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# *Diversity and Obscurity in Old Testament Books: A Hermeneutical Exercise Based on Some Later Old Testament Books*

GORDON McCONVILLE

## **Preamble**

The complexity of the task of biblical interpretation has already been aired in the pages of *Anvil*.<sup>1</sup> It was well illustrated there how much traditional formulae for expressing the authoritativeness of Scripture fall short of showing the ways in which individual parts of the Bible actually exercise their authority within the community of faith. There can, indeed, be no authority without meaning, and therefore the task of understanding Scripture belongs essentially to the act of submission to it. When, therefore, the Church fights shy of large sections of the Bible, mainly in the Old Testament, on the grounds that they are difficult, or apparently irrelevant, it actually falls short of a serious reckoning with Scripture as a rule of faith. The canon-within-a-canon identified by the Church's practice does not exclude large parts of the Old Testament only (since it tends to exclude at least some of the New Testament as well). I propose to focus here, however, on the issue as it relates to certain books from the later Old Testament period (Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther and Daniel) which present particular problems, and try to suggest ways in which they might speak to Christians today.

Perhaps the immediate problem presented by these books to the Christian interpreter is their fairly uncompromising Jewishness. To take an extreme situation (but one in which the present writer found himself), how do you make sense of the Book of Nehemiah, with its rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and the inevitable contemporary reverberations of that, to Arab Christians living on the West Bank of the Jordan? The Book of Joshua—a set text in many Israeli schools—presents worse problems. It is hardly surprising to find distinct Marcionite tendencies in the strongly Palestinian Anglican Church in Israel. The Palestinian response to the

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1 J. Goldingay, *Anvil* 1, 1984, pp 53-162, and 261-281.

Jewishness of the Old Testament is only symptomatic, however, of the fundamental difficulty experienced by Christian interpreters in coming to grips with the problem. The Book of Esther, deeply significant for many Jews, is hardly preached from Christian pulpits, again because of the difficulty of seeing it as anything other than belligerent and sectarian. This difficulty is not completely met by the spiritualization of the 'Jews' into 'the people of God' as we shall see, though I believe this is one part of a right interpretation of the books in question.

A second aspect of the problem is the diversity of the material. It is interesting to observe the relative popularity of Old Testament books in Christian preaching. It hardly requires demonstration that Daniel is a winner, while Chronicles (often closely associated with Ezra and Nehemiah) is an also-ran.<sup>1</sup> There may be a number of reasons for this. Most strikingly, Daniel contains memorable and dramatic stories about sympathetic figures who readily become heroes. These have fed easily into the Sunday School chorus and children's story-book, not to mention the sermon, and have thus acquired a firm place in popular Christian culture. Chronicles, on the other hand, gets off to a bad start with nine chapters of genealogies,<sup>2</sup> and its subject-matter gives the general impression that it has all been heard somewhere before (an impression that is actually superficial and misleading).

The relative prosperity of the two books goes deeper, however. There are certain obvious *theological* characteristics of Daniel which facilitate its reception into Christian thought. The first is that, though Daniel and his friends are Jews, their Jewishness need not obtrude unduly on the reading of the book. Their insistence on refraining from Babylonian dietary customs and religion can easily be understood as courageous loyalty to God in the face of godless tyranny. Indeed, the Old Testament doctrine of election is rather muted in Daniel, in favour of 'wisdom' emphases which have

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1 The poor showing of Chronicles goes back at least to the Septuagint where it was dubbed 'The Book of Things Left Out' (Paraleipomena). This gives the impression that it consists of lengthy footnotes to Samuel and Kings. The image of Chronicles was not helped when its character as a serious historical document came under fierce attack more or less from the beginning of the modern critical era.

It has long been held that 'the Chronicler' was also responsible for Ezra and Nehemiah. This view has experienced one or two important setbacks. (See the critique of it in H. G. M. Williamson, *Israel in the Books of Chronicles*, CUP, Cambridge 1977). Nevertheless there remain important similarities, both of setting and interest, between Chronicles on the one hand and Ezra-Nehemiah on the other.

2 I have attempted to rescue these from the oblivion they don't deserve in *Evangel* 2, 1984, pp 3f., and *I and II Chronicles*, (Daily Study Bible), St. Andrew Press, Edinburgh and Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1984, pp 7-13.

universal dimensions.<sup>1</sup> The fact that the apocalyptic figure of Daniel 7 is the 'Son of Man' stresses humanity rather than belonging to Israel. The 'saints of the Most High' (Dan. 7:22) can easily be translated into 'the saints who are in Christ Jesus' (1 Cor. 1:2). Most importantly, perhaps, the expectation of a final overthrow of earthly powers, in the establishment of a kingdom of God, incorporating a hope of resurrection (12:2), forms a natural antecedent not only to the Kingdom teaching of the gospels, but to all New Testament teaching which is in terms of a new age.<sup>2</sup>

As against all this, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah show a marked interest in the Israelite heritage of post-exilic Judah. They seem intent on parading past glories, particularly those of David and Solomon. (Note the space given to David's warmongering, 1 Chr. 18-20, and to the splendour of Solomon's kingdom, 2 Chr. 1-9). Nehemiah builds walls to keep those who do not belong to the community of returned exiles out (Neh. 1-6), and both he and Ezra take strong action against marriages between Jews and non-Jews (Ezra 9, 10; Neh. 13:23-27). The problem here is not *just* the Jewishness of the books, however, but their alleged self-satisfaction.

