Adam Clarke Commentary

Esther 1

Introduction

Ahasuerus makes royal feasts for his nobles and people, Esther 1:1-9. Vashti is sent for by the king, but refuses to come, Esther 1:10-12. Vashti is disgraced; and a law made for the subjection of women, Esther 1:13-22. The whole history of this book in its connected order, with the occurrences in the Persian empire at that time, will be found in the introduction: to which the reader is referred.

Concerning the author of this book there are several opinions: some attribute the work to Ezra; some to one Joachim, a high priest; others, to the men of the Great Synagogue; and others to Mordecai. This latter is the most likely opinion: nor is that to be disregarded which gives to Mordecai for co-partner Ezra himself; though it is likely that the conclusion, from Esther 9:23 to the end of the book, was inserted by another hand, and at a later time. Though some Christians have hesitated to receive the book of Esther into the sacred canon; yet it has always been received by the Jews, not only as perfectly authentic, but also as one of the most excellent of their sacred books. They call it מגילה (megillah), The Volume, by way of eminence; and hold it in the highest estimation. That it records the history of a real fact, the observation of the feast of Purim, to the present day, is a sufficient evidence. Indeed, this is one of the strongest evidences that any fact can have, viz., that, to commemorate it, a certain rite, procession, feast, or the like, should have been instituted at the time, which, without intermission, has been continued annually through every generation of that people, and in whatsoever place they or parties of them may have sojourned, to the present day. This is the fact concerning the feast of Purim here mentioned; which the Jews, in all places of their dispersion, have uninterruptedly celebrated, and do still continue to celebrate, from the time of their deliverance from the massacre intended by Haman to the present time. Copies of this book, widely differing from each other, exist in Hebrew, Chaldee, Syriac, Greek, and Latin. All these differ much from the Hebrew text, particularly the Greek and the Chaldee: the former has many additional paragraphs; and the latter, as it exists in the London Polyglot, contains five times more than the Hebrew text. To notice all the various readings, additions, and paraphrases, in the above copies, would require a volume of no inconsiderable magnitude. The reader who is curious may consult the above Polyglot. This book does not appear to be extant in Arabic, or in any other of the Oriental languages, besides the Hebrew and Syriac.

The question may naturally arise, What was the original of this book? or, In what language was it written? Though learned men in general decide in favor of a Hebrew original, yet there are many reasons which might be urged in favor of the Persian. Several of the proper names are evidently of a Persian origin; and no doubt all the others are so; but they are so transformed by passing through the Hebrew, that they are no longer discernible. The Hebrew has even retained some of the Persian words, having done little else than alter the character, e.g., Esther, Mehuman, Mishak, Melzar, Vashti, Shushan, Pur, Darius, Paradise, etc., several of which will be noted in their proper places. The Targum in the London Polyglot is widely different from that in the Complutum, Antwerp, and Paris editions. The principal additions in the Greek are carefully marked in the London Polyglot, but are too long and too numerous to be inserted here. It is a singular circumstance that the name of God does not once occur in the whole of this book as it stands in Hebrew.
Verse 1

Now it came to pass - The Ahasuerus of the Romans, the Artaxerxes of the Greeks and Ardsheer of the Persians, are the same. Some think that this Ahasuerus was Darius, the son of Hystaspes; but Prideaux and others maintain that he was Artaxerxes Longimanus.

Reigned from India even unto Ethiopia - This is nearly the same account that is given by Xenophon. How great and glorious the kingdom of Cyrus was beyond all the kingdoms of Asia, was evident from this: Ὡρισθῇ μεν πρως ἑῳ τῇ Ερυθρᾳ θαλαττῇ· προς αρκτον δε τῷ Εὐξεινῷ ποντῷ· προς ἑσπεραν δε Κυπρῷ και Ἀιγυπτῷ· προς μεσημβριᾷ δε Αἰθιοπίᾳ. “It was bounded on the east by the Red Sea; on the north by the Euxine Sea; on the west by Cyprus and Egypt; and on the south by Ethiopia.” - Cyrop. lib. viii., p. 241, edit. Steph. 1581.

