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THE BOOK OF ESTHER¹

I

ITS CONTENTS

THE inclusion of the book of Esther in the Christian Bible annoys many of our contemporaries. Might it not be advisable, even obligatory, to expunge this "ebullition of Jewish vindictiveness" from the Church's Holy Scriptures? Or has this book, in conjunction with the rest of the Bible, something evangelically requisite to say to those who are willing to believe in Christ Jesus? To put the query is to answer it, those will judge who are vexed by its "unChristlike" character. But as Christ Himself is, by the testimony of Scripture, "a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence", we must be prepared to find that those very stones of Holy Writ at which we stumble have positive importance for our apprehension of, and faith in, Jesus Christ. It will help in any case first of all to glance at the contents of the book.

The story unfolds itself in the time of King Ahasuerus (e.g. Xerxes I.) who ruled the vast Persian Empire stretching from India to Abyssinia from 486 to 465 B.C. Insurrections were not uncommon events in the East upon new accessions to the throne. Having quelled such a rising Xerxes celebrates a festival of six months' duration held for the nobility of his kingdom. The king makes a parade of his riches on this occasion. That incites him at the height of the feast to display his costliest treasure, the beauty of his consort, which he cannot exhibit without losing it. Vashti refuses to appear, and consequently is deposed. He must needs re-marry, and the fairest maidens are fetched to the harem from all the provinces.

Among these figures a Jewess with the sweet name Myrtle (Hadassah). After her parents' death her uncle had taken her under his wing. He bears the Babylonian name of Mordecai, and traces his descent from the first king of Israel. It agrees with his distinguished pedigree that he resides in the palace

¹ Translated from German original by E. K. Simpson, M.A., and revised and approved by the Author.

precincts of Susa and is entitled to frequent the king's gateway. At her guardian's behest Hadassah conceals the fact that she is a Jewess. She wins the royal heart, and becomes Queen Esther of Persia.

Hereupon a favourite, Haman the Agagite, looms in view, who outvies all the princes of the land. Mordecai alone will not bow the knee to him. He is a descendant of Kish, and Haman an Agagite. Agag was that Amalekite king whom Saul should have executed in fulfilment of the Lord's word to Moses (Exod. xvii); and he was rejected for omitting to do so. The Targum observes that behind Agag and Amalek stands Esau. The history of Israel had begun with the choice of Jacob at the expense of Esau. Was it to end in a destruction proceeding from Esau's line? Haman is informed of Mordecai's contumely, and vows that he will wipe out the whole Jewish people in revenge. He casts lots (*purim*) to ascertain the fated hour for his enterprise. The lot falls on the 13th day of the 12th month. And he wins permission from Xerxes to work his wicked will.

Mordecai now appears in sackcloth and ashes before the palace gate. The Queen thus learns of the edict, and Mordecai persuades her to intercede. The king receives her favourably and offers to gratify her desire even to the half of his kingdom. But she durst not present her momentous request at once; so she merely invites Haman twice to a banquet. Elated as he is by this honour, it cannot satisfy him as long as Mordecai offers him defiance. And so at his wife's suggestion he makes a gallows ready for his opponent. That night the king cannot sleep, and beguiles the time with the chronicle of his kingdom. He finds there that Mordecai had saved his life from certain liers-in-wait, and yet remains unrewarded. In the morning Haman, on arriving early at Court, is greeted with the question: "What shall be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour?" Fancying that man to be himself, he proposes every possible distinction he can devise, and is thunderstruck when Xerxes bids him pay these selfsame honours to Mordecai. The second of Esther's banquets now takes place, and Esther prefers her petition for her people, menaced by Haman with utter extermination; and he at once falls into disfavour, and is speedily hung on the very gallows prepared for Mordecai.

The Jews' peril, however, is still unaverted. Messengers have been despatched throughout the Empire, assigning the

date for their destruction. Ahasuerus himself cannot recall the edict. All that can be done is to give the Jews permission to defend their lives. Of that permission they avail themselves to the full, with much effusion of Persian blood.

In perpetual memorial of these days in which the Jews' trepidation had been transformed into triumph, Mordecai and Esther appoint the festival of Purim, to be preceded however by a fast. The book is obviously written as a ground for this observance, which took its rise in the East, and was probably not introduced into the Holy Land until a century before Christ. It is still commonly celebrated by the Jews. Every Israelite, small or great, is supposed on that occasion to read, or have read to them, twice over the book of Esther. It is no festival of vengeance, but of unrestrained rejoicing. According to a statement of Raba in the Talmud it is not only lawful but laudable to carouse so heartily at this feast as no longer to be able to distinguish between "Cursed be Haman!" and "Blessed be Mordecai!" Its observance is accompanied by masquerades, similar to these associated with the nearly simultaneous Shrovetide of Christendom; and the story of Esther, dramatically adapted, is then acted with all kinds of mirthful pleasantries.

