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REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

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Testament Editors

Iain M. Duguid, Old Testament
Daniel M. Doriani, New Testament

Esther and Ruth

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CONTENTS

Series Introduction vii

Preface xi

Esther: The Hidden King Delivers

1. Standing Firm against the Empire (1:1–22) 3
2. Beauty and the Beast (2:1–23) 18
3. Mordecai Makes a Stand (3:1–15) 32
4. The Dog That Didn't Bark (4:1–17) 45
5. Meekness and Subtlety (5:1–14) 60
6. The Man the King Delights to Honor (6:1–14) 73
7. Coming Out in Susa (7:1–10) 85
8. It Ain't Over (8:1–17) 98
9. A World Turned Upside Down (9:1–10:3) 112

Ruth: The Lord Redeems

10. The Road to Nowhere (1:1–5) 129
11. Grace at the Bottom of the Barrel (1:6–22) 139
12. A Refuge from the Storm (2:1–23) 154
13. Ruth's Redeemer (3:1–18) 168
14. Ruth's Reward (4:1–22) 180

Index of Scripture 193

Index of Subjects and Names 197

SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment

Series Introduction

of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastors-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proven to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application.

Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries our gifted authors can provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely upon for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

The Books of Esther and Ruth are not really stories about their respective “heroines.” Rather, they are part of the Bible’s larger story about God and his dealings with his people, and with the world. This is true even though the Book of Esther does not so much as mention the name of God. As in everyday life, God’s intervention is everywhere visible in the Book of Esther, even though his presence is concealed. The essential conflict between the two kingdoms—the empire of Ahasuerus and the kingdom of God—plays itself out in the lives of flawed and unexpected individuals, as God delivers his people once again from the threat of extinction. Meanwhile, in the Book of Ruth, the Great Redeemer shows his love and compassion to the embittered Naomi as well as to her foreign daughter-in-law, Ruth. His grace brings home the disobedient prodigal daughter with empty hands, so that he can astonish her with unexpected fullness. In both stories, the grace of God to the undeserving and the outcasts is prominently on display. Both stories thus constantly point us forward to Christ as the one in whom that grace will fully and finally come to aliens and strangers, redeeming rebellious sinners and making them into God’s new people.

Even though writing is a solitary task, no book is the product of a single individual. This is especially the case for a book that began as two series of sermons preached at Grace Presbyterian Church in Fallbrook, California. My thanks are due to the congregation there for the great encouragement and support we have experienced over the years we have served that community of God’s people. It is a wonderful blessing for a preacher to serve a people with a hunger for God’s Word and a never-failing enthusiasm to hear

Preface

the gospel of grace over again. I also want to thank Rick Schaeffer and Ken Han, who served in ministry alongside me while these sermons were preached and revised. Your diligence and hard work freed me to be able to complete this work.

My thanks are also due to Westminster Seminary California, where I taught this material in a number of classes. Many students asked perceptive questions that helped me to refine my thinking and answer the question, “Now, how do you preach this?” A teacher always learns more from his students than they do from him.

I would like to thank my fellow editors for this series, Dan Doriani, Rick Phillips, and Phil Ryken, who were not slow to challenge my sloppy thinking or poor forms of expression. Their efforts have made this book much better; the remaining flaws, however, are all my own work. I would also like to express my gratitude to Al Fisher and the staff of P&R for encouraging this commentary series in the first place, and for producing it in such an excellent manner.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. My wife, Barbara, is both my best and most perceptive critic and, at the same time, the most enthusiastic encourager and supporter. You are truly a “helper corresponding to me” (Gen. 2:18). My children, Jamie, Sam, Hannah, Rob, and Rosie, sat regularly in the front row of the church, listening to me preach. They were always the first to say afterward, “Good job, Dad.” Thank you for encouraging me in my labors; I pray that in the years to come you will continue to have the same enthusiasm for God’s Word as you do now, and that as you go out in life, you may always find churches where grace is the dominant note in the chord.