Differences such as these have led scholars to perceive serious theological discrepancies between 'eschatological' works such as Daniel on the one hand, and 'theocratic' works such as Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah on the other.<sup>3</sup> According to this view these diverse books were the products of different sociological circles within post-exilic Judah,<sup>4</sup> some of whom were basically content with the *status quo*, seeing the restoration from Babylon as God's more or less final act of salvation, while others expressed serious discontent and longed for a far greater deliverance by God from what they saw as bondage.

Here then are two important elements in the difficulty of interpreting the post-exilic Old Testament literature. On the one hand, it is more or less *Jewish*, and thus intrinsically difficult to make Christian. On the other, its diversity, if it is seen as disagreement about the nature of God and the kind

- 1 Note the ascription of praise to God in Dan. 2:19ff. as the revealer of mysteries rather than the establisher of a covenant. Cf. G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel*, SCM, London 1972, pp 277ff. for a statement of the affinities between apocalyptic and wisdom.
- 2 Notice the extent of the allusions to Daniel in Revelation. Jesus' self-designation as the Son of Man is another factor in lifting the profile of Daniel.
- 3 The classical statement of the distinction is made by O. Plöger, in his *Theocracy and Eschatology*, Blackwell, Oxford 1968. It is maintained by a whole school of commentators, notably W. Rudolph on Chronicles (*Die Chronikbücher*, Mohr, Tübingen 1955) and Ezra and Nehemiah (*Ezra und Nehemia Samt 3 Ezra*, Mohr, Tübingen 1949). Cf. also P. D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic*, Fortress, Philadelphia, 1975 pp 209ff.
- 4 These could have been more or less strong at different periods. The theory that Daniel received impetus from the outrages committed by Antiochus Epiphanes IV in the years following 170 BC is well-known.

of expectations of him which theology can legitimately express, is a barrier to Christian assimilation because it seems to confront the interpreter with a choice and a dilemma. In what remains of this article we shall first take a closer look at the nature of diversity in our books, and secondly focus on the Book of Esther as a work whose Jewishness seems most intransigent.

### Diversity in Old Testament Theology

The proposition that there is diversity in Old Testament writing is in itself unexceptionable. At the lowest level there are differences of style, genre etc. There are, however, more substantial kinds of diversity which we may briefly notice. The first is observable where, by a kind of inner dialogue, the Old Testament recognizes that truth is complex and many-sided. Thus what seems certain in Deuteronomy (that the righteous know God's blessing) appears less so in Job. Yet this kind of diversity is less conflict than the thrashing out of issues inherent in theologizing. The end of the Book of Job is in some ways a vindication of deuteronomic theology, though of course the path to that point has thrown up many insights about the nature of reality which Deuteronomy did not. The second kind of diversity arises because of progress in salvation-history. Once again Deuteronomy may be cited, now for its ruthless commands about the expulsion of the nations occupying the land promised to Israel (Deut. 7), and in contrast to parts of the Old Testament which hold out the hope of salvation to other nations (cf. Isa. 42:5f.). This difficulty is less serious than it appears, however, when it is recognized as the playing out in history of the paradox that Israel is *elected* in order to be a *blessing to the nations* (Gen. 12:1-3).<sup>1</sup>

This latter kind of diversity sheds some light on the problem we have outlined in relation to Daniel on the one hand and Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah on the other. To the extent that the problem of interpreting these books is a problem about the Old Testament's perception of the role of Israel *vis-à-vis* the nations it must be discussed in terms of the changing scenery of salvation-history. If the difference between Deuteronomy and Isaiah 40-66 is explicable by the paradox of the election of one nation for the salvation of many, it may be that other differences can be explained likewise. Indeed, both poles of the paradox, Israel's election and her priestly role (Exod. 19.6) in relation to the nations, are deeply rooted in Israel's theology and always struggle towards the light. There seems little doubt that we can discern a movement within the Old Testament towards a greater pre-occupation with the fate of the nations. This begins with the prophetic recognition that they, like Israel, are responsible to God and subject to his judgment; hence the oracles against Israel's neighbours side

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1 I have elaborated this point in: 'The Shadow of the Curse: a Key to Old Testament Theology', *Evangel* 3, 1985, pp 2-5. For a General treatment of the subject of Diversity in the Old Testament see J. E. Goldingay, 'Diversity and Unity in Old Testament Theology', *Vetus Testamentum* (hereafter VT) 34, 1984, pp 153-168.

