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ESTHER.

THE history of the century succeeding the return of the Jews from exile is contained in the three books which in the English Bible stand immediately after the other historical books, and in the contemporary prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. It is from the brief narratives of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther that we must gather our information regarding the long period which elapsed from the first return of the captives under Zerubbabel to the return of Nehemiah, nearly a hundred years after. And these books themselves rather bridge the century with one span than lead us through it. They concentrate attention on the first return, in the year 538 B.C., and on the final returns in 458 and 446, but of the intervening years they have nothing to say. And not only so, but they depict only the fortunes of those who returned to Jerusalem, and have nothing to tell us of that larger part of the nation which remained in exile. This blank of eighty years is annoying, and lends an enhanced value to the little book of Esther, which alone relieves it. Only from this remarkable episode, occurring in the year 482 B.C., can we learn anything of the condition, habits, thoughts, hopes of the Jews during this century.

That there should not have been much to tell of the Jews who had returned to their own land is not surprising. There would necessarily fall to the lot of the first generation much work that was merely mechanical or manual, building houses, reclaiming lands, organizing the Temple services and the municipal government. Owing to such

causes, the history of some of our own most vigorous colonies has been for the first hundred years of their existence devoid of interest to the world at large. Much too depends on the leader of a colony, and Zerubbabel was not a man to make a deep mark on history. He seems to have had little of the martial vigour of the first conqueror of the land, and little of the legislative capacity of the leader of the earlier exodus. Under the Persian government, as under our own, native princes were often allowed to retain their crown and much of their local authority, as vassals of the empire. But from this time, instead of any revival of the glories of the old Jewish monarchy, the royal line of native princes disappears; and the high priesthood remains the one Jewish hereditary dignity.

But if in Jerusalem the hereditary leaders were timorous and languid, the story of Mordecai and Esther is evidence that there was abundant vigour and self-reliance among the Jews who remained in captivity. The risks to which the Jew has at all times been exposed among foreigners, the self-possessed courage and ruthless strategy with which he meets these dangers, his scorn of other races, and his skilful employment of them to his own ends, his loyalty to his own people, the tenacity of his faith, were never more conspicuous than in this story. That the Jews were numerous in Shushan will naturally be inferred from the dismay with which the announcement of their intended massacre was received. "The city Shushan was perplexed." That they had already amassed considerable wealth appears from Haman's promise to the king that their confiscated goods would yield for his treasury the enormous sum of ten thousand talents.

But the intention of the book was in all probability not to picture the condition of the Jews, nor to save from oblivion a story whose plot rivals the most ingenious fiction, but to account for the origin of one of the later Jewish

feasts, the feast of Purim or Lots. This feast commemorated the great deliverance recorded in the book of Esther, and it took its name from the circumstance that Haman made use of the lot to ascertain what was the most auspicious day for the execution of his bloody design against the Jews. It was probably on this account that the book was admitted into the canon. The deliverance of the Jews from massacre was thought to be worthy of commemoration in a festival; but without a historical document, giving a clear account of its origin, it would have inevitably become an unmeaning celebration. It seems that the book of Esther is still read in the synagogue at the annual feast. On the other hand, the existence of the feast of Purim is evidence of the historical character of the book, as the annually diminishing gathering of the veterans of Waterloo is evidence that such a battle took place and was an English victory.

Surprise has commonly been expressed at the reticence of the book. No allusion is made to the hand of God guiding the complication of interests and aims to an issue favourable to the Jews. The joy of the rescued is dwelt upon; most emphatically is it said that "the Jews had gladness and joy, a feast and a good day"; but not a word of thankfulness to God is heard throughout the rejoicing. The motive of the book is patriotic, not religious. This would seem to be a note of the Jews of the Dispersion. They "learnt by degrees to keep back the expression of their religious convictions, to assimilate themselves externally to their masters, to eliminate from their ordinary discourse all that would mark them for Jews, while they clung internally to their old belief and practised secretly their old customs." They cultivated, in short, that moody reserve which was construed into a hatred of the human race, and which brought upon them many a persecution well-nigh as bloody as that which Haman devised. This

reticence may perhaps be accepted as a sign that the book was written in a country where such reticence was practised, and is not a romance composed by an inhabitant of Judah for the glorification of his people.