≈ *Esther*

THE HIDDEN KING DELIVERS

1

STANDING FIRM AGAINST THE EMPIRE

Esther 1:1–22

If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she.

(Esth. 1:19)



Imagine living life teetering on an unstable perch in a hostile world, while trying to perform a difficult task. This is the metaphor that dominates the classic film, *The Fiddler on the Roof*. The main character, the Russian Jew Tevye, explains his life in these terms:

A fiddler on the roof—sounds crazy, no? But here in our little village of Anatevke you might say every one of us is a fiddler on the roof, trying to scratch out a pleasant, simple tune without breaking his neck. It isn't easy. You may ask why we stay up there, if it's so dangerous? Well, we stay because Anatevke is our home. And how do we keep our balance? That I can tell you in one word: Tradition!

FIDDLING ON THE ROOF

The image of the fiddler on the roof applies to the Jews in Persia in Esther's time just as much as it does to early-twentieth-century Russian Jews. They were not like those who lived around them, and they knew that their overlords could not be trusted. The Persians held all the power in their hands and the Jews had none. Even though these Jews had been born in Persia, they were exiles far from their homeland, surrounded by strangers. Their property could be seized or their life ended in a moment on the whim of some petty bureaucrat. On the other hand, if fortune smiled on them, they might yet survive to a good old age and make a reasonable living. As Tevye put it, "It isn't easy . . . but it is home." In such a difficult situation, why should the Jews take the risk of living a distinctive lifestyle? Why not just give in to the empire's demands and allow themselves to be assimilated and become invisible? To reverse the old Japanese proverb, "The nail that doesn't stick out is much less likely to get hammered."

But is that the right way of putting it: "If fortune smiled on them . . . ?" Wasn't there a God in heaven, a God who had committed himself to the Jewish people in an ancient covenant? Didn't he take care of their forefathers when they were strangers and aliens in a land not their own? Didn't he bring them out of Egypt with a strong hand and a mighty arm? Wouldn't he look after his own people even in the midst of this present darkness? Or would he? After all, it had been a long while since that wonderful story of the crossing of the Red Sea, and why would he deign to look down on ordinary folk eking out very ordinary lives in distant Persia? They couldn't see this God, they hadn't heard from him lately, and in any case, they were living miles from the land he called his own. Did this invisible God still have what it takes—in terms of power and interest—to reach out and touch their lives?

When we think about it in these terms, it becomes clear that the situation of Tevye and that of Esther are not so far distant from ours as we might first have thought. We may not personally face direct persecution based on our nationality or our faith, although many of God's people today in different parts of the world are confronted with exactly such a reality. However, we too are strangers in the land in which we live, called to be *in* the world but not *of* it. We may be citizens of the country in which we live, yet we are in a profound sense the subjects of a different king, with loyalties and

allegiances different from those of our neighbors. Sometimes that difference doesn't seem particularly important; we are all part of the same community. Yet at other times it becomes painfully clear that we are not operating under the same management as those who live all around us. In a pluralistic society, we too face the struggle to stand for our primary allegiance, and in a culture where those who stand for truth regularly find themselves getting hammered. It isn't easy—but it is home.

What is more, we too struggle with the invisibility of God. The God who can part the Red Sea and raise Jesus from the dead does not choose to exercise that same power very often in our experience. We struggle when the goals and dreams we had for our lives are trampled underfoot by circumstances, even though perhaps they were good and godly dreams that God could easily have brought to fruition. Tevye dreamed of being a rich man and wondered what cosmic scheme of God's would have been ruined if he had been given a better life. Perhaps all we ever wanted, though, was to be happily married, or to have children, or to raise those children, but God didn't bring that dream to fruition. Perhaps our heart's desire was to serve God in a full-time ministry, or to see our dearest friend come to faith in Christ, but it never happened. We cried out to God, asking what cosmic scheme would be disrupted by answering our prayers, but there was no response. God remained hidden, his will inscrutable. Like the Jews of Esther's time and the Russian diaspora, we too may find ourselves "fiddlers on the roof," struggling desperately to keep our balance in a confusing world.

