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The Sham of Earthly Providence

Esther 1

God's Providence is THE overriding theme of the Book of Esther. The word "providence" comes from the word "provide" which has two parts: "*pro*" (Latin: "forward," "on behalf of") and "*vide*" (Latin: "to see"). Accordingly, "provide" literally means "to see forward" NOT in the sense of foresight, BUT in how we use the word in the statement "I'll see to that" — that is "I'll take care of or provide for that." Hence, the word "provide" came to be used in terms of supplying or taking care of what is needed.

And that is where the term “providence” came from. When used of God, it refers to “...His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures and all their actions.” (WSC #11) Yet it can be used more broadly. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines “providence” as “(1) care or preparation in advance, foresight. (2) prudent management; economy.”

As such, it can be used in reference to man, peoples, and nations. Thus, to speak of the providence of an earthly king speaks of his care and control of those governed.

And it is with this that God began this incredible book before us. Prior to a detailing of God’s providential dealings as it relates to His people in Esther 2-10, we are confronted first with the providence exercised by Persia and its king.

Recall that the book of Esther was written as a Chiasm- where the focus is on the sixth and central chapter which details The Crises, “During that night the king could not sleep...”

Chapter 1: The Opening

Chapters 2-3: The King’s First Decree

Chapters 4-5: The Clash Between Haman and Mordecai

Chapter 6: The Crises, “During that night the king could not sleep...”

Chapters 6-7: Mordecai’s Triumph over Haman

Chapters 8-9: The King’s Second Decree

Chapter 10: The Epilogue

Thus, by design the focus and whole of this book points to and flows from chapter 6 which makes this the pivotal chapter/message in this book. Yet and again, that doesn’t mean that chapters 1-5 and chapters 6-10 are unimportant. They are. What it means is that when we consider each of these chapters, we must have one eye on the overriding message of this book, beautifully illustrated in chapter 6- a chapter in which God effected the deliverance of His people while they slept! Accordingly, we must read each chapter of this book against the whole story to understand the message of this book.

With that, we turn to the first chapter which was written to give a contrast between the providence exercised by Ahasuerus (which imprisoned God’s people with fear) and the providence exercised by God! Notice the sham of earthly providence.

Esther 1:1-4, “Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces¹, in those days as King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne which was in Susa the capital [this was one of four capitals of Persia at this time].² In the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his princes and attendants, the army officers of Persia and Media,

the nobles, and the princes of his provinces being in his presence. And he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days.”

The focus of this passage is on the grandeur, the glory, and the greatness of Ahasuerus. As you know, he was the son of Darius who truly was a great king. And before Darius we read of Cyrus [Xerxes’ grandfather on his mother’s side] who likewise was a great Persian king. Well at this time, the third year of his reign, Ahasuerus fancied himself as one of the greats which is how the kingdom would have viewed him at this time—especially after his 6-month banquet which was specifically given to “...display of the riches of his glory and the splendor of his great majesty”!³

Now the suggestion has been made that this was NOT simply a show of Ahasuerus’ greatness, BUT a war council for the impending battle against the Greeks. Recall, in the effort to demonstrate his greatness over his father, Darius (who failed in his conquest of Greece), one of the first major acts of Ahasuerus was a declaration of war with Greece. Accordingly, he assembled the largest Navy and Army the world had ever seen to that point. The planning and acquiring of the resources necessary for this attack would easily fill the “six-month” period referenced here. At the end of the six months, when it came to launch the attack, Ahasuerus held one last feast which lasted a week.

Esther 1:5, “And when these days were completed, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days for all the people who were present in Susa the capital, from the greatest to the least, in the court of the garden of the king’s palace.”

And what a banquet! Word of its extravagance would have spread throughout the empire.

Esther 1:6-8, “There were hangings of fine white and violet linen held by cords of fine purple linen on silver rings and marble columns, and couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones. [Sound lavish and it was...] Drinks were served in golden vessels⁴ of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful according to the king’s bounty. And the drinking was done according to the law, [yet] there was no compulsion,⁵ for so the king had given orders to each official of his household that he should do according to the desires of each person.”

As it was throughout ancient up to modern history, in the presence of the king, you did not eat or drink freely. When the king lifted his fork, you lifted your fork. When the king lifted his glass, you lifted your glass. And so, at this particular celebration Ahasuerus did away with that custom. He wanted everyone genuinely to enjoy themselves and so eat and drink as they saw fit without fear of a breach of protocol.