But while certainly there are few obtrusive exhibitions of religious belief or feeling in the book, it must not be overlooked that the antagonism of Haman to the Jews, and all the plotting and counterplotting which sprang from it, was excited by Mordecai's stubborn adherence to a religious scruple. The reverence he was required to pay to Haman was such as his conscience would not permit him to pay. This is shown in Mordecai's prayer, recorded in another ancient narrative of these events, and in which he is represented as saying: "Thou knowest all things, and Thou, Lord, knowest that it was neither in contempt nor pride, nor from any desire of glory, that I did not bow down before proud Haman. For I could have been content, for the salvation of Israel, with goodwill to kiss the soles of his feet. But what I did, I did that I might not prefer the glory of man above the glory of God; neither will I worship any but Thee, O God." This is borne out by Mordecai's reply to those who found fault with his conduct. He was a Jew, he said; and this excuse had so much plausibility in it as prompted his interrogators to make inquiry whether it was altogether valid. Haman too sought to destroy, not only Mordecai, but all his race, proving that he understood that his creed was at the bottom of his insubordination, and that any Jew might show the same spirit and plead the same excuse. It was, in fact, a kind of St. Bartholomew's Day which Haman aimed at, an extinction of this people who by their stiff, religious scruples had forced him to see that, whatever rank he might hold, he should never be lord of their conscience.

Though the heroine of the tale is Esther, the other prominent characters are drawn with life-like touches.

Ahasuerus, the Xerxes of European historians, who invaded Greece with unparalleled pomp and was so gallantly repelled, appears here the same self-willed and yet facile, amorous, and changeable despot as secular history depicts. The want of self-respect and consideration for the feelings of others, the vanity and coarseness of nature shown in his proposing to exhibit his queen to the gaze of his half or whole drunk guests, the facility with which he lends himself to the crafty Haman's plot, and the rage with which he discovers that he has been duped, are characteristic of the man. Characteristic also is the readiness with which he gave orders that all the Jews should be massacred, and the dismay with which he found that his own decree, which he had forgotten as soon as made, came back and laid a bloody hand on the woman he held in his arms as his surest possession. Haman too, compelled to exchange places with the man he hated, to pay to him the honours he expected to receive himself, and to be hanged before his own household on the gallows he had erected for his victim, presents the very ideal of retribution, and is gibbeted as the very type of the over-clever men who fall into the pit they have digged for others. Mordecai again, who is the moving spring of the whole drama, is every inch a Jew, affectionate to his own kindred, loyal to his own people, daring, self-reliant, resolute, full of resources, and shrinking from nothing which might forward his purpose.

It was the beauty of Esther which saved the Jews from massacre. Her beauty might indeed have merely graced an obscure Jewish household, had not the king, flushed with wine, issued his insulting order to Vashti. Her beauty might have gradually and ignobly faded in the palace had not Mordecai and Haman quarrelled. Still it was Esther's beauty which fought for the Jews at this critical juncture. In one of the Jewish writings which relate to this period of history, we read that three of the young men of Darius'

bodyguard entertained him one night, when like Xerxes he was sleepless, by discussing what is the mightiest force in the world. The first held that wine was strongest, the second maintained that the king was the mightiest power, but the third (who was Zerubbabel the Jewish prince) is reported to have said, "Women are strongest; but above all things truth bears away the victory." Pascal, the most serious of writers, gives us abundant food for reflection by the bare statement of a historical fact when he says, "If Cleopatra's nose had been shorter, the whole face of the world would have been altered." The beauty of Esther was the only weapon required by God at this time for the rescue of His people.

But Esther was no mere painted puppet in the hand of God. Without courage of the highest kind and acceptance of responsibility as heroic as Judith's or Deborah's, she could not have become the saviour of her people. This courageous and devoted acceptance of the responsibility attaching to her gifts and her position is the noteworthy feature in Esther's character. She was but beginning life, and she was no doubt beginning life with the same feelings as other young people who are conscious of some superiority to the ordinary lot. Innocently conscious of her beauty, breathing the exhilarating atmosphere of deference and admiring regard which her loveliness everywhere produced, she might readily have accepted the life of luxury and intrigue to which she seemed destined. Her elevation was sufficiently intoxicating. Two or three months ago a secluded girl, she is suddenly raised to a position higher than that of any woman on earth. Naturally at Mordecai's first summons she was unwilling to listen. Naturally she at first resented that so heavy a responsibility, so fearful a risk, should attach to her elevation. She could not help being queen. She had not thrust herself into the position. Was the dignity of it at once to turn into responsibility,

its elevation to prove the mere pinnacle from which she might cast herself in the hope of saving others?

To the aid of her better impulses came love of Mordecai, and that true-hearted loyalty to her people which the manners of a splendid court had not deadened in her, and which nothing seems to extinguish in the heart of a Jew. Esther was not of the breed of those who spurn the ladder by which they have climbed to high place. She did not ask her ladies who that Jewish-looking person was who day by day haunted the palace gates. She thought with fond gratitude of the man who had brought up the little orphan, and she fearlessly proclaimed herself a Jewess when her people could be saved by the disclosure. Age does not always meet with its deserts at the hands of youth. The young feel at times keenly the awkwardness of acknowledging parents who have raised their children to a much higher social position than their own. They forget how much they owe to their parents, and are merely annoyed with the awkwardness of manner which measures the interval through which the parents have lifted their children, and with the dulness of an intellect and the infirmities of a body worn out in their service. There are happily many Esthers among us: but there are also many Lear's daughters.