THE TWIN TEMPTATIONS: ASSIMILATION AND DESPAIR

We can relate, then, to the two primary temptations that the Jews faced in Esther's day. On the one hand, the power of the pagan empire was intensely visible and tangible. They heard it daily in the footsteps of the marching soldiers and the rumble of chariot wheels. They saw its opulent wealth and absolute control of the details of life. They smelled its power in the incense offered in a hundred state-sponsored pagan temples all around them. Why not just give up the distinctive motto, "We are God's covenant people," and be assimilated into the crowd? That was the goal of the Persian Empire. In the science fiction series *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, there was a particularly nasty opponent of the Federation called "The Borg," who operated by

Standing Firm against the Empire

incorporating their enemies into their collective and extracting from them whatever was of value. Their slogan was “Resistance is futile, you must be assimilated.” In just the same way, the Persian Empire sought to assimilate the various peoples that inhabited their territory into a single entity.

What made the temptation to assimilation particularly pressing was the fact that most of the really enthusiastic “As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (Josh. 24:15) people among the exiles had left and returned to Jerusalem at the time of Cyrus’s decree in 538 B.C., or during the generation that followed. Now, more than fifty years after that event, those who remained in Susa, the Persian capital, were strongly tempted to settle into a comfortable (perhaps too comfortable) coexistence with the generally benign autocracy that surrounded them. Exile had been kind to them. They had come to terms with the powers of the day and had forgotten that the pagan environment in which they lived was always at least potentially hostile and could never be trusted. They had forgotten that “the powers that be” were fickle masters who could easily turn against them.

If assimilation was one temptation that faced the people of Esther’s day, then despair was surely another. They were surrounded by a fickle, all-powerful empire that might well turn out to be antagonistic, and they followed a God whose ways were often inscrutable, invisible, and mysterious. What, then, could keep them from despair? As the Borg realized, despair and assimilation are closely related. The reason they constantly repeated the “Resistance is futile” slogan is that those who have given up hope are easily assimilated. How then could the Jewish exiles hold on to hope and faithfulness in the midst of a hostile pagan environment? How can we hold firm in the face of the trials and disappointments of our lives? As Tevye discovered as the movie *Fiddler on the Roof* unfolded, something more than the answer “Tradition” would be necessary to maintain a distinctive community.

To the twofold temptation to assimilation and despair, the Book of Esther offers a twofold answer. In the first place, it satirizes the empire, mocking its claims to power and authority. Satire takes the object of fear, the authority, and makes fun of it, showing its ridiculous side. The book is meant to make us laugh. For oppressed and powerless people, satire is a key weapon, cutting the vaunted splendor of the empire down to size. Dictatorships and totalitarian states have never had much of a sense of humor when it comes to their sense of self-importance. Books like *Animal Farm*, in which George

Orwell depicted and parodied the Soviet system of government, swiftly find themselves being banned by the empire, because it fears the power of satire. If the people once perceive that the emperor indeed has no clothes, then the empire's power to command obedience and instill fear is broken. The one who is able to laugh in the face of the Borg will never be successfully assimilated. Satire is thus a powerful antidote to despair. The Book of Esther shows us that the great empire is not run by fearsome giants after all, but by petty bureaucrats. The ruling class of Persia is depicted not so much as "The Magnificent Seven" but more like "Ahasuerus and the Seven Dwarfs."¹

The second approach the Book of Esther takes is to show us that God is often at work in this world in an entirely different mode from, say, the events of the exodus. In the Book of Exodus, God's work is all thunder and lightning, full of dramatic interventions that expose the emptiness of the Egyptian gods. There are great heroes like Moses and Aaron to lead the people and a trail of miracles to attest to God's presence with them. In the Book of Esther, however, we see God working invisibly and behind the scenes.² Here there are neither dramatic miracles nor great heroes, just apparently ordinary providence moving flawed and otherwise undistinguished people into exactly the right place at the right time to bring the empire into line and to establish God's purposes for his people. God is not mentioned by name anywhere in the book. However, when it comes to a conflict between the empire of Ahasuerus and his dwarfs on one side and the kingdom of the almighty, invisible God on the other, there is only one possible outcome.