II

ITS SIGNIFICANCE

We now ask: How is this story to be appraised historically? The recently deceased Babylonian expert, Peter Jensen, years ago sought to prove that a myth regarding battles between Babylonish and Elamite deities underlies the narrative. At the time his assumptions attracted wide attention and obtained no small amount of support. Later researches have in turn abandoned them, largely because of the recognition of the fact that the identification of the main actors with gods forms a very dubious basis for Jensen's alleged proof. Gunkel arrives at the conclusion, based on modern literary and historical investigation, that the book can be strictly classified as a "historical romance". The Jewish feast of Purim presupposes an Elamite or Persian festival of like nature. With the object of imposing a Jewish stamp and aspect on it, the pagan *Saga* has been copied. At the same time the main theme has been taken from the grievous plight of the Jewish *Diaspora*. The Jewish

composer must have lived at the Court of Susa. Gunkel shows how in his delineation of Persian institutions and manners he presents a lively and truthful picture of the conditions of the realm, as Ed. Meyer had already insisted; and how he is especially well informed respecting the court.

In fact, a comparison of his statements as to the various offices of the royal residence with the results of the French excavation of the palace at Susa brings to light the structural stage at which the author of the book of Esther viewed the palace, namely, in the period between the reign of Artaxerxes I. and II., that is to say between 424 and 404 B.C. So Gunkel attributes to the book of Esther "considerable value as a source of history". Nevertheless he is by no means ready to grant that the story of Esther is really historical. On the contrary his opinion is that "the climax of the relation, the murder of the Jews' adversaries, is certainly unhistorical, and that Esther was ever Queen must remain extremely improbable. Moreover, as far as we know, a *universal* persecution of the Jews never took place in Persia. Such violent collisions with the State occurred under the subsequent domination of the Greeks and Romans". Yet the hatred of the Jew did not spring up first in the Hellenistic era. It is as old as Judaism itself, whose very constitution involves that it cannot be inserted in the general world-outlook and civilization of the Nations, and accordingly excites universal odium.

"How frequently may murder and fire and confiscation have raged presumably through the Jewish quarter within the circuit of the Persian Empire! How many a time may the children have cowered beside father and mother, with barricaded doors and fast-closed windows, shrinking timidly at each wild yell of the mob, who were on the prowl outside! The sole human hope of the Jews in this perilous situation is that the State, with its vast resources, may not leave them quite in the lurch. The Persian Empire would never have acted as the book of Esther leads us to suppose. This story supplies a typical instance of the way in which history can be moulded by wishes. The possibility, however, exists that an averted catastrophe of the Jewry of a certain locality lies in its background."

Thus writes Hermann Gunkel, and he expresses well what is to be said of the literary and historical value of the book of Esther, regarded from the standpoint of present-day research.

Now what gives this book its place in the Bible? It would

be too much to say that its reception into the canon of Holy Scripture brings a strange element into the collection, and thus distorts its line of vision. But it is undeniable that it so intensifies the Jewish trait in the Biblical point of view, elsewhere more or less slightly touched upon, that we can no longer disregard it, if the question is put to us, whether we like or dislike the viewpoint of the Bible. After we have once encountered Esther and Mordecai in our reading we catch the odious family likeness in all the figures, not only of the Old but also the New Testament. The surmise suggests itself that the Jewish Scribes who determined the choice of Holy Writ may have recognised their own frame of mind in the book of Esther, and been glad to install it in the Bible. But that supposition clashes with the tradition that 85 elders, among whom were 30 prophets, refused to recognise a Divine authorization for the feast of Purim. They did not dismiss the assembly however till God opened their eyes, and they found in the Lord's word to Moses (Exod. xvii. 14) the injunction to keep the feast of Purim and to canonize the book of Esther. It is the passage where, after the victory over Amalek God commands Moses to "write this for a memorial in a book and rehearse it in the ears of Joshua; for I will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven". On the ground then of this text was the book of Esther included in the canon. Soon it came to acquire peculiar favour. Rabbi Simeon of Lachish (circa 300) places it on a level with the Torah, and above the prophets and the other Scriptures.