In Esther's person, then, female beauty found its pre-eminent opportunity of proving itself to be of God and for God. Every natural gift brings its responsibility, and has its opportunity of furthering what is good. And this was the opportunity which suddenly emerged for the beauty of woman to redeem itself from all the slurs and suspicions cast upon it, and to show that, not only can it add a pleasure to social intercourse, but may on occasion be the one fit instrument for effecting a heroic purpose. And if a gift apparently so secular and so slightly connected with the character of its owner may yet be the medium for most

severely testing the moral state, and affording it the opportunity for its highest exercise, what other natural gift may not similarly be such a medium? Whether therefore we have quickness of feeling and ready sympathy, a nimble fancy, humour, ready speech, or any aptitude for moving among men with ease and influence; or whether we have a vigorous constitution, great powers of endurance and of work, or any gift by the help of which we know we can get a little way ahead of our neighbours in some one direction,—then the proper ballast which will keep us steady in our course and save us from shipwreck is the recognition that every personal endowment brings with it a proportionate responsibility, and that the time will come for us also to determine whether our gifts are to be used for our own advantage and glorification, or for the welfare of others.

Esther was apparently an affectionate, patriotic, noble-minded woman, and yet her first impression was that it would be better for her to skulk in her guarded elevation and suffer her kinsmen to be massacred. That is to say, her first idea was that it was better to lose the opportunity of saving many thousand lives, the opportunity which alone ennobled her life, and suddenly lifted it out of the common and undistinguished herd of eastern princesses to a place among the world's heroines. And we are often more than on the brink, as she was, of throwing away in our selfish fears our best opportunities. We refuse to recognise that if we cannot brave a danger, or run a risk, or make a real sacrifice, or forego a selfish advantage, neither can we win the crown of life. If the scale always turns with us in favour of comfort and security, if the conventions and regularities of respectable life always outweigh the real needs and calls of our fellow men, then must we be content with a useless, discredited, artificial, untrue life. If we find that through all we do we are chiefly influenced by selfish considerations, we should pass on ourselves the judgment

we should have passed on Esther had she weakly declined to take her life in her hand and seek to reverse the decree of the haughtiest despot in the world.

The true note of heroism is struck by Esther in the words, "If I perish, I perish." She takes her life in her hand, and goes where duty calls. Her words reveal a mind that clearly apprehends the risk, but is made up to run it. It may be she will not succeed, but the attempt must be made. It may be she is uselessly throwing away her life, but the cause deserves her life. "If I perish, I perish." This, I say, is the note of heroism. For where there is no heroism, the risk will not be run. The probabilities of success are weighed and reweighed, and meanwhile the opportunity is past. We shrink from taking action in this or that cause, because success is not certain, because it is quite possible that the only result may be our own discomfiture, loss, ruin. With the heroic soul the question is, Ought the thing to be accomplished? is the end supremely desirable? is the cause a good one? The prospects of success may be doubtful, but the risk must be run. Thus only are great steps taken. We in this country have much need of some heroic souls who, not through imitation or from vainglory, but pressed by the weight of their country's burdens and dangers, give themselves to the task of wiping out national sin and checking national decline. Never has heroism been far to seek in our country; in ordinary circumstances and family life there is abundance of it: what we need is the heroism that can make a stand and a sacrifice for the best interests of the people.

Among the most striking features of this graphic narrative is the unobtrusiveness of the Providence which guides to the one desired issue all the plotting and counterplotting of the various actors in the drama. The interest and significance of this passage in Jewish history arise from the impression it leaves, that even when men are most freely

and busily bent, each on his own purpose, they are yet controlled by an unseen will. The rapidly succeeding emotions and hurry of events, the drunken freak of Xerxes and his exasperation at being thwarted, the arrogance and vindictiveness of Haman and the craft of his friends, the king's opportune sleeplessness and Mordecai's accidental over-hearing of a conversation, were so combined that results contemplated by none of them were accomplished. The human agents alone were in direct contact with the events; there is no miraculous, unaccountable interposition, no falling back on the devices of a weak dramatist, no earthquake, no eclipse, no break in the chain of merely human and ordinary motive and action; yet the coincidences are so numerous, so surprising, and so fruitful, that the reader, when he comes to the close, can scarcely avoid sitting with the book open before him, and feeling that behind all this there is a power governing all. He is conscious that to close the book with the remark, "That is an extraordinary story," is not a satisfactory criticism, and leaves something unaccounted for. It is true there is no obtrusion of this "something more." The whole story can be told, and in fact is told, without any allusion to higher agencies than the figures on the board. And this is as it should be. God is in the background in the story, because He is in the background in life. He is "through all," "over all." As the invisible force of attraction holds together all things, and keeps them in their due place whether at rest or in motion, so this unseen power that concerns itself with human affairs guides without constraining, and through the free planning and passions of men accomplishes its own wise and beneficent purpose.

MARCUS DODS.