LIFESTYLES OF THE RICH AND FATUOUS

The Book of Esther begins by introducing us to the great empire of Ahasuerus:

1. The same satirical motif is visible in the stories of Daniel 1–6, for example, in the repeated lengthy list of different classes of government officials who turn up to worship Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue, and the similar long and repeated list of instruments that are played to give the command for worship. The empire cannot resist the temptation to put on a great show! Yet its vaunted power is thwarted by the simple refusal of Daniel's friends to give in to its agenda.

2. Sandra Berg comments, "The Book of Esther, then, does not ignore the presence of divine activity; rather, it points to the hiddenness of Yahweh's presence in the world" (*The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* [Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 44; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979], 178).

Standing Firm against the Empire

Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the capital, in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa, the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. And drinking was according to this edict: "There is no compulsion." For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired. Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus. (Esth. 1:1–9)

This Ahasuerus was no teacup tyrant: he ruled 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia, from sea to shining sea. What is more, Ahasuerus knew how to throw a party, a six-month-long event, for his military leaders, his princes, and his nobles—all of the power brokers of the kingdom. Anyone who was anyone was there. There were marble pillars and hangings of white and violet linen in the gardens, couches of gold and silver—even mosaic pavements made of costly materials. The very ground on which the guests walked and the seats on which they sat were made of things that other hosts would have kept safely locked away as precious treasures. No two of the wine cups were identical and the wine flowed freely, matching the king's generosity.

This lengthy description serves an important purpose in the narration. We are meant to be impressed and awed by this display of excess—and a little revolted by its wastefulness. Just as we are both impressed and revolted when we read reports of the weddings of Hollywood stars—the flowers, the bands, the choirs, the fireworks, the outrageously expensive dress—so too here we should be both impressed and revolted. Ahasuerus is the very picture of power and wealth, both of which are squandered on his own appetites. And remember, these would have been our tax dollars at work!

But a key detail begins the process of deconstructing the empire in front of our very eyes, setting us up for the revelation that the emperor who has such a beautiful closet actually has no clothes. That detail comes in verse 8: “And drinking was according to this edict: ‘There is no compulsion.’ For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired.” This continues the theme of Ahasuerus’s power: even the very drinking at his party must conform to his law. No detail escaped the empire’s notice and regulation: an edict was required to ensure that no one was under compulsion! But power that must regulate conformity at this level inevitably invites a petty bureaucracy. Real power does not consist in regulating such detailed minutiae. In fact, the tendency to regulate such details is actually a sign of weakness not power. The stories that circulate of government regulations requiring bananas to conform to certain criteria of straightness and size do not impress us as shining examples of government efficiency but rather of bureaucrats run amok, compensating for lack of real significance by inordinate attention to minuscule details.³ Such was the empire of Ahasuerus, and as we read its description, it is hard to resist a chuckle.

DECONSTRUCTING THE EMPIRE

The process of deconstructing the empire continues in the next scene. The king—Great King Ahasuerus—had been drinking for seven straight days and was predictably in high spirits. With a characteristic touch of overkill, he sent no fewer than seven of the royal eunuchs who served him to summon his queen, Vashti, wearing her royal crown, so that the people and the nobles could admire her beauty: “On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and 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 show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at” (Esth. 1:10–11). The Rabbis may have been

3. The government in question is the European Commission, whose regulation No 2257/94, concerning banana standards, requires that bananas must be “free from malformation or abnormal curvature of the fingers” and lays down a minimum length of 14 cms. and minimum grade of 27 mms. Although often dismissed as a myth, this regulation is apparently real, although in practice unenforced. See Blake Morrison, “Adventures in Euroland,” *The Guardian*, December 17, 2001.