by side with those directed to Israel and Judah themselves in eg Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.<sup>1</sup> These often seem to put other nations on an equal footing with the chosen people, and indeed can be favourable towards them (Isa. 19:18-25). The movement gathers momentum with prophecies such as Ezekiel 38f., which begin to envisage, not individual and imminent judgments, but a final and cosmic intervention of God in the affairs of all nations.<sup>2</sup> The second part of the Book of Isaiah may be seen as belonging to this trend, with its promise of salvation to the nations (42:6), as may the Book of Jonah. There are further developments, embracing those in apocalyptic works, into the inter-testamental literature, where, in some cases, the emergence of a 'righteous-wicked' antithesis seems to displace the Israel-nations antithesis, and envisages salvation for the (or some) Gentiles.<sup>3</sup>

### **Eschatology and Universalism in Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah?**

If, then, there is a clear trend towards an inclusive, universalist soteriology in the Old Testament and beyond, how may we account for what seems to be the exclusive soteriology of Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah? Are those in the right who, as we saw, interpret the relationship between these books and others such as Daniel in terms of conflicting ideology? If so, we would have an analogy with what certainly does happen in the inter-testamental literature, where those works which, as we have indicated, reckon with the salvation of the Gentiles stand alongside others which strenuously deny it. It seems to me, however, that this kind of diversity need not be appealed to, for two reasons. The first is that the situation against whose background Ezra and Nehemiah were written was one which inevitably encouraged the 'election' pole of our paradox to come to prominence. There are analogies between Deuteronomy and the Chronicler which help us here. Each is spoken to a situation in which Israel (or Judah) is about to take, or has recently taken, possession of the land, and anticipates a moral threat from neighbouring peoples. The prominence of the 'election'-pole derives in each case from the particularity of the moment in salvation-history. On this view the emphases of the Chronicler are explained on the premise that different moments demand different 'moods'. This is by no means the same as appealing to ideology.

The second reason why it is unnecessary to think in terms of ideological conflict supplements the first. It is based on exegesis of Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah, and consists of a claim that the kind of difference that is often

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- 1 Cf. J. L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament*, Geoffrey Chapman, London 1974, pp 167f.
  - 2 Cf. D. S. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic*, SCM, London 1964, pp 190f.
  - 3 Eg Testament of Levi 5:7; Testament of Naphtali 8:3; Psalms of Solomon 17:30f. In contrast see the Book of Jubilees 24:28ff., Assumption of Moses 10:7-10.

held to exist between these and works that are universalistic and/or eschatological rests on a caricature. The point at issue, essentially, is whether the authors of Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah welcomed and approved of Persian overlordship. The belief that they did, which has prevailed until quite recently in Old Testament studies,<sup>1</sup> is based largely on Ezra 1, which records Cyrus's decree releasing Jewish exiles in Babylon and providing for the re-building of the temple and the restoration of its accoutrements for the worship of God (Ezra 1:2-4). The fact that, in the wording of the decree, Cyrus ascribes praise to Israel's God, enhances the impression that, in the view of the author of Ezra, Persia impinges only positively upon Israel's life. Such an understanding of Persia's role is entirely consistent with the belief that the kind of theology which we have called 'theocratic' (and which is anti-eschatological and content with the *status quo*) characterizes Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah.

There are, however, serious objections to this understanding of these books. First, it is hardly likely that a book which, as Chronicles does, extols Kings David and Solomon precisely in terms of their victories over and subjugation of other nations, can be seen as a tract supporting an occupying power. In the choice of these as ideal leaders of Israel there is a strong, implicit hope for a better future for a weak, politically emasculated community – a hope which is not inappropriately called Messianic.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, the role of Persia in Ezra, if examined more carefully, is at best ambiguous. In Ezra 4 the imperial power sides with Judah's enemies. More significantly, in 6:22 the Persian Emperor is described as 'the King of Assyria', an unmistakable indication that there is in the end little to choose between Empires. Finally the prayers of both Ezra and Nehemiah describe Judah's condition under Persia as one of slavery, albeit alleviated (Ezra 9, especially v.9; Neh. 9, especially vv.36f.). The latter passage in particular implies a profound challenge to the *status quo*, and a belief that the possibilities for a Jewish people that is obedient to its God are far greater than their current experience.<sup>3</sup>

If it should be asked why the authors of Ezra and Nehemiah, in their desire to see the end of Persian rule, were hesitant to nail their colours more firmly to their mast, two answers may be offered. The first, and more obvious, is that for diplomatic reasons it would have been at best tactless to do so. The second, and more important, is that the continuing sin in the community of returned exiles (Ezra 9, 10; Neh. 13) led our authors to

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1 See Plöger and Rudolph, *op. cit.*

2 There is a trend towards recognizing a messianic strain in Chronicles in some recent studies: eg W. F. Stinespring, 'Eschatology in Chronicles', *Journal of Biblical Literature* (hereafter *JBL*), 80, 1961, pp 209-219; J. D. Newsome, 'Toward a New Understanding of the Chronicler and his purposes', *JBL* 94, 1975, pp 201-217. Cf. Williamson, *op. cit.*, p 135.