If you and I could transport back to this time, what we would see and believe is that never before was there a king so great and powerful as Ahasuerus, talk of his navy would have been beyond belief. And the size of his army would have been staggering. In fact, when Ahasuerus began his attack, the Greeks believed they were fighting an army that numbered over 3 million men⁶ (which was not the case)!

Now as would be expected, there were duties which would have been incumbent upon his queen, one of which was the throwing of a large banquet as well.

Esther 1:9, “Queen Vashti⁷ also gave a banquet for the women in the palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus.”

I don't know what your view is of the power of the United States or any other country or organization, BUT I have no doubt you personally believe that there are principalities, powers, and forces which are much larger than you — forces, actualities, or beings which if in their presence you would be frightened to the point of despair. Perhaps it would be one of these:

- Cancer.
- The loss of a loved one.
- A powerful cabal ruling and governing America or over this world.
- A demon.
- Or Satan himself.

Well, short of being in the literal presence of one of the Persian gods, the ancient world would have been that frightened and sobered by the sheer power, grandeur, and glory of Ahasuerus and his army! At this point, you easily would have believed that nothing could stand in his or its way! Think of it, the Assyrians made easy work of God and the northern kingdom in 722 BC. Roughly 120 years later a larger and more powerful army (the Babylonians) made easy work of God and the southern kingdom — having their way no less than three times, as they humiliated Judah in 605 BC, 597 BC, and 586 BC. Get this! The size, wealth, and power of Persia put these two nations to shame!

And though at the time the typical Jew most likely would have said otherwise, deep down inside many would have thought that even God could not stand before Persia! But then we read of Vashti!

[The Power of Xerxes Thwarted, vv. 10-12.](#)

Esther 1:10-11, “On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine,⁸ he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown in order to display her

beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful.”

Ahasuerus liked beautiful women and Vashti was one of the most beautiful. And so, at the climax of the celebration of Ahasuerus’ impending victory over Greece, the king wanted to show his kingdom what was his as king. And so, the command was given for Vashti to come to the main banquet wearing a crown whose value would have been beyond belief!

Now to demonstrate her beauty, Vashti could NOT have come in the typical clothing of that day which would have covered her entire body. Rather, Ahasuerus wanted her with her crown so that he could parade her before his drunken guests! This would have been an incredibly defiling act!!⁹

So (1) was the king drunk? Yes! (2) Was he in his right mind? Clearly not! But don’t miss it: it was a command given by an omnipotent king who ruled over an unstoppable army- which brings us to the most ironic moment perhaps in Ahasuerus’ entire regency...

Esther 1:12, “But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s command delivered by the eunuchs. Then the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him.”

The emphasis of this verse is “at the king’s command.” Soon the king would be commanding an army and all in Greece would quake with fear! Had anyone in any place at this time refused the command of the king, they would have been executed on the spot and their body put on public display as a demonstration of what happens when you opposed this king! And so, we read that “the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him.” SOMEONE IS GOING TO DIE!

[The Power of Xerxes Revealed, vv. 13-22.](#)

This was Ahasuerus’ response:

Esther 1:13-15, “Then the king said to the wise men¹⁰ who understood the times- for it was the custom of the king so to speak before all who knew law and justice, and were close to him: Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media who had access to the king’s presence and sat in the first place in the kingdom- ‘According to law, what is to be done with Queen Vashti, because she did not obey the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?’”

Though he is drunk, he nevertheless was respectful of “the law of the Medes and Persians”! So, what was available to the king in response to his wife’s disobedience?

Esther 1:16-18, “And in the presence of the king and the princes, Memucan said,

'Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king but also all the princes, and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. [In other words, her sin was against the entire nation, much less the king! This just made her offense that much more heinous...] For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women causing them to look with contempt on their husbands by saying, "King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought in to his presence, but she did not come."

And this day the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's conduct will speak in the same way to all the king's princes, and there will be plenty of contempt and anger."- wait a minute... I'm confused. I thought she disobeyed the voice of someone more powerful than the gods. What's all this talk about the impact of her rebellion on the rest of the marriages of the Kingdom of Persia? Whatever, let's read of the painful fate which we all know must await her.

Esther 1:19-20, "If it pleases the king, let a royal edict be issued by him and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it cannot be repealed [it is that serious], that Vashti should come no more into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she.¹¹ [What? That's it?!? Where is the 'weeping and gnashing of teeth'? Where's the torture? Where's the furnace of blazing fire? What were they thinking? Read on...] And when the king's edict which he shall make is heard throughout all his kingdom, great as it is, then all women will give honor to their husbands, great and small."