Verse 2

Sat on the throne of his kingdom - Having subdued all his enemies, and brought universal peace to his empire. See the commencement of the introduction.

Shushan the palace - The ancient city of Susa, now called (Shuster) by the Persians. This, with Ecbatana and Babylon, was a residence of the Persian kings. The word הַבִּירָה (habbirah), which we render the palace, should be rendered the city, ἐν Σουσοίς τῇ πόλει, as in the Septuagint.

Verse 4

The riches of his glorious kingdom - Luxury was the characteristic of the Eastern monarchs, and particularly of the Persians. In their feasts, which were superb and of long continuance, they made a general exhibition of their wealth, grandeur, etc., and received the highest encomiums from their poets and flatterers. Their ostentation on such occasions passed into a proverb: hence Horace:

Persicos odi, puer, apparatus:
Displicent nœxœ philyra coronae;
Mitte sectari, rosa quo locorum
Sera moretur.
I tell thee, boy, that I detest
The grandeur of a Persian feast;
Nor for me the linden's rind
Shall the flowery chaplet bind.

Then search not where the curious rose
Beyond his season loitering grows.
Francis.

Verse 5

A feast unto all the people - The first was a feast for the nobles in general; this, for the people of the city at large.

In the court of the garden - As the company was very numerous that was to be received, no apartments in the palace could be capable of containing them; therefore the court of the garden was chosen.

Verse 6
White, green, and blue hangings - It was customary, on such occasions, not only to hang the place about with elegant curtains of the above colors, as Dr. Shaw and others have remarked, but also to have a canopy of rich stuffs suspended on cords from side to side of the place in which they feasted. And such courts were ordinarily paved with different coloured marbles, or with tiles painted, as above specified. And this was the origin of the Musive or Mosaic work, well known among the Asiatics, and borrowed from them by the Greeks and the Romans. The beds of gold and silver mentioned here were the couches covered with gold and silver cloth, on which the guests reclined.

Verse 7

Vessels being diverse - They had different services of plate.

Verse 8

None did compel: for so the king had appointed - Every person drank what he pleased; he was not obliged to take more than he had reason to think would do him good.

Among the Greeks, each guest was obliged to keep the round, or leave the company: hence the proverb Ἡ πιθι, η απιθι; Drink or begone. To this Horace refers, but gives more license: -

Pasco libatis dapibus; prout cuique libido est.
Siccus inaequalis calices conviva, solutus
Legibus insanis: seu quis capit acia fortis
Pocula; seu modicis humescit aetius.
Horat. Sat. lib. ii., s. vi., ver. 67.

There, every guest may drink and fill
As much or little as he will;
Exempted from the Bedlam rules
Of roaring prodigals and fools.
Whether, in merry mood or whim,
He fills his goblet to the brim;
Or, better pleased to let it pass,
Is cheerful with a moderate glass.

Francis.

At the Roman feasts there was a person chosen by the cast of dice, who was the Arbiter bibendi, and prescribed rules to the company, which all were obliged to observe. References to this custom may be seen in the same poet. Odar. lib. i., Od. iv., ver. 18: -

Non regna vini sortiere tali.

And in lib. ii., Od. vii., ver. 25: -

- Quem Venus arbitrum Dict bibendi?

Mr. Herbert, in his excellent poem, The Church Porch, has five verses on this vile custom and its rule: -

Drink not the third glass, which thou canst not tame
When once it is within thee, but before
Mayst rule it as thou list; and pour the shame,
Which it would pour on thee, upon the floor.

It is most just to throw that on the ground,
Which would throw me there if I keep the round.
He that is drunken may his mother kill,
Big with his sister; he hath lost the reins;
Is outlawed by himself. All kinds of ill
Did with his liquor slide into his veins.
The drunkard forfeits man; and doth divest
All worldly right, save what he hath by beast.
Nothing too severe can be said on this destructive practice.