3 The view of Ezra and Nehemiah, thus briefly sketched, is elaborated in J. G. McConville, 'Ezra-Nehemiah and the Fulfilment of Prophecy', *VT*, forthcoming.

regard the return from Babylon as no more than a partial fulfilment of prophecy. The attentive reader will notice the total absence of allusion to patently relevant prophecies such as those in Isaiah 60-66. This, however, is not because of a lack of sympathy with the hopes expressed there. Rather it belongs to the conviction that the enslavement by Persia is deserved, and that betterment can only be related to better performance.<sup>1</sup> There is for this reason a deliberate muting of triumphalism in our books.

It follows from these observations, nevertheless, that the authors of Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah are not in principle averse to the belief that a far brighter future is possible. To this extent there is no fundamental conflict of principle between them and the explicitly eschatological books. The failure to express such hopes is directly related to the situation addressed, especially in terms of the community's sin. (In a similar way it is possible to argue that Chronicles-Ezra-Nehemiah are not as strictly exclusive as is sometimes implied. If their vulnerable situation requires attention to be paid to matters of purity, nevertheless a door is open to all who would worship the God of Israel to join the community. Cf. especially Ezra 6:21).<sup>2</sup>

### **A Uniform View of Empire in the later Old Testament Books?**

We have argued against the view that Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah represent one side of an ideological conflict in post-exilic theology. The argument may be taken further by asking whether there has been an over-hasty pigeon-holing on the other side of this alleged conflict also. Daniel is the most obvious case of a work which portrays both the wickedness and the impermanence of Empires. Both of these properties are to the fore in chapter 7, for example, where a succession of vicious Empires finally gives way to an everlasting kingdom of God. The Book of Daniel, indeed, consistently pictures the potential for evil in human government, whether manifested in Babylon or in its successors. Chapters 11 and 12 of Daniel represent the climax of the tendency in the book to show that the ultimate good of God's people can only lie in a radically new order of things. It is for reasons like this, therefore, that Daniel has often been regarded as standing over against Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah.

Here too, however, the matter is not as simple as it first appears. For the negative judgment on the Empires has to be qualified by the fact that Daniel, like both Ezra and Nehemiah, holds high office in Babylon. The fact that human systems of government are transitory, which is not only recognized but preached in the book, does not preclude participation in its structure and administration by the people of God. Daniel is here in a deep-rooted tradition within the Old Testament according to which there is a community of interest between those who are 'on God's side' and the

1 For elaboration of this also, cf. *ibid.*

2 Cf. also Williamson, *op. cit.* who has argued the point chiefly in relation to Chronicles, see eg pp 87ff.



secular milieu in which they live. This tradition emerges more strongly, in the nature of the case, in 'exilic' situations. There are clear analogies between Daniel and Joseph, who by his wisdom preserves not only the chosen race but Egypt also (Gen. 41). The theme is taken up again by Jeremiah in his letter to the first wave of exiles in Babylon encouraging them to work for its welfare, 'because if it prospers, you too will prosper' (Jer. 29:7). We find it also in Esther, whose plot has much to do with the gullibility of Ahasuerus in believing that the Jews pose a threat to his power. On the contrary, it is the Jew Mordecai, not Haman, who has the king's interests at heart (Esther 2:21-23), and who, to any impartial observer, is always going to make the better Prime Minister.<sup>1</sup>

The most important consequence of these observations is that, alongside the *negative* potential of human government, a certain *positive* potential is recognized. The acceptance of power by Joseph, Daniel, Nehemiah (who as 'cupbearer to the king' occupied high office<sup>2</sup>) and Mordecai, and indeed the celebration of their skills, testifies to an underlying belief in the dignity of the activity of government as such. The charter for such a view is, I believe, in Genesis 1:26-28. This, indeed, informs much of the thinking about government in the Old Testament, and our texts are no exceptions.<sup>3</sup> It has to be added, of course, that our texts are not actually treatises. Rather, they are concerned with particular events. And the most important factor in all those events is that God's people have two distinct loyalties, viz. to God and to the established power. I avoid the term 'divided loyalty' because it seems to me that our texts affirm that the two loyalties *can* co-exist peaceably. This is why Jews become prominent in them without any implication that it is wrong for them to do so. Under good government, conflict between the two loyalties would not arise. (This, again, is a theme of Esther).

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1 Cf. A. Meinhold, 'Theologische Erwägungen zum Buch Esther', *Theologische Zeitschrift* 34, 1978, p 330; S. Talmon, 'Wisdom in the Book of Esther', *VT* 13, 1963, pp 433ff.