Oh yah, that will do it! Every woman in every place in Persia when they hear of the king's decree will immediately bow before their husbands and call them lord — *just like Vashti did to Ahasuerus!*

What a joke! If ever you feared the Persians or Ahasuerus, you wouldn't after this! One woman took on the most powerful king and kingdom the world had ever known, and she won! Don't miss it, Vashti did NOT forfeit her relationship with Ahasuerus. She would remain at the king's side for the next four years! The only thing this decree did was remove her from being his official queen and so entering officially into his presence as his queen.¹² In other words, it removed her title, NOT her position.

Yet we're NOT finished for the king has yet to respond:

Esther 1:21-22, "And this word pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. So he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province according to its script and to every people according to their language, that every man should be the master in his own house and the one who speaks in the language of his own people."

Once again, what a joke! If “the most powerful man in the world” was NOT the master of his own house, how could a command issued from him make any other man the master of his own house?!

This is satire at its best! This chapter exposes the power Ahasuerus *truly* wielded. And what is that power? He couldn’t even command a woman! Joyce Baldwin put it this way:

For us who live in a very different age it would be easy to miss the subtle irony and humour, obvious to the original readers. There are several ironical nuances, but the most obvious is the contrast between King Ahasuerus at the beginning of the chapter, when he is the world’s greatest monarch, rich and powerful, aloof yet generous, and that same king by the end of the chapter, attempting to maintain his dignity despite the defiance of his wife... The counsellors represented by Memucan were clever but hardly wise; the decree promulgated according to their advice made the king look a fool in the eyes of his subjects... (Baldwin, 1985, p. 63)

Ian Duguid adds to this:

In fact, the edict deconstructs itself, serving merely to publicize throughout the vast empire and in the language of every people group Ahasuerus’s lack of authority in his own household. If it was meant to inspire respect for husbands and respect for Ahasuerus, its actual effect was surely the exact opposite. If he was afraid that the story of his impotence would spread through gossip, now his own edict has done its best to ensure that everyone would hear the story. Once again, at the same time as we are impressed by Ahasuerus’s power, we find it hard to restrain a chuckle as he slams his sledgehammer down on a nut, and misses. (Duguid, 2005, p. 12)

Now many today have a problem with how women were treated at this time — so demeaning! And we should as well. Yet that’s the point! If Vashti, as insignificant as she was, at the time in her culture could thwart the will of Ahasuerus with a single word, ought we to fear what he might do?¹³ Christian, this is how we should respond to every “giant” in our lives which are not jolly and green:

- Cancer.
- A tragic event.
- A powerful cabal.
- A nation.
- A demon.
- A bad guy.

Hebrews 13:5b-6, “He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,’ so that we confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What shall man do to me?’”

Truly before us is an expose of the sham of earthly providence. At this point in our study, we are NOT told/shown whom we ought to fear, YET as we read this chapter in light of the entire book, the answer is quite clear: Whom should we fear? None other than God Almighty who reigns supreme over all the earth AND whose redemptive purpose and will cannot be thwarted! Not then, not now, nor in any age!

With that, let’s not leave this chapter without considering some of the redemptive principles which are on full display here.

Redemptive Principles Revealed

Romans 15:4, “For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”

The book of Esther was written NOT only for those living in the fifth century BC, BUT for us as well. Accordingly, this book should give us great encouragement.

First, we receive a glimpse of the true victory celebration which will occur at the end of this world (vv. 1-9; Revelation 19!) The celebration and the culminating banquet which Ahasuerus threw BEFORE he did anything is BUT a shadow of The Celebration and The Culminating Banquet which all in Christ will enjoy at the end of this world when Christ has conquered Satan and death.

Revelation 19:1-2, “After these things I heard, as it were, a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, ‘Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God; because His judgments are true and righteous; for He has judged the great harlot who was corrupting the earth with her immorality, and He has avenged the blood of His bond-servants on her.’”

There is coming a day when Christ will return to this earth, destroy the Devil, and cast him, his angels, and all his followers into “the Lake of Fire.” After that time, a most amazing celebration will take place.

Revelation 19:6-7, 9, “And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude and as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty peals of thunder, saying, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.’ And he [the angel speaking with John] said to me, ‘Write, “Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of

the Lamb.”””

