Esther - Commentaries by Henri L. Rossier

Esther, Chapter 2: The Jews

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If we consider them as they are now, we see a people, formerly recognized of God as His people in the land which Jehovah had given to them, now far from their land, dispersed and subjected to the power of the nations, apparently forsaken of God. I say apparently, for one always sees the hand of God behind the scenes directing all the circumstances and keeping even the simplest ones in view and it is just this which lends the book of Esther its great significance and keen interest.

The Jews1 thus are viewed as a people dispersed throughout all the nations of the vast empire of Ahasuerus. Nevertheless, though in the midst of nations, they always remained Jews, a separate people by their manners, their customs, their religion and their observances. Their great enemy, Haman, adjudged them well by this report; however, he added a wicked and false trait to his description. “There is,” said he to Ahasuerus, “a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king’s laws; therefore, it is not for the king’s profit to suffer them. If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed” (ch. 3:8-9).

All of Haman’s report about the Jews was true, except the accusation of insubmission to the king’s laws. They obeyed them for conscience sake (see Dan. 3:6-18; 6:4-16). The ordinances and prohibitions of their God were above every commandment and every injunction of man whoever he might be. “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). But the accusation of Haman was not truthful. On this point we would remark that generally the enemies of the faithful have made use of this weapon against them to bring down upon them the rigors of the authorities and hatred of the people.

The Jews accused Jesus before Pilate saying: “We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar. ... He stirreth up the people” (Luke 23:2-5). Later the masters of the damsel possessed with a spirit of Python, frustrated in their hope of much gain, drew Paul and Silas before the magistrates. “These men,” they said, “being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city, and teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans” (Acts 16:19-21). Likewise this accusation is aimed at Paul by Tertullus (Acts 24:5). There were also the martyrs of the first centuries, refusing to sacrifice to the emperors’ images. They were considered bad citizens. Do not we find it so, in some measure, in our day? Walking the path of separation as regards that which is of the world, and for conscience sake, always excites enmity and draws the reproaches of the world upon the believer. A Christian does not vote, takes no part in the fairs, the patriotic festivals and public meetings, and he is openly or otherwise said to be a poor citizen. But if we are to be subject to the authorities, to pay taxes, to give honor to whom it is due (Rom. 13:1-7), we have to maintain our separation from the world, manifesting that we are not of the world and that our citizenship is in heaven (John 15:19; 17:16; Phil. 3:20).

Another trait characterizing the Jews in the book of Esther is that a moment arrives when after having become the chosen target, and because of this exposed to shame and contempt, tribulation raised by the adversary overtook them: “If it please the king, let it be written that they may be destroyed.” It is a time of distress beyond compare, everything being against them. They are to be destroyed and it seems there is nothing which can deliver them from it. The decree which demands their death has been rendered in the name of the king, sealed with his ring and sent to all the provinces with orders to the governors to execute it. It could not be revoked according to the law of the Persians (Dan. 6:12-15). It affected all the Jews personally as well as touching their belongings. No one was to escape. “All Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, even upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month Adar” (Esther 3:12-13) were to be destroyed.

This order recalls Pharaoh’s edict of another day but surpasses it with singular cruelty. Do we not see here an image of the tribulation of the last days of which the Lord speaks in these terms: “For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be. And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect’s sake those days shall be shortened” (Matt. 24:21-22). Will there not also be a time of unimaginable distress coming throughout all the Roman Empire, restored by satanic power, when all they who refuse to render homage to the image of the beast will be killed (Rev. 13:15)?

Everywhere, in the days of Esther, enemies of the Jews were found in the domains of Ahasuerus ready to vent their hatred and to execute that cruel decree, fanned all the more by the prospect of plunder. The adversary, the enemy of the people of God, finds, and will always find, willing helpers. But at the same time, the effect the decree produced upon the people of the nations is striking. They felt the stroke which was to fall upon the Jews who had lived in their midst for a long time. “The decree was given in Shushan the palace ... but the city Shushan was perplexed” (ch. 3:15). The evil which menaced the Jews aroused their compassion; this was a public calamity, for without doubt the Jews contributed to everyone’s welfare, and perhaps through them some of the Gentiles had received the knowledge of God. More than one example in the Word shows the influence the Jews of the dispersion had for good or for contempt. Some were led to inquire as to the motives for their separation, and thereby were led to read the Scriptures.