Is this characteristic for Judaism, and should the Christian Church, when it took over the Hebrew Scriptures, have discarded the book of Esther, and so have definitely obliterated the Jewish feature from the Biblical facepoint? In point of fact, she did vacillate a good while, and even towards the close of the Fourth Century highly reputed teachers of the old Church shrank from reckoning it among the Holy Scriptures. Athanasius, for example, only went so far as to recommend it for reading to the catechumens. Eventually, *Esther* remained in the Christian Bible, and took its place immediately beside its dissimilar sister *Ruth*. Jerome, who had discovered a proof of Divine wisdom in the fact that the Hebrew Scriptures comprized just as many books as the letters of the Hebrews alphabet, only assigned to Esther the last place in the list, as Origen had

done before him. By accepting simply as it stood the entire holy writings of the Old Covenant, the Church testified that Christ crucified forms the whole revelation of God in the entire height and depth and length and breadth of its attestation by the Old Testament, and not least the book of Esther's attestation to the Redeemer. The Church of the Reformation was well aware what she was doing, when, in spite of Luther's personal repugnance to the book, she endorsed this confession without reservation.

So this book stands to this hour not merely in the Jewish but the Christian Bible, and renders all Holy Scripture distasteful to many minds. Should the Church then of to-day have the courage to exclude it? Rabbi Samuel ben Judah said that when Esther bade the wise men let her feast be celebrated perpetually, they replied: "Wishest thou to excite hatred against us among the Nations?" For the feast of Purim and the book of Esther were bound to provoke all Gentiles against Judaism. Esther made reply: "I am already registered in the chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia." For us that signifies: You might doubtless strike the book of Esther out of the Bible, but it is indelibly inscribed in the annals of universal history, not only with ink, but with blood and fire.

Again and again, when things come to the last resort, the story of Esther repeats itself. It intimates quite plainly the uncanny reality of the Jewish Question in our world. He who cancels Esther from the page of Holy Writ declares by his action that the Jewish Question and its solution have nothing to do with the revelation of God in Christ.

III

THE JEWISH QUESTION

The book of Esther presents the Jewish Question to us in full relief. There is a peculiar people, dispersed amid all other peoples, and yet isolated from all. It will not amalgamate with them, and cannot for its own idiosyncrasy's sake. The nations receive it as a foreign body, nay, as a thorn in their flesh which must be extracted at all costs. The wrath and hate against the Jew is but slenderly accounted for by the sense of racial differentiation. The physical and moral aspects of the Jewish Question are an inoffensive consideration. For the blood and the moral status of the Jew are not so diverse from the blood and the moral status of the rest of mankind, that the Jew

must be regarded as unendurable on that score. "Their laws are different from those of other Nations", says Haman, and thus hints at the deeper distinction. But even he says merely "their laws", not "their Law" or "the Law of the Lord their God". For neither Persian nor Jew observes that the peculiarity of the Jew grounds itself on the peculiar will of Him who is the True God, and has set the Jews apart on purpose to reveal through them His unique Godhead. The most singular feature of the book of Esther is that it seems wholly to leave that reflection out of account, and never mentions the Deity, to say nothing of the Old Testament revealed name of God. Not once in any context in which the word God would involuntarily be mentioned, for instance, where Mordecai protests to Esther that if out of solicitude for her own life she will not go to the king, then shall help come to them in some other fashion,—even there instead of 'from God', we read only "from another place". Intentionally, it is clear, not a word touching God is uttered. No less intentionally is the name 'Israel' suppressed, the name that marks the Jews' divine vocation. 'There was a Jew, a man of Judah (isch jehudi)', runs the wording. Purely as the *Jewish Question* is it contemplated and answered in the book of Esther, as though it were not withal the question of *Israel*, God's question. But when so viewed, as if it were only a national, or shall we say? biological or political or a variety of the cultural question of humanity, no answer can be given to it at last but that which *Esther* supplies; sanguinary strokes and counterstrokes without end. Neither party obtains a complete victory. Notwithstanding that the absolute dominion of the Persian king and the entire apparatus of the Persian government stood at his disposal for that purpose, Haman succeeds just as little in solving the Jewish Question by extirpation of the Jews, as Pharaoh before him had done by his brutal policy, or the Greeks and the Romans and the Spaniards and the Russians and the Germans later on. Why not? Because the Jewish Question is the question of Israel; because the Lord God is He who has propounded this question and who alone can answer it.

Is that merely a conception, nothing more than an idea relative to the "philosophy of history"? No! it is a perception arising from the fact that the book of Esther is found in Holy Scripture. As a constituent element of the Bible, it bears record