2 See J. M. Myers, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Doubleday, New York 1965, p 96.

3 Much of the Old Testament is taken up with the exercise of political authority. There is the discussion as to the rights and wrongs of kingship as opposed to judgeship (1 Sam. 8-12), and the prophetic condemnation of the exercise of power by the kings. The prominence of rulers and judgments upon them derives from the need for the chosen people to exercise the responsibility of government in a way that is consistent with their being the people of God. (On the significance of political structure see C. J. H. Wright, *Living as the People of God*, IVP, Leicester 1983).

It is important, however, that in the Old Testament God also holds *other* nations responsible for how they wield power (e.g. Isa. 10). A Christian view of government is not *only* derivable from the texts about government in Israel. Indeed the texts under discussion are among the most important in the Bible for forming such a view.

In hard experience, however, government is not always good, but at best fickle. There are moments of enlightenment. Darius is distressed about his own pride and folly which exposes Daniel to danger because of his loyalty to God, and when Daniel is saved from the lions he praises God (Dan. 6:26f.). Nebuchadnezzar had done likewise (Dan. 3.28f.). In these moments the two Babylonian kings are not far from Cyrus in his decree that the exiles should return to their land (Ezra 1:2-4). In contrast, the kings of both Empires can be tyrannical. The enlightened acts of Nebuchadnezzar and Darius follow hard on the heels of acts of oppression. And, as we have seen, Persia's real interests were by no means identical with those of the exiles, even if policy had once dictated benevolence (cf. again Ezra 4). Here again the Book of Daniel has something fundamentally in common with Ezra-Nehemiah. Each, indeed, produces similar dilemmas for its heroes. As Daniel prays (Dan. 6:10-12), so Nehemiah wears a long face before Artaxerxes, (Neh. 2:1f.). Nehemiah's long face bespeaks the same loyalty as Daniel's prayer, and the potential offence to his royal master differs only in degree.<sup>1</sup> It is the same fundamental tension which produces in both works, alongside an acceptance of office in Empire, an aspiration towards the *overthrow* of Empire. There is a substantial difference between the ways in which the aspiration is expressed, with Daniel resorting to the language, imagery and ideas of apocalyptic, which are absent in Ezra-Nehemiah. Yet it is mistaken to think that this difference represents a difference in ideology. The explanation lies in quite different directions. Part of it may be the simple availability of apocalyptic imagery.<sup>2</sup> A second factor is that, for whatever reasons, the author of Daniel felt able to use language which openly proclaimed the downfall of the Empire (or Empires), while the authors of Ezra and Nehemiah may not have done. And thirdly, as we have seen, these latter books, for theological reasons, were intent on showing that deliverance would be conditional upon a renewed life-style, and therefore expressed the hope of it in muted terms.

### **Esther and Self-Help**

So far I have argued against the view that certain books (ie Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah) diverge radically from the trend elsewhere in the Old Testament towards a universalistic soteriology. In doing so we have discovered important interests common to these books and others which are often supposed to be in conflict with them (eg Daniel). All of these, indeed, draw on deeply-rooted Old Testament traditions, and come to express themselves differently because of their respective situations and

1 Cf. D. J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, London 1984, p 141.

2 I do not mean to imply by this that apocalyptic imagery can only have become available in a period later than Ezra and Nehemiah and thereby to advocate a late dating for Daniel. I favour a Babylonian dating of the book, and for this reason have made the point about availability of imagery somewhat tentatively.

purposes. We have had occasion to draw the Book of Esther into the discussion in arguing for an essentially uniform view of the relation of members of the chosen race to government throughout the Old Testament. Esther, however, has problems of its own, which we now come to consider.

The essence of the argument that Esther is something of a theological curiosity in the Old Testament (made recently by, for example, S. B. Berg) is the belief that the book advocates no turning to God for help, nor any devotion to traditional Israelite structures, whether religious or political.<sup>1</sup> Such a view attaches theological significance to the well-known fact that the book nowhere mentions the name of God. Berg, pursuing consistency, comes down against the traditional view that the reference in Esther (4:14) to help 'from another place' is a veiled allusion to God.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the whole thrust of the book is to advocate self-reliance as the real source of hope in a harsh world. A. Meinhold took a similar line when he argued that Esther 'de-mythologized' *vis-à-vis* Israel's traditions. It is in reality men/women who do the things which Israel's traditions had left to God to do. For Meinhold, God in Esther is a mere observer, and indeed the 'fear of Mordecai' (Esther 9:3) a deliberate 'humanization' of the traditional 'fear of Isaac' (Gen. 31:42), which had so clearly been a name of God.<sup>3</sup>