Oh, that our separation might be more real, so that, though misunderstood by the world, we would be as lights and that among those of the world there should be those who would want to know the secret of this life apart from the world and would also be led to Christ! We know also, in view of what will take place at the day of the judgment of the living (Matt. 25:31) that in the coming times when the brethren of the King, the messengers of the “kingdom gospel” will be persecuted, some from among the nations will receive them, and these will not lose their reward.

Is it not also striking to see, in the midst of the consternation of the city of Shushan that “the king and Haman sat down to drink”? The distress of an entire people which was about to perish, and the effect it had upon the population of the city, did not touch them. They sat down to

drink and made merry. Haman, the adversary, envisions the disappearance of the objects of his hatred; that makes him happy. Is that not also what we see at other occasions in the Scriptures? This is especially so when the world has succeeded in getting rid of the light which so exposed them: Christ, the light of the world. “Men loved darkness rather than light” (John 3:19). The world rejoiced, while the saints sorrowed (John 16:20).

Furthermore, after we have been gathered around the Savior, God will raise up, in the midst of an apostate people and a world at enmity, faithful witnesses who will prophesy. The beast that ascends out of the bottomless pit, puts them to death, “and they that dwell upon the earth shall rejoice over them, and make merry, and shall send gifts one to another” (Rev. 11:3-10).

Such is the dreadful hatred of the heart of man against the truth and against all testimony to the truth. They let themselves be led by him who is the father of lies, the adversary of God, the enemy of Christ, who is out after only one thing; he seeks to hinder God’s designs from coming to pass, preventing them every way he can. In fact, in all of Israel’s history and even before this began, we see the effort of Satan to reach his goal of nullifying, if he could, God’s plans. He always has his instruments in readiness for this purpose. He remembers the word pronounced against him in Eden, that the seed of the woman “shall bruise thy head,” and he would like to render the sentence of no effect. At the time of the flood, who was it that involved the human race altogether in corruption and violence? It is Satan hoping that if the entire race disappeared under the judgment of God, the seed of the woman could not appear to bruise his power. God baffled his cunning in sparing Noah “a just man and perfect in his generations,” and who found “grace in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen. 6:7-9).

Later, when God had chosen a people in Abraham who is the father thereof and the depository of the promise, “in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (Gen. 22:18), this people having descended into Egypt, they were greatly multiplied there. How did Satan try to render the promise tied to Israel’s existence of none effect? Pharaoh, frightened at the abundant increase of this people and the dangers which could result for Egypt, gave commandment to destroy all the male children of Israel. Had he succeeded, what would have been the consequence? The gradual extermination of the elect people. What then would have become of the promise? It would have been annulled. Pharaoh acted on political motives it appears; human wisdom motivated him, but who inspired him, who incited him to such cruel measures? It was Satan, the adversary of God.

At the end of the crossing of the desert, Balak, through Balaam, wanted to destroy Israel. He was not permitted to do so, for Jehovah, seeing His people according to His counsels, has not seen iniquity in Jacob (Num. 23:21). Then through Balaam’s counsel he made the Israelites fall into sin. Why? In order that, being deprived of God, and under the curse which Balaam was not able to pronounce, but which their unfaithfulness merited, they could not overcome their enemies and enter into Canaan, the land of promise. But behind Balak and Balaam, we see the hand of Satan, of whom the miserable prophet is the responsible instrument.