that the Jewish Question and its solution belong to Divine revelation. If it is true that we only believe in the Living God as we believe in the witness of His Holy Word—and the Church stands or falls with the acknowledgement of this truth—then we only believe in Him as we believe that He links the Jewish Question with the revelation of His Godhead and supplies the only solution of it. That follows from the inclusion of the book of Esther in the Word of God. We may stumble at that; but God Himself says: "Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling-stone and rock of offence" (Rom. ix. 33). The apostle Paul shows clearly why he cites this prophetic word when he is expounding the Jewish Question. For it is the most offensive truth in the whole of revelation that God has connected Himself indissolubly with Israel's history. The Lord, the God of Israel, is and abides the God of the Jews. He hallows His name with what in the eyes of the world must constitute its greatest dishonour. The whole Book testifies to this. In the Pentateuch, the Prophets, the Psalms, and throughout the New Testament the Jewish Question propounds itself. The children of Israel are therewithal the Jews. The book of Esther makes us realise that in a specially unpalatable fashion; and therein lies its significance. That is its contribution to the testimony of Jesus. It proclaims so loud that it cannot be ignored that the true Christ solves the Jewish Question; unless He does that, He is not the true Messiah, and therefore not the world's Divine Saviour.

If the community of those who believe and confess that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ of God has the book of Esther in their Holy Writ, it thereby acknowledges that God has solved the Jewish Question through Christ crucified and risen. Note that expression! For the solution lies in the fact that the supreme council of Judaism condemned this same Jesus to death and delivered Him up to the Gentiles on the ground that His claim to be King of the Jews was a blasphemy and a pollution of Israel, and that God on His side raised Him who had been put to death in that fashion and showed Him to be the Christ.

The Jewish Question is settled in the New Testament in the single Person of Jesus. In correspondence wherewith in the narrative of *Esther* the battle for existence or extinction concentrates itself in the wrestle between Haman and Mordecai. Haman's animosity against this one Jew drives him to the scheme of annihilating Jewry; and furthermore it does not

suffice him to destroy this one victim along with all the rest; he will debase him as no one else has been debased and erect a trophy of his triumph over the degraded Jews by his execution on a gallows fifty cubits high. Does he succeed? Who will hang on this fantastically lofty gallows, the Jew or the Jew's adversary? Herein lies the whole tension of the narrative. A commentator who should treat this feature as incidental would be to blame. And so the Christian witness of the book of Esther is inadequately disclosed, if the import of this climax of the story is not recognised.

"To hang on the wood" is a form of capital punishment frequently portrayed on the Assyrian monuments, and the customary penalty with the Persians as well as one often found later among the Romans. It consisted in the suspension of the transgressors living or dead on a wooden stake or his fastening thereto with nails. Herodotus employs (e.g. iii. 125) to describe it the same Greek terms as the New Testament uses for crucifixion. It is not an Israelitish mode of punishment and, if resorted to in Israel, entails entire profanation, for the victim is hung up before God and exposed to His wrath. The body must not remain impaled overnight, but has to be buried the same day; for "he that is hanged is accursed of God; that thy land be not defiled, which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance" (Deut. xxi. 23). According to the Old Testament this punishment was only put in execution twice by Israelites or Canaanitish kings, and twice by David in the peculiar case of the murderers of Ishbaal and on the residue of Saul (Josh. viii. 29, x. 26; 2 Sam. iv. 12, xxi. 9). Conspicuously alone in the Old Testament, and overtopping all the gallows of the world, stands the "tree", 50 cubits in height, which Haman erected for the Jew.

To the Israelitish mind there can be nothing more impossible and preposterous than the notion that its Messiah should hang upon a cross. If their chief council constrains the representative of Rome to execute this pagan mode of punishment on a Jew, it is to cleanse the holy people from an abomination which that person has brought to Israel's door. That Jesus was executed in that manner, and did not suffer any casual sort of death, all the New Testament witnesses affirm emphatically. While Jesus according to Matthew's Gospel said on His first announcement of His passion that He must suffer many things from the chief Priests and be slain, on the second

occasion He predicted that He must be betrayed into the hands of men, and on the third, that He must be condemned to death and given up to the Gentiles, that they might mock and scourge and crucify Him. It suffices not that the Jews should condemn and stone Him, as a little later they stoned Stephen. The co-operation of the pagan authority is requisite in order that this false Christ may be despatched as 'accursed'! Yet more strongly is this brought forward in John's Gospel through his detailed account of the dealings of the Jews with the Roman Governor. "If this man be a transgressor according to your law, take him and judge him by your law", says Pilate. But the Jews will not consent to dispose of this case as an internal incident. "We can put no man to death", they declare. That applied only to death by crucifixion, which the Romans reserved in their own hands, and which the Jews would fain see wreaked on Jesus. Accordingly the Evangelist adds that they said that to Pilate that the word of Jesus might be fulfilled, signifying what death He should die (John xviii. 32). Plainly he is pointing to the statement of Jesus to Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, at the inception of His ministry, that the Son of man must be "lifted up" precisely as Moses had lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, namely on the wood of the pole as a visible mark or token, that *whosoever* believeth on Him might have everlasting life. (John iii. 14, 15). Later on Jesus once more proclaimed that He must be lifted up from the earth, that He might draw *all* unto Himself. And it is very significant on what occasion this took place, just at that crucial moment when a party of Greeks desired to see Him (John xii. 20, e.g.). The more obstinately and passionately the Jews in their transactions with Pilate insist that Jesus must be executed on the cross and by the representative of worldly dominion, the more openly and trenchantly the Roman governor lays stress on the proposition, that the fulfilment of their desire implies that he as a non-Jewish judge passes judgement in the Emperor's name on the King of the Jews, and likewise on their Messianic hope. Pilate feels uneasy because he has an inkling that he in person, together with the power which empowers him to sentence Jesus to death, becomes guilty by this act of affronting "the King of Truth". But in vain does he seek to remit the case to the Jewish Council on the ground that the crime of Jesus violated only the law of the Jews, not the imperial code.