For both Berg and Meinhold it is important that the arena of the development of this 'do-it-yourself' theology is the *diaspora*. Meinhold argues that Esther belongs to the Gattung 'Diaspora-Novelle', of which the Joseph story is the other outstanding example.<sup>4</sup> For him, the chief concern of the book is to show that the Jewish people can assimilate to the society of the Persian Empire without losing its identity, and indeed, by use of its own resources can not only survive but be of benefit to the Empire.<sup>5</sup> Berg sees the book as a defence of the choice, by some Jews, to remain in 'exile', which is, she claims, a rejection of the ideals expressed in Ezra-Nehemiah, where it is precisely the returning exiles who are identified as the continuing people of God. Because Esther represents a rejection of a traditional theological perspective (enshrined in the prophets' expectations of a return to the land) it also plays down (at least) the very idea of Yahweh's control of events and lays all the stress on the human capacity for

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- 1 See S. B. Berg, 'After the Exile: God and History in the Books of Chronicles and Esther', in J. L. Crenshaw and S. Sandmel eds., *The Divine Helmsman*, KTAV, New York 1980, p.115.
  - 2 Ibid. She thus follows P. R. Ackroyd, *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 5, 1966/67, pp 81-84. For the traditional view see J. G. Baldwin, *The Book of Esther*, IVP, Leicester 1984, p 37.
  - 3 Meinhold, loc. cit., pp 323-325. Meinhold does consider Esther 4:14 to be a reference to God, however, who is thus seen to be ready to act if men fail.
  - 4 Ibid., p 321. This does not mean that Esther is in all respects like the Joseph story.
  - 5 Ibid., p 330.

self-help.<sup>1</sup> Berg specifically contrasts Esther with Chronicles: 'Chronicles and Esther . . . suggest antithetical perspectives *vis-à-vis* the question of divine and/or human initiative in shaping history.'<sup>2</sup> (Cf. the motif of divine help in, eg 1 Chr. 12:18).

This view, however, rests upon an extreme and unwarranted polarization. The postulated antithesis between human resourcefulness and reliance on divine help is wholly false. Chronicles, to which Berg appeals, is a good example of this, for it is clear there that divine help is realized through human agency. 1 Chronicles 12:18-22, the same context which proclaims that God is David's helper, fleshes out that help in terms of the skill and valour of the leaders of Israel's tribes. David's own victories in battle celebrate his prowess as well as God's faithfulness (1 Chr. 18-20). Equally, in Ezra and Nehemiah the testimony to God's power in the exiles' release and re-establishment (Ezra 1:1; 6:22) is balanced by recognition of the great leadership qualities of both men.<sup>3</sup> Human resourcefulness, therefore, is by no means the interest of the author of Esther alone.

That said, it remains valid to ask whether Esther actually has the *balance* between resourcefulness and faith which Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah evidently have. The answer to this depends upon what attitude to the role of God in the Jews' affairs we find in the book. This, as we saw, was a matter of debate. Is there or is there not an allusion to God in Esther 4:14?

In a sense this question is a red herring. It is often posed as if the issue were whether the word for 'place' (*māqôm*) were a kind of cipher for the divine name, which it probably is not.<sup>4</sup> However, the question is not one of terminology but of theology. When Mordecai says to Esther that, should she fail in her hour of opportunity to bring deliverance to the Jews, then deliverance will arise from elsewhere, how can we expect a Jewish audience to understand him otherwise than as affirming faith in the ultimate rule of God over all events? This much, indeed, is admitted by Berg.<sup>5</sup> She thus adds her voice to the many who have seen that the very oddness, even improbability, of the chain of cause and effect, with all the ironic justice which is produced for Mordecai and for Haman alike, can signify nothing other than the overruling of God in events.<sup>6</sup>

1 Berg, loc cit., p 114.

2 Ibid., p 120.

3 The similarity in terms of resourcefulness between Esther and Mordecai on the one hand and Ezra and Nehemiah – and indeed Joseph and Daniel – on the other, has been acknowledged by some who argue for the distinctiveness of Esther's theology. S. Talmon dilates upon the accomplishments of the court-scribe which link all these figures, even noting linguistic affinities; loc. cit., pp 436f. Cf. W. L. Humphreys, 'A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel', *JBL* 92, 1973, pp 211-223.

4 Thus with Ackroyd, loc. cit.

5 Berg, loc. cit., p 118.

6 One wonders then why she insists so much on the idea of self-help.

This, of course, does not yet answer the question why the name of God is not actually mentioned. With Berg, Meinhold and others we must recognize that the omission is not merely accidental. There could be no such 'accident' when Israel's entire self-understanding is in terms of her relationship with Yahweh. Rather, the style of the book is such as deliberately to *avoid* mentioning the name of God. (4:14 is merely the most striking example of this). We are compelled, therefore, to seek a reason for this style.