The promises are assured unto David and to his posterity. Now what will the enemy do? Athaliah, the impious queen, daughter of Ahab, at the death of her son Ahaziah, took possession of the royal throne of Judah; so that nothing might stop her ambitions she planned to destroy the entire family of David (2 Kings 11:1-3). Only Joash escaped. Who drove Athaliah to this bloodthirsty resolution? Seen from a human viewpoint this was her ambition, but at the bottom of it was Satan who wanted to destroy the race from which Messiah was to come according to promise. In the history of Esther this is instigated by a sentiment of wounded pride and a desire for personal vengeance that made Haman seek to rid himself of Mordecai, but we are told that “he thought scorn to lay hands on Mordecai alone; for they had showed him the people of Mordecai: wherefore Haman sought to destroy all the Jews that were throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus, even the people of Mordecai” (ch. 3:6). This is the wounded pride which demanded a vengeance equal to Haman’s estimation of himself.

But Satan who motivated him aimed at the destruction of all the people from whom the Deliverer was to come. Notice that, in effect, the decree embraced as well all the Jews which on returning to their land had rebuilt the temple, and among them Zerubbabel their governor and ancestor of Christ. Again Satan reckoned on spoiling God’s designs, so he excited the passions of Haman’s heart. How terrible! Man without God is the plaything of his covetousness and thereby the slave and instrument of Satan.

Later, “when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman” (Gal. 4:4), and Satan made a new effort. Herod, fearing to lose his throne, ordered Bethlehem’s infants to be destroyed, thinking to include the “King of the Jews,” whom the wise men had come to seek. Who moved Herod to attempt this because of his love for power? Satan — and we see it clearly in Revelation 12:1-6. The woman (Israel as seen in the counsels of God) gives birth to a son, Christ who should govern the nations with a rod of iron (see Psa. 2). But the dragon, the old serpent which is the devil and Satan, “stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born.” The dragon wanted to make Christ perish at His birth by the hand of Herod; he did not succeed, for God watched over His Son. Next he raised up the priests and elders of the people, exciting their hatred against Christ, and they, by means of the Roman power, the fourth beast, whose characters the dragon carries — seven heads and ten horns (comp. Dan. 7; Rev. 13; 17), nailed Christ to the cross. This resulted in breaking the power of Satan. This is his last unsuccessful effort to annul the promise. The seed of the woman is bruised at the heel but the head of the serpent is crushed by the same stroke. Christ is passed through death that “through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14).

Who can bring to naught the counsels of God? Satan may appear to triumph for a time, but his efforts are always shown to be in vain. At present, though overcome, he still seeks to attack the saints, to hinder their progress; he seeks to deceive and to entice them by means of his instruments, often unconsciously, into false doctrines, by human teachings; if he cannot now move directly against Christ, he tries to have His name dishonored by those who are His, leading them away by the covetousness of their own natural heart. The war has not ceased. After violent persecutions he employs deception to attract the Christian to join up with the world. However, the Christian ought to fight the good fight, put on the whole armor of God, being reminded of the precious Word by Paul: “And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly” (Rom. 16:20). Soon the war will cease by God’s intervention and we will enjoy rest.

Still there will be another outbreak of iniquity upon the earth. This will be during the time of Israel’s distress, the times of sorrowful temptation which shall come upon all the world to try them that dwell upon the earth (Rev. 3:10). During these end times the beast, by Satanic power, will arise out of the abyss to rule over the nations; the false prophet with two horns like a sheep but speaking like a dragon will seduce the people; saints will suffer persecution; the great adversary the dragon will cast out of his mouth water like a flood after the woman to carry her away, that is, the faithful of Israel, but Christ will triumph. The final overthrow of Satan is certain. The divine One, the Lamb, accompanied by His followers, the called ones, elect and faithful, will overcome the kings of the earth, the beast and the false prophet which will have led them

against Him. Thereafter, Satan, will lie bound for a thousand years. After having yet once more seduced the nations and incited them against God and the saints, he will be cast forever into the lake of fire and brimstone (see Rev. 12-13; 17; 19-20). Such are the marvelous ways of God towards His own, such the final triumph of Christ over His enemies.