The Jews maintain that by their own law this crime could only be expiated by that capital sentence which the Emperor's delegate ought to impose. In vain Pilate proclaims from the secular tribunal the innocence of the accused. In vain does he attempt by the device of an exemption once a year granted to the Jews for their oddity's sake of a semi-political insurgent to release the "King of the Jews". "Not this one but Barabbas", all cry. In vain does he present Jesus to them wearing the crown of thorns. They insist that according to the Jewish law, the blasphemy of Jesus that He was the Christ could only be expiated by His crucifixion. In vain Pilate tells them from his judgement seat on the Pavement twice more, before issuing the command for that doom, that the execution of the King of the Jews is at stake.

Only when the chief priests, by the declaration "We have no King but Caesar!" have with the surrender of Jesus surrendered likewise every Messianic pretension of the chosen people does the representative of the secular power allow Jesus to be led away to the cross. Nor does he fail to publish the meaning of this crucifixion and finally drive it home by the superscription which he causes to be drawn up in the sacred tongue and the two chief profane languages, and placed above the head of Jesus on the cross: "*Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*". It was upon reading this inscription that the Jews began to suspect that the crucifying of Jesus could be taken to signify the full renunciation of all the Messianic claims of the chosen people. "Write not King of the Jews"—such is now the petition of the chief priests to Pilate—"but that He said, I am King of the Jews". But he will not accede to their request. "What I have written I have written," replies the imperial delegate in words which strikingly (and that not by chance) sound like a reproduction of those with which Xerxes responded to Esther and Mordecai: "What is written in the King's name cannot be revoked" (*Esther* viii. 8). Yet whereas the *pogrom* issued in the name of Xerxes became abortive through a counter-order issued in his name, in order that the Jewish people in the Persian realm might survive till the advent of Jesus Christ, the order by which the Roman procurator signalized the crucifixion of Christ abides finally and irrevocably the superscription over His cross, the certificate of the total reprobation of Jewish Messianic theories. The representative of Roman lordship and of the heathen world is drawn *volens nolens* into

the charge brought against Jesus, and His crucifixion thus rendered a possibility; and thus the Gentiles are made partners with the Jew in His rejection. It avails Pilate nothing to wash his hands in innocency. Jesus was crucified by his instrumentality.

IV

KING OF THE JEWS

So it is Jesus as King of the Jews who hangs on the cross. And the two crosses, that reared before the gates of the holy city, and the fifty cubit high scaffold at Susa, greet one another across the continents and the centuries. The book of Esther intimates that the decision of the Jewish Question as a Divine question coincides with the decision which of the twain, the Jew or the Jew's enemy, in the event is lifted up on the tree. The final solution, which every provisional settlement adjourns and by its provisional nature vindicates, is the solution furnished by God Himself, when He suffered the Jews in concert with the Gentiles to uplift His Son as a Jew on the cross. Neither the crucifixion of a Jew by the Gentiles nor the crucifixion of an enemy of the Jews by the Jews embodies that solution, even though the essence of Judaism so fully excluded that of Gentilism, and *vice versa*, that from the human standpoint nothing short of the overwhelming victory of the one over the other can provide a solution. He who regards the opposition between them as of a less thorough cast has not sounded the Jewish Question to the bottom. The unparalleled wonder of God's solution lies in this, that both of the mutually exclusive solutions of men, neither of which in God's sight can dispose of the question, are historically conjoined by Him to bring about His solution. The supreme Jewish council and the pagan authority make common cause in doing away with the King of the Jews at the accursed tree in the person of Jesus Christ; and at that very moment when they think to triumph, God's unique victory emerges to view. There it becomes patent that His possibility renders both of their possibilities impossible. In the trial of Jesus, in fact, the Jews with passionate fury carry through a policy akin to that sketched in *Esther*, and the Roman procurator achieves the end, remarked too late by the Jews, that floated before the mind of the Jews' foe at the Court of Persia. The fanatical determination on the part of the Jews to preserve