The reason is to be found, I believe, in the fact that Esther belongs in that mass of post-exilic literature which attempted to answer hard questions about the nature of God's dealings with Israel. This is not to say that hard questions had not been asked before the exile.<sup>1</sup> Yet the exile undoubtedly gave an impetus to a range of literature which had in common an element of theodicy. The sudden profusion of apocalyptic writing in the inter-testamental period is a case in point. So too are the many post-exilic writings which come into the broad category of wisdom. S. Talmon pointed out some time ago that Esther had certain affinities with wisdom literature.<sup>2</sup> He believed this was compatible with what he saw as the absence of traditional religious features and historical awareness, explaining it in terms of the universalism of international wisdom and the feeling of God's remoteness (cf. Ecclesiastes). The story is a typical eastern wisdom tale, with Ahasuerus as the powerful dupe, Mordecai the righteous wise man, and Haman the wicked schemer. A parallel is drawn with the Assyrian story of Ahiqar.<sup>3</sup> Talmon's analysis is certainly suggestive. It depends, however, upon the discernment of an original version of the story lying behind the form in which we now have it. This idea in itself has much support today. Nevertheless Talmon's belief that in the original version Mordecai's Jewishness is at best incidental to the story cannot be demonstrated.<sup>4</sup> The universalistic aspect of wisdom, therefore, (such as is undoubtedly present in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes) is hardly to be found in Esther. Wisdom, however, is multiform, and if it is in Esther at all then it is in unmistakably Jewish dress (as it is also in, for example, Ecclesiasticus).

Where the wisdom-affinities of the Book of Esther are most striking is in its powerful sense of order. Its certainty of the confluence of events in

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1 It seems to me to be specious to argue that all Old Testament speculation about the nature and causes of suffering derives from the experience of exile, as if suffering had been unknown prior to that cataclysm. I consider Job, for example, to be pre-exilic. (Cf. F. I. Andersen, *Job*, IVP, Leicester 1976, pp 61-63).

2 S. Talmon, loc. cit.

3 *Ibid.*, pp 438f. For Ahiqar, see J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1955/2, pp 427-430.

4 D. J. A. Clines has argued recently for a five-step formation of the Book of Esther. He finds it impossible to know, however, whether the 'original' Mordecai was Jewish, and therefore whether racial conflict was part of the story,' *The Esther Scroll*, JSOT, Sheffield 1984, pp 142f.

the Jews' favour is, in fact, a powerful affirmation of the theology of Proverbs (eg 15:29; 16:4, 7, 13, 18, 25 etc.). It follows that its sense of the remoteness of God by no means constitutes an abandonment of him. It is here that the category of theodicy helps us. Esther accepts the fact of the remoteness of God in daily experience, and affirms that, in spite of it, God still governs events for the good of his people. (It is thus analagous to Ecclesiastes, which is ultimately, eg 12:13f., a response in faith to the fundamental doubts expressed in it).

### **Esther and the Meaning of Narrative**

If we have vindicated the Book of Esther from the charge that it advocates an ideology of self-help we have not yet dealt with all of its apparent anomalies. Granted that through the actions of Esther and Mordecai the book encourages radical allegiance to and trust in Yahweh, we are left with the question whether all the actions and assumptions of the leading characters are commended. Should we defend Esther from the charge that she is morally inferior to Vashti, who refused to conform to the king's degraded conception of wifehood? Is it part of the message of Esther that intermarriage with pagan foreigners is now the acceptable thing for a nice Jewish girl? Is the diaspora really in the centre of the stage as far as God's continuing dealings with Jewry are concerned?<sup>1</sup> It is questions like these which called forth the embarrassed glosses to the story now contained in the Greek Additions to Esther.<sup>2</sup> Yet to ask them, I would suggest, is to fail to see how the narrative art of the book works.

The outstanding characteristic of that art is its reticence. The author conspicuously refrains from presenting either Esther or Mordecai as paragons (this in contrast to the portraits of Joseph and Daniel). He reveals nothing of his opinion (if he had one) whether Esther was right to enter the harem of Ahasuerus, nor even whether Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman was righteous zeal or personal conceit. The meaning of the story is not contained in the characters portrayed, but rather in the way in which actions and destinies mesh.<sup>3</sup> *Certain* actions clearly are to be judged right or wrong. Mordecai's betrayal of the conspirators is virtuous, because it

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- 1 I have not raised here the question of the morality of Esther's and Mordecai's measures against the Jew's enemies in chs. 8f. This is partly because those events are capable of numerous interpretations and it is impossible here to discuss them all. Among them is the view that the Jews' actions may all be regarded as self-defence. It is also possible, however, to see them as vengeful exploitation of the new situation, and thus actions which – like others in the book – are not in themselves commended.
  - 2 Cf. Esther's prayer as she prepares to enter Ahasuerus' presence with the petition on behalf of her people. In it she expresses her abhorrence of her position as queen and claims to have kept apart from the royal feasting and libations; see Clines, *op. cit.*, p 231. (Clines provides a translation of the Additions).
  - 3 Cf. Goldingay, *loc. cit.* p 265.