Let us return to the book of Esther. What about the Jews in their distress? They are absolutely powerless against the king's orders and the wrath of their enemies. Their trouble cannot be described; their anguish is extreme. "And in every province, whithersoever the king's commandment and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping, and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes" (Esther 4:3). But who came to their aid? The mightiest of the nation, the king and his favorite are they who have decided their plight, and they have sat down to drink, not caring about the blood that will be shed, the tears that will flow, the cruel agonies of those so unjustly condemned. What can equal the pitiless heart of man! The Scripture has well said, "With their tongues they have used deceit." This certainly applies to Haman. "Their feet are swift to shed blood: destruction and misery are in their ways" (Rom. 3:13-16).

But if the heart of man is hard and without compassion, "filled with all unrighteousness ... unmerciful" (Rom. 1:29,31), it is not so with the heart of God. Someone saw the mourning and tears and heard the wailing. It is He of the bush which burned but was not consumed, saying to Moses: "I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them" (Ex. 3:7-8). This same God, mighty and compassionate, was also ready to undertake for His poor Jewish people, scattered throughout Ahasuerus's empire, and at the point of being exterminated.

It will be so also in the time to come. The faithful and persecuted Jews will cry out: "We are become a reproach to our neighbors, a scorn and derision to them that are round about us. How long, Lord? wilt Thou be angry forever? ... Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Thy name: and deliver us" (Psa. 79:4-9). And again: "Thou hast showed Thy people hard things: Thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment. ... Save with Thy right hand, and hear me. ... Give us help from trouble: for vain is the help of man" (Psa. 60:3,5,11). These could well have been the supplications of the poor Jews ready to perish. And God granted their prayers, as He will in the last days hear those of the oppressed remnant; as in the time of Esther, so also in the future, those who have trusted in the Lord will say: "Through God we shall do valiantly: for He it is that shall tread down our enemies" (Psa. 60:12).

Yes, after their distress, their anguish and imminent death, deliverance came for the Jews. They were not to perish. God intervened and though it came to pass by means of various circumstances and not as previously in Egypt, in a striking manner, with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. Although He remains hidden and even His name is not mentioned, one cannot fail to see His hand and His counsel directing all to save the dispersed from perishing. Their deliverance is simple and complete, accomplished by orders of the same power which first had condemned them to perish. They are ordered to defend themselves and take vengeance on their enemies. We shall see now the change wrought in Ahasuerus's disposition towards the Jews. For the moment let us simply notice the new edict by the king (for the previous one could not be revoked): which "granted the Jews which were in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all the power of the people and province that would assault them, both little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey ... upon the thirteenth day of the twelfth month" (ch. 8:11).

In virtue of this edict, all the Jews everywhere put themselves on the defensive and on the set day, instead of their enemies having the mastery over them and destroying them, they are the ones which smite their adversaries. "And no man could withstand them; for the fear of them fell upon all people. And all the rulers of the provinces, and the lieutenants, and the deputies, and officers of the king, helped the Jews" (ch. 9:2-3). The Jews, defending themselves, killed a great number of their enemies and among them the ten sons of Haman their cruel adversary, but they did not lay their hands on the loot. They fought for their lives, not to acquire goods.

Thus for the Jews the royal edict became "light and gladness and joy and honor," in place of mourning and sadness. In every province, in every city, whithersoever the royal decree had come there was joy and mirth for the Jews, a day of feasting and gladness. "And the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad. ... And many of the people of the land became Jews" (ch. 8:15-17), no doubt concluding that they were the objects of divine favor and therefore desiring to have part in it.