themselves intact which animates the record of Esther solemnizes its triumph in the charge launched against Jesus, and in that very act runs into the trap laid by the representative of the world-power. Here we view the most absolute contrast to the Will of God revealed in the life and death of Jesus. That being so, must we not affirm that the book of Esther and the Gospel stand in irreconcilable antithesis to one another? Yes! and nevertheless the recognition of the indissoluble connection between the two ensues. The Holy Spirit has linked the Gospel inextricably with the book of Esther by revealing how God has established His Son's title to be the Saviour of the World in letting Him die through the agency of the Jews for the Jews, and the agency of the Gentiles for the Gentiles. While God permits the sin both of Jew and Gentile to work itself out in the crucifixion of His Son by both parties, and judges it, He fulfils and reveals at the same time the unique and complete victory of His grace and truth over the world's iniquity. For in permitting His Son to become a Jew, to die as King of the Jews, and to rise again on the third day, He vindicates His election and conservation of Israel, and fulfils all His promises to His chosen people. By this means moreover He establishes peace in lieu of enmity between Jew and non-Jew. For now it is manifest that both are one in their sin against Him, that both live solely by His grace, which is proffered to them in the message that God has made One to be a curse and gloriously raised Him up again because He has mercy on all. This solution constitutes the judgement of God on both the Jew especially, and also the Gentile. And this solution connotes the Divine possibility of redemption for all who believe in it, the Jew in the first place, but also the Gentile.

It behoves that One should die on the cross for the redemption of all. Caiaphas expressed it in its Jewish application: "It is better that one man die for the whole Nation than that the whole Nation perish" (John xi. 50). The occasion on which he says that is remarkable. After Christ's greatest sign, the raising of Lazarus, the high priests and Pharisees call a meeting of the Sanhedrin to decide what is now to be done. "If we let Him go on, all will believe in Him; then the Romans will come and take away both the place and the Nation." That is to say; through Him we shall lose our peculiar right to exist in the eyes of the world-power. Then Caiaphas in the words we have quoted points out the only possible solution of the

problem. And the evangelist declares: "this said he not of himself; but, being high priest that year, he prophesied, because Jesus was to die for the Nation, and not for that nation alone, but that He might gather into one the children of God dispersed among the nations." So significant is Caiaphas's saying to the Evangelist that he recalls it afresh in his narrative of the trial of Jesus. We remark that he puts a deeper construction on the speech than the Jewish high priest had intended. He perceives merely the means of preservation for the nation in the sacrifice of a single individual. The Evangelist discovers in it the proclamation that by the death of this one Person all the children of God, whether Jew or Gentile, should be united in one. And so he wakens within us remembrance of the most striking passage in the story of Esther, where Mordecai calls upon the Jewess, who is Queen of Persia, to fling herself into the breach, that her whole people may not be exterminated. He repels her plea that such a course assuredly entails her death with the intimation that she will certainly lose her life if she seeks to safeguard it at the cost of her countrymen. Then she braces herself for the arduous task with the sentence: "if I perish, I perish." In this speech of Esther, out of all the texts of Holy Writ, Wilhelm Löhe found the appropriate watchword for our evangelical deaconesses. And do not the words of Mordecai sound singularly like (and that not by accident) the word whereby Jesus directs His disciples to carry their cross after Him? "Whoso will save his life shall lose it: but he who loses his life for My sake shall find it." Even as Christ's disciples must be His witnesses in point of readiness to carry the cross as His followers, so the readiness of Queen Esther is an antecedent witness to the crucified King of the Jews. But then Esther had not to die for her people, it may be said. No! yet just in that feature that she is fully prepared, but her willingness does not meet with its fulfilment in herself, is she a witness for Him who alone brings the unique sacrifice of His life which suffices for the redemption of many, an offering that could not be replaced, but only witnessed to, by the most entire devotion or even martyrdom on her part. The case is similar to that of Abraham, the father of the faithful, who was ready to sacrifice his only begotten son, but received him back in parable (Heb. xi. 19). And the same parallel holds with regard to the edict of the Persian king, which might have blotted out the Jewish people,

