spoil of them for a prey ... And the king and Haman sat down to drink; but the city of Shushan was perplexed" – and so were the Jews (from 3.13, 15end / 4.1-3). The parallels are all too obvious with the Nazi Holocaust and with similar threats of today made against Israel by Iran and her Hizbollah and Hamas proxies.

Mordecai stressed to Esther that she was the key to saving her people the Jews – "who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (4.13-14). Esther's unauthorised approach to the king, even though she was the queen, would be full of risk, but she resolved to do the right thing, simply saying, "if I perish, I perish" (4.11, 16end). By God's grace and protection, when Esther stood before the king, "she obtained favour in his sight ..." (5.2).

At this stage Esther simply invited the king and Haman to a banquet (5.4-8). Haman was “chuffed to bits” (5.9a,11-12) and had a huge set of gallows built on which to hang Mordecai for his refusal to pay Haman due respect (5.13-14).

Chapter 6 is delightful! – a beautiful “turning of the tables”; Haman’s wife Zeresh had rather more spiritual insight than her husband (6.13). The truth finally came out at Esther’s second banquet (7.1-10), justice was done, “then was the king’s wrath pacified” (7.10end).

In Chapters 8, 9 and 10, the king’s foolish decree was reversed; “the Jews had light, and gladness, and joy, and honour ... a feast and a good day” (from 8.16-17; 9.17-19); enemies of the Jews were slain (9.5-16); the annual 2-day feast of Purim was established (9.20-32); and Mordecai was “next unto the king ... great among the Jews ... accepted of the multitude of his brethren, seeking the wealth of his people, and speaking peace to all his seed” (from 10.3) – hence emerging as a clear “type” of Christ as Messiah and Lord.

God the Father, who had been quietly overseeing the situation from behind the scenes throughout, has included this wonderful story in His Word for the guidance and blessing of both His Old and New Covenant peoples, who will be finally brought together in Christ. Today the Jews of Israel, while still largely in unbelief concerning Jesus as their Messiah (praise God, that is to change, eg., Romans 11.25), remain highly gifted in so many areas of expertise, not least in military capability which is just as well. Despite some recent peace agreements with various Arab neighbours, Israel is still surrounded by enemies, notably Iran, and needs meaningful support from western countries, especially the United States; the expectation is that such support may well dwindle under a Biden presidency.

Mordecai and Esther acted with faith and courage to protect their people the Jews, the “apple of God’s eye” (Deuteronomy 32.10). We have abundant evidence that God still loves the Jews, and so there is no good reason why we, as branches of that “wild olive tree” by God’s grace in Christ, should not love them too (egs., Genesis 12.1-3 / Psalm 122.6-9 / Matthew 10.42 / Romans 11.1a,17-36).

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