

August 22, 2004
The Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Esther, the heroine of the book named after her, was a quiet lady. Not only did she refrain from revealing her people and family (2:10), she seems not to have said very much of anything. Her recorded words fill fewer than a dozen verses of the Bible.

Esther appears, rather, as a quiet and lovely presence, much like stars that adorn the night. Indeed, the aptness of this simile is suggested by the etymology that associates Esther with the heavens. Although she was called Hadassah in Hebrew, the name by which she is better known relates her to the Babylonian sky goddess, Ishtar, a name related to the Persian **sitar**, meaning "star." Esther's name is likewise associated with the Greek noun for star, **astron**, as well as to the equivalent Latin words **aestrum** and **stella**. (And while we are on the subject, it is worth mentioning the English verb "stare," meaning to fix one's gaze. As the poet Robert Frost observed, this is what the stars do.)

Given the context and themes of the Book of Esther, these etymological considerations are far from idle. First, the book's setting is Persia, where the religion (until the Muslim invasions more than a thousand years later) was that of Zoroaster, the Greek name of the philosopher Zarathustra. The Greek form of his name includes **astron**, meaning-as we have seen-"star" and reminding us that a great reliance on the reading of the stars was a major characteristic of religion in that part of the world.

Indeed, throughout Persia there was a widespread persuasion that events in this world were somehow "fixed" by positions of the heavenly bodies. That is to say, everything was predestined in heaven. Classical Persian philosophy was shot through with astrology and theories of determinism. (Those expert in reading the stars, by the way, were called **Magi**. They sometimes made long journeys to learn where a star might lead.)

Now the Bible certainly does not teach astrology, nor does the Bible say that everything is predetermined in a way that precludes the freedom of human choice. Yet, the Book of Esther does concern itself with a sense of concealed forces that influence the course of history in a mysterious fashion.

Some of these hidden forces are satanic (from "Satan," the Persian name of the tempter in the books of Job and Zechariah, as well as the New Testament). These forces involve "the prince of the power of the air," "spiritual wickedness in high places" (Ephesians 2:2; 6:12).

But God is also at work secretly within the decisions of history, and this truth is known as the doctrine of Divine Providence. Both kinds of activity are presented in the Book of Esther. Haman is the agent of an evil force, Esther the instrument of the God whose active presence is so concealed that He is neither named nor addressed throughout the whole book.

First, there is Haman, who employed the rigidity of the Persian legal system to "fix" the Jews once and for all. In Esther, as in Daniel, one was obliged to deal with "the laws of the Medes and the Persians that cannot be changed." Thus, after Haman had arranged a royal decree ordering the destruction of the Jews, even the Emperor Ahasuerus was powerless to alter it.

The date of that planned destruction was determined, we recall, by the casting of dice (in Persian, *puru*, whence the Hebrew Purim). In consulting these instruments of divination in order to determine the destruction of the Jews, Haman and his henchmen become the agents of evil forces. These latter too remain unnamed.

Although in our own culture, dice are thought of as instruments of chance, this was not the case in ancient times; the Persian rolled dice precisely because he did **not** believe in chance. The verdict of the dice was inevitable, rather, and revealed some deeper purpose hidden from human ken. Whatever the dice indicated was bound to occur.

But then came Esther, the instrument of the hidden God who silently worked to bring about His own purposes in the world. Events in this book appeared to be accidental, but the biblical writer knew better. So do his readers. They perceive it was no accident when Esther won that beauty contest at the book's beginning; nor was it by chance that Ahasuerus, unable to sleep one fateful night, began to search the archives and thereby discovered name of Mordecai. It was hardly fortuitous that Haman fell on Esther's bed just as the king walked in, nor was it mere happenstance that that unwitting scoundrel had prepared a gallows for his own neck.

"Who knows," Mordecai remarked to Esther, "whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" (4:14). Her shrewd kinsman suspected that more was transpiring than even the staring eye was able to discern.

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