Standing Firm against the Empire

going beyond the text when they interpreted the command to Vashti to appear wearing her royal crown as requiring her to wear nothing else apart from the crown, yet they were not too far off the mark in discerning the offensiveness of Ahasuerus's intentions. To command his wife to appear dressed up in her royal finery for the enjoyment of a crowd of drunken men was to treat her as a doll, a mere object who existed for the king's pleasure, and to show off his power—a "trophy wife," in the contemporary jargon.⁴ Not for her the decree "There is no compulsion" (1:8). Here we see the dark side of placing so much power in the hands of a man whose only thought is for himself.

But here the raw power of the empire encountered a snag: "But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him" (Esth. 1:12). The law of the Medes and the Persians, which could not be revoked, could nonetheless be refused. Queen Vashti, who in accordance with Persian custom had been holding a separate feast for the women (Esth. 1:9), refused to comply with Ahasuerus's unreasonable demands. The law might be able to compel people to drink as they wished, but it could not ultimately compel the king's wife to be treated as a sex object. A mere woman stood up and said "No!" and the empire was powerless to enforce its will. The mouse had roared and the glorious empire was shaken to its foundations by her refusal.

What was to be done? A royal conference of the wise men of the empire was required to work out how to deal with this dangerous threat to authority: "Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom): 'According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?' " (Esth. 1:13–15). For their part, Ahasuerus's advisors were terrified that the queen's "just say no" policy would spread to every home in the empire:

4. On this scene, see Adele Berlin, *Esther* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 11.

Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, “Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the queen’s behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, ‘King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.’ This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen’s behavior will say the same to all the king’s officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty.” (Esth. 1:16–18)

Horrors! What would happen to a man’s position in his own home once it became known that Queen Vashti had refused the command of the king?

THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

Yet what did Vashti’s resistance really achieve? She personally lost her position of power and prestige as the queen, for the imperial advisors said, “If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike” (Esth. 1:19–20).

Thus Vashti was stripped of her title. The law, it appears, triumphed, for the regulation that she resisted also set her punishment (Esth. 1:15), though it is clear already that “the law” merely serves as a fig leaf to cover the whim of the king and his advisors. Since she chose not to appear before the king when she was summoned, she would never again appear before him. Instead, her place would be given to someone “better than she.” Her suffering freed no one, not even herself, and was ultimately a foolish gesture. Pragmatically, Vashti is a model of how *not* to get things done within the empire: the nail that dared to raise its head was indeed hammered for it. Esther would have to be much more circumspect and subtle in dealing with the empire if she was to defuse its danger. Yet 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.

Standing Firm against the Empire

That lesson appears to have been lost on the empire, which busily set about making another law that it was powerless to enforce: “This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people” (Esth. 1:21–22). Consider the futility of this regulation: “that every man be master in his own household” (Esth. 1:22). The entire weight of imperial authority was placed behind this edict: it was a royal decree, a law that could never be repealed (see Esth. 1:19). The entire resources of the empire went into disseminating this edict through the royal mails, the intricate system of horses and dispatch riders which carried the emperor’s wishes speedily to the most distant provinces. But what was actually achieved by all this huffing and puffing? Was the social order of Persia really threatened by this one woman’s resistance? Even if it were, can such a principle of male authority in the household really be imposed by governmental decree? Are all men to exercise power in such a self-centered way as Ahasuerus did, and then expect instant obedience? Is every man supposed to banish his wife if she fails to submit to his will?

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.