Truly, in the words of C. S. Lewis, this world is the Shadow Lands! To gaze upon any and all victory celebration — yea, even the one referenced in our text — is to be reminded of the glorious banquet which everything in this world is moving toward — which Christ shall host at the dawn of the next age! It is at this time that Christ will approach each one of us and give us “praise, glory, and honor” (1 Peter 1:7)!

So Christian, as we know the end from the beginning, let us NOT leave this chapter without remembering the banquet which awaits us in Christ!¹⁴

In this chapter we see the contrast between Ahasuerus’ response to his rebellious bride and God’s response to His, vv. 10-12; SS. 6:4ff. When Vashti didn’t submit to her husband’s request (be it legitimate or illegitimate), Ahasuerus responded with an anger which would last for four years (cf. Esther 2:1)!

Well, what is God’s response to His bride when she sins? Because we are talking about the omnipotent God who rules over this universe, we might expect that it would be much more severe yet listen to the Song of Solomon a book written to describe the love God has for us. There was a time in Solomon’s marriage when his wife sinned against him grievously. Upon realizing what she had done, she sought after her husband, Solomon. When she found him, this is what He said in response to her:

Song of Solomon 6:4ff, “You are as beautiful as Tirzah, my darling, as lovely as Jerusalem...”

If you’ve studied this book, you know that this essentially is what Solomon told her in Song of Solomon S. 1:15ff- on their wedding night! From this we learn an incredible truth about God’s love for His bride. What are we to God even when we are in rebellion? Beautiful! In other words, God does NOT respond with anger, wrath, disdain, humiliation, or more law! Rather, God’s response is that of love!

So, Christian, when it comes to your relationship with God stop acting as if you are married to Ahasuerus! You are NOT! Your Bridegroom is none-other than Christ Himself who in the face of your sin, did NOT condemn, BUT gave Himself up to be condemned in our stead!

And that brings us to a third redemptive principle, we are reminded of that which only can inspire obedience on the part of man. (v. 20; 1 John 4:19; Romans 12:1) How is it that Ahasuerus and his advisor’s endeavored to bring about the obedience of their people? They did two things:

- They publicly stripped Vashti of her title- they humiliated her, Esther. 1:19.
- They placed every woman under a new Persian law, Esther 1:22.

This was their hope:

Esther 1:20, “And when the king’s edict which he shall make is heard throughout all his kingdom, great as it is, then all women will give honor to their husbands, great and small.”

What is it that God uses in His kingdom to inspire our love and obedience? It is NOT humiliation or the threatenings of the law, BUT His own love!

1 John 4:19, “We love, because He first loved us.”

I used to read this verse as that which God did to make our love possible. Yet that is a misreading of this text. Listen to it again, “We love, because He first loved us.” In other words, when a genuine child of God beholds the love Christ has for them, THE redemptive response is that of love! See, God’s love does NOT simply make our love possible; RATHER, the Holy Spirit uses it to create love in us! in light of this and not surprisingly, on what basis did Paul appeal for obedience in the Christian life?

Romans 12:1, “I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship.”

So, in the face of our sinful flesh whose passion is to rebel against God, how does God secure our obedience? By giving us a more powerful passion, the passion of love for Christ in response to His love for us!

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End Note(s)

¹ “The primary divisions of the empire were the satrapies, of which there were never more than thirty-one. By quoting the higher number of provinces, the domain of the king is made as impressive as possible.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 56)

² “At the beginning of King Xerxes’ reign, he had put down rebellions in Egypt and Babylon. ¶ Susa had been the capital of ancient Elam. Darius I rebuilt and used it as his residence before Persepolis became his capital. Xerxes also had his main residence at Persepolis but lived in Susa in the winter. ¶ ‘Citadel’ here means an “acropolis or fortified area” raised above the rest of the city. The citadel fortress was a rectangular platform seventy-two feet above the general level of the city. It was surrounded by a huge wall two and a half miles long.” (Breneman, 1993, p. 304)

³ “For the majority of people in western Asia, then as now, life was hard and food none too plentiful. While labourers received barely enough to live on, even though they were producing works of art that are still unsurpassed, life at court was extravagant beyond imagining. The more lavish the king’s hospitality, the greater his claim to supremacy.” (Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC, p. 55)

⁴ “Persian goblets of gold were more like drinking-horns in shape and capacity, individually designed and beautifully decorated.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 58)