Verse 9

Also Vashti the queen - (Vashti) is a mere Persian word; and signifies a beautiful or excellent woman.

Made a feast for the women - The king, having subdued all his enemies, left no competitor for the kingdom; and being thus quietly and firmly seated on the throne, made this a time of general festivity. As the women of the East never mingle with the men in public, Vashti made a feast for the Persian ladies by themselves; and while the men were in the court of the garden, the women were in the royal house.

Verse 10

He commanded Mehuman - All these are doubtless Persian names; but so disguised by passing through a Hebrew medium, that some of them can scarcely be known. (Mehuman) signifies a stranger or guest.
We shall find other names and words in this book, the Persian etymology of which may be easily traced.

Verse 11

To bring Vashti the queen - The Targum adds naked.
For she was fair to look on - Hence she had her name (Vashti), which signifies beautiful. See Esther 1:9.

Verse 12

Vashti refused to come - And much should she be commended for it. What woman, possessing even a common share of prudence and modesty, could consent to expose herself to the view of such a group of drunken Bacchanalians? Her courage was equal to her modesty: she would resist the royal mandate, rather than violate the rules of chaste decorum.
Her contempt of worldly grandeur, when brought in competition with what every modest woman holds dear and sacred, is worthy of observation. She well knew that this act of disobedience would cost her her crown, if not her life also: but she was regardless of both, as she conceived her virtue and honor were at stake.
Her humility was greatly evidenced in this refusal. She was beautiful; and might have shown herself to great advantage, and have had a fine opportunity of gratifying her vanity, if she had any: but she refused to come.
Hail, noble woman! be thou a pattern to all thy sex on every similar occasion! Surely, every thing considered, we have few women like Vashti; for some of the highest of the land will dress and deck themselves with the utmost splendor, even to the selvedge of their fortunes, to exhibit themselves at balls, plays, galas, operas, and public assemblies of all kinds, (nearly half naked), that they may be seen and admired of men, and even, to the endless reproach and broad suspicion of their honor and chastity, figure away in masquerades! Vashti must be considered at the top of her sex: - *Rara avis in terris, nigroque simillima cygno*.
A black swan is not half so rare a bird.

Verse 13
To the wise men - Probably the lawyers.

Verse 14

And the next unto him - the seven princes - Probably, the privy counsellors of the king. Which saw the king's face - were at all times admitted to the royal presence.

Verse 16

Vashti - hath not done wrong to the king only - This reasoning or arguing was inconsequent and false. Vashti had not generally disobeyed the king, therefore she could be no precedent for the general conduct of the Persian women. She disobeyed only in one particular; and this, to serve a purpose, Memucan draws into a general consequence; and the rest came to the conclusion which he drew, being either too drunk to be able to discern right from wrong, or too intent on reducing the women to a state of vassalage, to neglect the present favorable opportunity.

Verse 18

The ladies of Persia - שרות (saroth), the princesses; but the meaning is very well expressed by our term ladies.

Verse 19

That it be not altered - Let it be inserted among the permanent laws, and made a part of the constitution of the empire. Perhaps the Persians affected such a degree of wisdom in the construction of their laws, that they never could be amended, and should never be repeated. And this we may understand to be the ground of the saying, The laws of the Medes and Persians, that change not.

Verse 22

That every man should bear rule in his own house - Both God's law and common sense taught this from the foundation of the world. And is it possible that this did not obtain in the Persian empire, previously to this edict? The twentieth verse has another clause, That all wives shall give to their husbands honor, both to great and small. This also was universally understood. This law did nothing. I suppose the parade of enactment was only made to deprive honest Vashti of her crown. The Targum adds, “That each woman should speak the language of her husband.” If she were even a foreigner, she should be obliged to learn and speak the language of the king. Perhaps there might be some common sense in this, as it would oblige the foreigner to devote much time to study and improvement; and, consequently, to make her a better woman, and a better wife. But there is no proof that this was a part of the decree. But there are so many additions to this book in the principal versions, that we know not what might have made a part of it originally.

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