The fact that the emperor has no clothes is hardly a comforting reality for his subjects. As the Book of Esther unfolds, we shall see that Ahasuerus has little political acumen or capacity for personal thought.⁵ His decree concerning Vashti is symptomatic of a more general weakness in his character. At the same time, he is surrounded and manipulated by advisors who like-

5. See Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 171–77.

wise wield their power with more enthusiasm than skill. It is as if we were to see the surgeons about to operate on us practice by cutting logs with chainsaws and repeatedly miss the target. This is the world in which God's people found themselves then, and often still find themselves: a world in which the reins of power are in the hands of the incompetent, and in which we are guided at best by the amoral and at worst by the immoral. It is that way for some in the workplace or even in the home. Many Christians throughout the world live in countries that are practical dictatorships, or where the real power seems to lie in the hands of the local mafia or a drug cartel, not in the elected government officials. This world is a dangerous place, where power and wisdom are frequently unconnected. The reality of living with such people holding the power of life and death may seem to be no laughing matter, but sometimes laughter is the best way to begin to respond.

LIVING UNDER THE EMPIRE

What do we learn from the opening chapter of Esther for our own walk in the world?

First, Esther 1 reminds us not to take the power and the glory of this world too seriously. Sometimes we just have to laugh. The world takes itself all too seriously, and it wants us to take it seriously too. We live in a society that routinely elevates the trivial. Whole magazines are devoted to the antics of soap opera stars, while our culture pays incredible amounts of money to grown men whose only talent is hitting or throwing a little ball. And we think Ahasuerus was wasteful? We live in a world that considers the car we drive an extension of who we are and is more impressed by where someone went to school than by what one learned there. And we think Ahasuerus's bureaucrats were focused on trivialities?

The empire of materialism in which we live takes stuff desperately seriously. It wants us to study the empire's laws and learn how to get ahead by the empire's standards. It wants us to dream of six-month-long banquets in beautifully decorated gardens, and then to devote our lives to pursuing the dream. It is easy for us to be dazzled by the empire's ostentatious show, but it is empty of real power at the center. The empire of this world is a glittering hologram that has no real substance. To defend ourselves against the danger of being assimilated, we must learn to laugh at the empire. We must

Standing Firm against the Empire

learn to laugh at those around us whose lives are wasted in pursuit of so many worthless goals, and to laugh at ourselves when we see our own hearts getting weighed on the empire's scale of values. What shall it profit a man if he can throw six-month-long parties with gold couches on mother-of-pearl pavements? How much more ridiculous are we, then, when we spend so much time and energy desiring a new sports car, or a great pair of shoes at the mall, or the latest home improvement in the mail-order catalog? Ultimately, it is all empty. The emperor's costly clothes are transparent, and what may be seen through them by the discerning eye is ridiculous. True value lies in the values of an altogether different empire.

Second, Esther 1 shows us that sometimes we have to wait to see what God is doing. God is nowhere to be seen in this chapter. That is no surprise, since he is hardly visible anywhere in the whole Book of Esther. However, that we cannot see God working doesn't mean he isn't at work. He is busily occupied throughout the Book of Esther as the unseen director of history, arranging all things for the good of his people. Esther and Mordecai have not yet even made an appearance on stage, but events are still moving according to God's good pleasure. Why did Vashti throw away her position and privilege for a noble but predictably futile gesture? Why did Ahasuerus make his foolish demand in the first place? Who came up with the idea of replacing Vashti with a better woman, instead of quietly resolving the offense Ahasuerus had caused? All of these events are on one level entirely explicable as normal human events, with no miraculous component. Yet all of them are necessary to make way for the process by which Esther will rise to the position where she can use her power and influence to protect God's people against a powerful enemy. Coincidences? By no means. Rather, they are the hand of God at work in a different mode from that seen elsewhere in the Bible.