had not the counter-injunction proved more efficacious, in contrast with the sentence of the Roman procurator and his inscription on the cross, which was irrevocably fulfilled. In this alternate correspondence and divergence of the events and sayings of the book of Esther and of the sayings and events of the Gospel, we catch a glimpse of the peculiar relation of the Old to the New Testament and of promise to its specific fruition. And thus as a constituent of the church's Bible *Esther* supplies a needful testification to the Saviourhood of Christ. It proclaims that Christ Jesus, crucified according to the counsel of God alike by Jew and Gentile, is the Divine solution of the Jewish Question as well as of that propounded in the choice of Israel, which He alone can evolve. The objection may be raised that the lesson drawn is one which might be gathered from the rest of the Bible without the help of the book of Esther. "So much the better" is our response. Would it not be extremely suspicious if this book comprised a testimony to Christ alien to the rest of Scripture? But that is not the fact. The Bible gives us in many passages tantamount utterances. Yet there is a profound necessity that this aspect of its witness to Him should be set in specially provoking relief in this book. The consequence is that every one who is called to believe is led inevitably to see that there is no genuine faith in Jesus, the Saviour of the World, which does not confess and pay homage to the crucified King of the Jews, for it is as the crucified King of the Jews that Israel's Messiah brings the world salvation.

V

FREE FAITH

This faith, and none other, apprehends and comprehends the only possible way of solving the Jewish Question. A "Christian" world which does not take the Gospel seriously as a fulfilment of the problem of the book of Esther, and does not solve the Jewish Question by faith in that gospel, bleeds to death in face of it. For its accomplishment belongs to the final stage of history. We mean that the Jewish Question has been fulfilled in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but not yet despatched. The saying of Christ, "I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil", holds good here. He is not only crucified but risen. And the Risen One is now attested in full

to be Israel's Messiah, and sits as such at the right hand of power (Ps. cx.) and will come again in the clouds of heaven as the Son of Man (Matt. xxvi. 64). That was the last thing Jesus said before the council, and so affirmed the high priest's question whether He were the Christ in the most comprehensive manner. The bearing of this final declaration on the connection of Israel's election with universal history, as presented in the book of Daniel, should be noted. According to the announcement of the angel to Daniel, the appearance of the Son of man in the clouds signifies that after the annihilating judgement of the wild-beast kingdoms "the kingdom and dominion and power under the whole heaven shall be given to the holy people of the Highest; and His kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and all powers shall serve and obey Him" (Dan. vii. 27). The elevation of Esther to the queenship of the Persian kingdom, and the victory which she obtains in this character for the "holy people of the Highest" are foreshadowings, shadowy prognostications, of the appearance of the Risen One and the ultimate return of Christ for the glorious reception of the kingdom. All the victories vouchsafed by the Lord to the people of the Old Covenant in history have this typical reference; they foretoken the final victory. Certainly, we cannot but surmise that this entire line of victory was broken by the death of Jesus, and that all realizations of it or longings for it lying in that tract of prefiguration were buried with Him. But it is equally certain that His resurrection guarantees the glorious fulfilment of all such pledges of victory. That fulfilment reaches far beyond the bounds of Jewish Israel. Since Pentecost the "holy people of the Highest" is being called and gathered out of all nations. If the great kingdom-promises of the Old Testament are now transferred to believers in all lands, the assumption seems quite natural that every peculiarity and distinction of Jewish Israel is abrogated. The matter might be viewed in this light. God chose and conserved Israel in the centuries B.C., in order that He might let His Christ come of their stock, and so salvation be "of the Jews"; but after they had handed Him over to the Gentiles and God had raised Him up to be the Saviour of the world, the Jews' day is over; nay, the peculiar connection of the Messianic promise with Israel is thereby dissolved.

The statements of the New Testament, however, by no means correspond with that supposition. True, every limitation

or perversion of the Messianic hope in terms of Jewish self-preservation or glorification is rebuked, and every curtailment of Christ's salvation to the Jews nullified. True, the hedge betwixt the heathen world and Israel is broken down, so that the Gentile has open access to full salvation and may become a citizen possessing the freedom of the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, the Jews have in point of fact entirely forfeited every right to a peculiar status there, and indeed henceforth to be exclusively the chosen people of God. But here is the astonishing thing. Now, when there can be no more talk of a right of theirs, God glorifies His *grace* in them, the grace which called them at the first and has conserved them ever since. He crowns the manifestation of His faithfulness by not only leaving "Israel after the flesh" alive after the crucifixion of Jesus, but in addition by keeping His peculiar promise to it inviolate. He is resolved to complete the redemption of mankind, which He began by the separation of Israel to Himself, through the Jews. That is why He preserves a "holy remnant" of Israel after the flesh, which are not merged in the nations either by emancipation or assimilation, nor cabined in a *ghetto*, nor converted by Zionist or kindred movements into a nation like the rest of the nations, nor can be uprooted by Pharaonic or Hamanish measures. Hence it comes to pass that the Jewish Question is an open wound in the body of humanity, and for God's own heart, which can only close when the Jews in genuine conversion believe and confess that God has made Jesus, whom they gave up to the Gentiles to crucify, both Lord and Christ. Then come the times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord, when God shall send again Christ Jesus in glory to what is first and last defined as *Israel*; "Whom the heaven must receive until the times of the full consummation which God hath spoken by the mouth of His holy prophets, sent forth from eternity" (Acts iii. 21; Matt. xxiii. 38-9).