All these events prefigured that which will take place, perhaps in a not too far distant time, sooner than we think, for "the time is at hand" (Rev. 1:3). After the last great tribulation which will overtake Israel, there will be deliverance. Jeremiah gives us this word:

"And these are the words that the Lord spake concerning Israel and concerning Judah ... We have heard a voice of trembling, of fear, and not of peace. ... Wherefore do I see ... all faces are turned into paleness? Alas! for that day is great, so that none is like it: it is even the time of Jacob's trouble; but he shall be saved out of it. For it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord of hosts, that I will break his yoke from off thy neck, and will burst thy bonds, and strangers shall no more serve themselves of him: but they shall serve the Lord their God, and David their king [Christ], whom I will raise up unto them. Therefore fear thou not, O my servant Jacob, saith the Lord; neither be dismayed, O Israel: for, lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity; and Jacob shall return, and shall be in rest, and be quiet, and none shall make him afraid. For I am with thee, saith the Lord, to save thee: though I make a full end of all the nations whither I have scattered thee" (Jer. 30:4-11).

Daniel also tells us: "And at that time shall Michael stand up, the great prince which standeth for the children of thy people: and there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation even to that same time: and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book" (Dan. 12:1). The Lord Himself will rise up against the enemies of His people and they will be destroyed. Israel will have the advantage over her enemies: "But they shall fly upon the shoulders of the Philistines towards the west; they shall spoil them of the east together: they shall lay their hand upon Edom and Moab; and the children of Ammon shall obey them" (Isa. 11:14). These are marvelous promises which will certainly be accomplished towards this now dispersed and oppressed people. The restoration of the Jews is a matter of certainty, "for the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (Rom. 11:29). Their triumph under Ahasurerus is but a feeble image of this.

Another thing will apply in the days of Israel's deliverance and blessing, prefigured by the light, the joy, and the honor the Jews experienced in Persia. For saved Israel, the light of divine glory shall arise: "Arise," said the prophet at Jerusalem, representing all the nation, "shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee. ... The Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory. Thy sun shall no more go down; neither shall thy moon withdraw itself: for the Lord shall be thine everlasting light, and the days of thy mourning shall be ended" (Isa. 60:1,19-20). Joy will abound in Israel in these happy times of her restoration: "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord," they will say,

“my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He hath clothed me with the garments of salvation” (Isa. 61:10). And again: “Whereas thou halt been forsaken and hated ... I will make thee an eternal excellency, a joy of many generations” (Isa. 60:15). “Everlasting joy shall be unto them” (Isa. 61:7). Notice also the touching words of Jeremiah: “Yea, I have loved thee with an everlasting love. ... Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with thy tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry. ... Shout among the chief of the nations” (Jer. 31:3-7). Finally, instead of being an object of shame, Israel will be an honor, much greater than in the day of Ahasuerus, and at the head of the nations. “The sons also of them that afflicted thee shall come bending unto thee; and all they that despised thee shall bow themselves down at the soles of thy feet. ... The sons of strangers shall build up thy walls, and their kings shall minister unto thee. ... I will make thee an eternal excellency” (Isa. 60:14,10,15). This is what is reserved for Israel in the days to come.

The blessing of Israel will be an occasion of happiness for the nations. As in the times of Esther: “the city of Shushan rejoiced and was glad” (ch. 8:15) about the deliverance of the Jews, and as “many of the people of the land became Jews” (vs. 17) so it will be again at the end. See again what the prophet says to Israel: “And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising” (Isa. 60:3). Her restoration will be magnificent. “And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and He will teach us of His ways, and we will walk in His paths” (Isa. 2:2-3). Also Zechariah in the name of the Lord of hosts, announces: “In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you” (Zech. 8:23).

Here, though in a still more marvelous manner, is that of which the book of Esther presents to us the shadow. Then we also will hear the voice: “Rejoice, O ye nations, with His people” (Deut. 32:43). Then these words will be accomplished: “And it shall come to pass, that as ye were a curse among the heathen, O house of Judah, and house of Israel; so will I save you, and ye shall be a blessing” (Zech. 8:13). Yes, the deliverance of Israel, caused by the judgements which destroyed the enemies of God and His people, became the joy and blessing of the nations. “Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fullness?” (Rom. 11:12).

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