serves to demonstrate what is evidently a concern of the author, namely that the presence of Jews within the Empire is potentially a benefit to the authorities. Similarly Esther's decision to plead for her people promotes the concern to show that God's loyalty to them depends on their willingness to show their loyalty to him as paramount. Such actions call for a particular reader-response. Others, in themselves, do not. Indeed, many events in the book are essentially meaningless in themselves, obtaining meaning only as they serve as springs of other events.<sup>1</sup> (We have observed that the very oddity of events makes us look to the idea of a controlling hand within them). The king's sleepless night is one such event (6:1), and serves not to prompt thoughts either about the king or about insomnia, but simply to facilitate the king's discovery of Mordecai's loyalty. Arguably Vashti's refusal to appear before her husband's friends, Esther's entry of the harem and Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman are just such 'neutral' actions, designed merely to prepare for the story's climaxes. A further encouragement to think that many of the incidents in the story are not in themselves charged with meaning is the sheer comedy-dimension. The opening scene, in which the mighty machinery of empire is cranked into operation for the paltry purpose of decreeing that men should rule in their own homes (though the king himself could not) is, on one level, ludicrously grotesque. Similarly Haman's rapid transition from elation to despair in chapter 6 is close to pantomime.<sup>2</sup> This undecurrent of the absurd represents a further caution against taking any character or event as seriously prescriptive, unless it unambiguously embodies an evident concern of the story as a whole. In the light of this it is mistaken to think of the book as advocating or expressing a secular form of Judaism, manifesting no concern for its religious traditions.

One further consideration must be added to the observation that the narrative-style refrains from making moral judgments, namely that we do not know all the circumstances (not even all the relevant ones) in which the book was written. It may be, for example, that it is addressed to a community which knew itself to have taken assimilation to the point of compromise. It could then be an argument for God's continuing care despite a compromised past and in response to a new resolution to display openly the Jews' higher loyalty to him. Once again we should be wary of discerning a secular ideology here. Furthermore, if there is a sense in which the book's aims are veiled to us, there may also be a sense in which its aims were veiled to (some of) its contemporary readership. Berg claims, for example, that the terms in which Mordecai's advancement is recounted have royal overtones and therefore constitute an implicit Messianic hope,<sup>3</sup> a hope which (like that of Ezra-Nehemiah) remained merely implicit in the

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1 Cf. Clines, *op. cit.*, pp 9-11.

2 For these points cf. the present author's commentary, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, St. Andrew Press, Edinburgh and Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1985, *ad. loc.*

3 S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther*, Scholar's Press, Missoula 1979, p 68.

interests of discretion. Yet again the suggestion that the book shows no interest in Israel's traditions is seen to rest on fragile foundations.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of the foregoing study has been to offer suggestions for the Christian interpretation of books of the Old Testament which are at once alien because of their tough-minded Jewishness and problematic because of what can be seen as ideological diversity. We have attempted to show that the latter problem is more apparent than real. There are certain kinds of diversity within Old Testament books arising from the fact that different historical situations require their own 'words'. A careful reading of the books in question, however, showed that their underlying concerns and motives were substantially similar. Such reading entailed investigating as far as possible the historical setting of the books. It also entailed, especially in regard to the Book of Esther, a sensitivity to the techniques of the authors of biblical narrative. I hope to have shown that the rather formidable books which emerged from the later part of Israel's (biblical) history can be appropriated for Christian theology. The central aspect of their significance in these terms is that they look, either explicitly or implicitly, but without fundamental disagreement, for a new age, which the God of Israel is powerful to achieve. In this way, they anticipate the teaching and work of Christ. In addition, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther and Daniel reflect the dilemma of the person whose first loyalty is to God and who finds that this loyalty comes into conflict with other loyalties – yet not so as to rule other, relative loyalties out of court. In this way our books have relevance not only as an affirmation of the reality and faithfulness of God, but as guidance on issues in modern living. The experience of the Old Testament saint in 'exile' translates easily into that of the Christian, an exile in the world in one sense, yet with a responsibility to exercise certain loyalties subordinate to his overriding loyalty to God. I have suggested that our books can speak particularly to the way in which Christians relate to politics and government.<sup>1</sup> Finally, Esther affirms the reality of God, despite his apparent remoteness.

I have not thus exhausted the possibilities for using the books we have examined. There is far more in them than can be summarized in a few sentences. Indeed, one of the reasons for the choice of narrative as a mode of communication is, as we have seen, precisely its power of suggestion. So let the reader read.

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1 Indeed our books form the most relevant biblical background to an understanding of Rom. 13 and 1 Pet. 2:13-17. If those passages do not actually advocate the kind of participation in government which we have seen in (Joseph), Daniel and Mordecai this is only because it could not in the circumstances be envisaged. But these New Testament passages do nothing to rescind the principles established in the Old Testament ones.