VI

THE POWER OF GOD

A finger is laid on this open wound in various passages of Scripture, nowhere more distinctly than in the Epistle to the Romans. When the apostle has expounded in eight chapters the truth that the Gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth, to the Jew first and also

to the Greek, and that nothing whatsoever can invalidate this possibility of salvation, he breaks off with the lamentation that he feels deep and continued anguish of heart because of the Jews, who are his kinsmen in the flesh, sorrow that as a community they still reject Christ. That is an intolerable grief to him, not so much because they are his kinsfolk as because to them primarily pertain the adoption and the covenant and the promises, and these are ratified by the Jewish birth of Christ. These Jews are notwithstanding still Israelites. It is noteworthy that the apostle who in the first eight chapters has designated them only *Jews*, in opening up the Jewish Question, terms them *Israelites*, using not their popular, but covenant appellation. He desired for the glory of God, like Moses in his day (Exod. xxxii. 32) and to some extent also Esther, to be sacrificed for the salvation of his brethren, for their sakes to be accursed from Christ. But that cannot enter into the reckoning. God needs no such offering; His word cannot, shall not, fall to the ground. It suffices that His Son has been made a curse. And it tallies with God's Word that Israel should be winnowed by judgement even to its vanishing remnant. Or has God *wholly* cast away His people? Impossible! They are "shipwrecked on God", it is true, but on the rock of His faithfulness, not that they may be dashed to pieces, but rather that the unfathomability of the Divine mercy may be manifested in them and through them as the sole ground of any man's salvation. Their fall is the salvation of the Gentiles, to provoke themselves 'to jealousy'. Israel, which again and again has rejected the Divine overture of salvation, is thus, viewing how the promise given to them first of all is embraced by the Gentiles, to wax so jealous that it turns at length to God and His Christ. If its casting away is the world's salvation, what will its reception be but "life from the dead"? That will be the last glorious design of God; and the accomplishment of it is suspended on the Jews' conversion. Hence Paul sees the glory of his Gentile apostolate, the final basis and justification of his Gentile mission, in the circumstance that with the calling of the Gentiles into the new covenant he ultimately secures the Jews for Christ.

We shall avoid seeking to know more in this matter than the Scriptures teach us, and not indulge in historical speculations. Be it ours to accept and hold tenaciously to what Holy Writ says. "I will not leave you in ignorance of this secret",

writes Paul (Rom. xi. 25), "lest ye be wise in your own conceits". In the Jewish Question there lies not merely a historical riddle, capable of solution by dint of force or fancy, but a "mystery", a secret, the disclosure of which at the end of the tale belongs to God. Herein exists the one definite historical problem of the Gospel. All else that can be affirmed concerning Christ and the history of nations derives its weight from hence, or it is a meaningless piece of guesswork. The history of the Jew is the crimson thread of universal history. That cannot remain altogether concealed upon a review of the almost millenniums of Christian history. Nations have risen to greatness and sunk to ruin, but the Jews have stayed. And more than once when matters have come to a crisis, the book of Esther has been reenacted. The various efforts, passionately pursued, to efface the Jews have always had the opposite effect, to wit that the Jews who had lost themselves in the world have found themselves again. "The drawing off of the king's signet ring," conferring full authority on the Jew's enemy, says Rabbi Abba ben Kahana in his exposition of *Esther* iii. 10, "wrought more than the 48 prophets and 7 prophetesses who preached in Israel; all of them did not turn them to the good way, whilst the drawing off of the king's signet ring did so."¹ Many as were the times on which God gave up the unfaithful people of His choice to the nations to cast reproach on it, the marvel of His conservation of a remnant always took place. Some vestige of the secret that, according to the last song of Moses, God has stored up and sealed among His treasures disclosed itself ever and anon: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." "The Lord shall judge His people, and repent Himself for His servants" (Deut. xxxii. 36, e.g.). The Church of Christ, which is a party to this secret, must also confirm it, and in contrition and faith grasp the grand possibility of the solution of the Jewish Question, namely, that the fulness of the Gentiles may enter into the covenant of Christ, and the chosen people be thus roused to jealousy. How should Judaism become jealous of a Christianity which is not Christian at all? Thus the *Jewish* Question is the *Christian* Question as assuredly as Jesus Christ is the Fulfiller of the promise of the book of Esther.²

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¹ Babylonian Talmud. Tract. Megilla, Fol. 14A.

² Cf. Solowjoff: *Judenthum u Christentum*.