⁵ This verse has proved to be problematic for translators and commentators. On the one hand drinking was ‘according to the law’ (Hebrews *kaddāt*), while on the other hand each one (lit. ‘man and man’) was free to do as he desired. Much depends on the degree of importance attached to the word *dāt*... It may be that interpreters have been over-influenced by the word *dāt*, which might on occasions have had the force of ‘order’ rather than ‘decree’, thus giving good sense, as in niv, ‘By the king’s command each guest was allowed to drink in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.’ Mention should be made of one further contribution to the meaning of this verse. The word *kaddāt*, repointed, may mean ‘flagons’, in which case there would be no mention of a decree, and the meaning would be ‘the drinking was by flagons without restraint’. Probably niv represents the best solution so far to the problem.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 58)

⁶ “The Greeks believed that they were fighting millions, as an epitaph from Thermopylae boasted: Four thousand warriors, flower of Pelops’ land, did here against three hundred myriads (i.e., three million) stand. (Herodotus 7.228)” (Yamauchi, 1997, p. 195)

⁷ “Herodotus said the name of Xerxes’ queen was Amestris. Many see this as an indication that this story is fictitious and not historical. However, the king may have had other queens, or perhaps she had different names. Some suggest that Vashti, which means “sweetheart,” may have been an epithet. The point of v. 9 is simply that Xerxes and Vashti were not acting in accord with each other. Their actions foreshadowed their separation soon to come.” (Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NAC, p. 307)

⁸ “After a week of indulgence the king’s heart may well have been merry. The Hebrew word *tōb*, ‘good’, can mean anything from ‘cheerful’ to ‘drunk’; the context decides (cf. 1 Sa. 25:36 and 1 Ki. 8:66 for contrasting interpretations of the same idiom). Ahasuerus is hardly likely to have been entirely sober.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 60)

⁹ Jewish Rabbis note the lack of direction for her dress, implying that Ahasuerus would have been quite happy had the queen come only wearing her crown! (Cf. Iain M. Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, REC, p. 10) Mervin Breneman wrote, “The rabbis as well as modern commentators discussed the queen’s refusal. The rabbis thought the king wanted Vashti to appear naked since she was to wear (only, they said) ‘her royal crown.’ One of the Targums says the king commanded her to appear naked. The author of the book did not say why she refused. We do know that to display her beauty would have implied coming unveiled, which would have been a violation of custom. No doubt the queen also knew what it would be like to show her beauty before that large group of men, many of whom had drunk too much wine.” (Breneman, 1993, pp. 307-308)

¹⁰ “Royal advisers, wise men, were a traditional institution; such were consulted by the Pharaoh (Genesis 41:8) and Daniel was among their number at Babylon in the time of Nebuchadnezzar.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 61)

¹¹ “The omission of the title ‘Queen’ before Vashti’s name from this point on is noteworthy. Another who is better than she anticipates the way the story will develop. In view of the regal isolation of the king, the queen’s influence was

potentially very great, and the next occupant of that royal position was to exploit her power to the full. Just how great her power was is explored in the course of the story. Vashti forfeited her influence by breaking the unspoken rule that it should be wielded in private. There is an appropriateness about her punishment. If she will not come when summoned, let her not come ever again.” (Baldwin, 1985, p. 62)

¹² Recall, she was there in Sardis when Ahasuerus made a spectacle of himself by publicly romancing his niece!

¹³ “Vashti’s refusal nonetheless serves to reveal the weakness of the law to command behavior. Resistance is possible. Assimilation to the will of the empire is not inevitable.” (Duguid, 2005, p. 11)

¹⁴ “The theme of the messianic banquet provides another point of comparison and contrast between the kingdom of God and the empire of Ahasuerus. The Lord too has prepared a sumptuous banquet for his people on the last day. But when God summons his bride (the church) to his banquet, he does so not to expose her to shame but to lavish his grace and mercy upon her. He doesn’t force sinners to come unwillingly to his feast, but gently woos them and draws them to himself. We can see why Queen Vashti was reluctant to appear before Ahasuerus, but who would refuse such a wonderful invitation from God to experience life in all its fullness? There is nothing noble about refusing to appear in the presence of such a good and gracious God. On the contrary, it is the height of folly and ingratitude. Have you heard and responded to his call to come? If not, then you too, like Vashti, are doomed to be banished from his presence forever. Why would you choose to die? Why not lay down all your resistance and come to the feast?” (Duguid, 2005, p. 15)