Notice, however, that none of these events would have seemed significant to the Jewish community in Susa at the time. A change in queen? Who cares what those pagans are doing? What has that got to do with the price of fish in the market? Only with the benefit of hindsight is it possible to see all the intricate details of God's plan working together for the good of his people. So also in our own lives, we may well have no idea what God is doing. He may seem hidden and remote, refusing to answer our prayers and to give us what we so earnestly ask of him. Wait! The end of our story has not yet been

told, and who knows how the pieces of the jigsaw that at present seem to have no logical connection with one another will ultimately come together? Even though we cannot see God acting, it does not follow that he is not doing anything. God's work is not all slam-bang action; sometimes it is a quiet faithfulness to his promises in the seemingly ordinary providences of life, bringing about in the hearts of his people what he has purposed.

Third, this passage shows that God's kingdom is not like the empire of Ahasuerus. The Book of Esther repeatedly invites us to compare and contrast the kingdom of God and the empire of Ahasuerus. There are superficial similarities between the two kingdoms, but in each case they hide deeper differences. The Lord too is a great king whose decrees cannot be challenged or repealed. His sovereignty governs all things, great and small. He must be obeyed, or we will certainly suffer the consequences. Yet his law is beneficial for men and women, unlike the drunken meanderings of a man at the mercy of his shrewd counselors. God doesn't use people for his own purposes as if they were disposable commodities. Rather, he graciously invites them into a loving relationship with himself. His kingdom grows and does its work not through the outwardly powerful and attractive, but rather in hidden but effective ways. For that reason, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to the growth of a mustard seed, or to the work of leaven. It starts small and hidden, but it achieves its goals nonetheless (Matt. 13:31–33). Big is not necessarily beautiful in God's service.

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?

Standing Firm against the Empire

This is all the more the case when we consider what Christ has done for his bride. Far from regarding her as a beautiful object existing solely to feed his pride and pleasure, he took one who was by nature completely unattractive and gave himself for her, laying down his own life for his people. It was while we were still dead in our transgressions and sins that Christ gave himself for us, his life as a ransom for the ungodly. Everything we have, even the very righteousness in which we are clothed to appear before God, comes from his good hand. How can our hearts not be touched again with fresh love for a King who has loved us so freely, and so graciously? With such a husband calling us, why would we not be delighted and overjoyed to come at his bidding? A King who has done so much for us can surely ask any level of obedience from us in response.

Indeed, this is how the Lord establishes male headship in the home. Like King Ahasuerus, God too decrees that men should lead their homes, but the differences are far more pronounced than the similarities. His decree is not an empty and futile gesture. For men who follow Jesus, headship can never be merely the exercise of raw power, as it was for Ahasuerus. Such so-called headship, which simply uses that term as an excuse for domineering control, is a far cry from the biblical model. On the contrary, Christian male leadership in the home and in the church is established and rooted in Christ's own self-sacrificing love for his bride. The obverse of the coin inscribed "Wives, submit to your own husbands . . . as the church submits to Christ" is the motto "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:22–25). This is what true love is: not husbands using their wives as objects to meet their needs and satisfy their desires, but rather giving themselves up for their wives, gently leading them to fulfill their gifts and godly aspirations. The gospel truth of Christ's love for us is the foundation for new minds that delight to submit to his ordering of creation. If Christian husbands were more like Christ and less like Ahasuerus, then perhaps we would find our wives more ready to submit to our leadership.

Who then is your real king and to whom is your heart committed? The empire wants to make us its slave. It wants to assimilate us into its ways of thinking. It offers us glittering prizes for compliance to its ways—a "successful" life, according to its own definitions. Have you been enticed and trapped? Flee from these things to the kingdom that is solid and substantial, the kingdom that Jesus Christ came to establish. Learn to laugh at the

emptiness of the empire's priorities and edicts. Come to Christ by faith and rest in his provision of forgiveness and life, thanking him for his gift of himself for us on the cross. Live according to his edicts, in which true wisdom resides. Trust that he is at work as he promised, working through even the evil impulses of the empire for good in our lives and the lives of all of his people. Finally, remember that this world is not our home: one day, when Jesus returns, our balancing act on the roof will be over and the true banquet will begin.