

ESTHER. The Book of Esther relates how a Jewish maiden, Esther, a foster-daughter of Mordecai, was raised to the position of queen by the Persian king Ahasuerus (Xerxes) after he had divorced Vashti; next, how she and her uncle Mordecai frustrated Haman's resolution to extirpate the Jews out of the Persian empire; how Haman fell, and Mordecai was advanced to his place; how Esther obtained the king's permission for the Jews to destroy all who might attack them on the day which Haman had appointed by lot for their extirpation; and lastly, how a festival was instituted to commemorate their deliverance. Its main object is to account for the origin of the feast of Purim, which from its cradle in the Persian capital had gradually made its way into other countries (Esth. ix. 19-32). The colouring of the narrative is entirely foreign. Frequent and minute references are made to the usages of the Persian court, while on the other hand the peculiar institutions of the Jews, and even Jerusalem and the temple, and the very name of Israel, are studiously, as it would seem, ignored. The name of God is not mentioned once, a phenomenon entirely unique in the Old Testament writings. From a theological point of view, the book is therefore not of much interest. It attracts the historical critic, however, by the strangeness and difficulty of its statements, while the ordinary reader cannot fail to be struck by the force and dramatic vividness of its literary form. Its early popularity is shown by the interpolated passages (as different as possible from the original) in the Septuagint and old Latin versions.

It was not until the 18th century that a critical examination of the book was made, with a view to determine its precise historical value, not, however, at first with sufficient impartiality or historical information. Eichhorn, the most moderate of the earlier critics, belongs to the 19th century. He has drawn up a long list of improbabilities of detail, some of which he thinks he can explain away, while others remain in full force. Subsequent critics have believed themselves to have discovered fresh difficulties, inasmuch that Dr Kuenen does not hesitate to say that "impossibilities and improbabilities pervade the whole narrative" (*Religion of Israel*, iii. 148). It is impossible to mention more than a few of these as a specimen. The very first verses of the book are great stumbling blocks to a Western reader. We are there told that Ahasuerus, "who reigned from India even unto Ethiopia, over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces," gave a banquet which lasted 180 days, and at which (if we take the expressions of the narrative literally) the whole official world of the Persian empire was simultaneously present (Esth. i. 3, 4). Further on, we are told that Esther, on her elevation to be queen, kept her Jewish origin secret (ii. 10), although she had been taken from the house of Mordecai, who was known to be a Jew (iii. 4), and had remained in constant intercourse with him (iv. 4-17). We also learn indirectly that Mordecai, previously to his mourning, was able to pass at pleasure into the harem of the jealous and amatory Xerxes (iv. 2). Further, that Mordecai offered a gross affront to Haman without any evil consequences (iii. 2-6). Lastly, Haman, the cruel grand-vizier, takes the trouble to give eleven months notice of his intention to exterminate the Jews (iii. 12-14), which respite is spent by the Jews in fasting (the narrative does not add praying) and lamentation (iv. 3), and when the danger has been averted through the patriotism of Esther, the Jews are allowed to put to death 75,000 of their fellow subjects (ix. 16).

Nevertheless, it must at any rate be admitted that these objections are not all of equal value, and that a comparison of the narrative of Esther with the later additions to the book, and with the stories of Judith and Tobit, is distinctly favourable to its historical verisimilitude. Some amount

of exaggeration must be allowed for, as the infirmity of an Oriental race; no exegesis is possible without such a postulate. As for the Persian customs described, they are no doubt singular, but, in the absence of documentary evidence, it is unsafe to give them a positive contradiction. At least one confirmation of some importance has been supplied by Herodotus (iii. 69, cf. Esth. ii. 12); and many critics hold that the assembly assigned to the third year of Ahasuerus (Esth. i. 3) is that mentioned by Herodotus (vii. 8) as having been held previously to the expedition against Greece. This, however, is quite uncertain. The reference to the 127 provinces is in itself not improbable, but is only confirmed by the author of the book of Daniel (vi. 1, cf. 1 Esd. iii. 3, LXX.), who has been thought by some to have made a confusion between satrapies and sub-satrapies. It is at any rate in perfect harmony with history that the book of Esther includes India among the subject provinces; this is confirmed not only by Herodotus (iii. 94), but by the inscriptions of Darius at Persopolis and Naksh-i-Rustam. The conduct of Mordecai certainly remains mysterious. In our own day, the harem is impenetrable, while "any one declining to stand as the grand-vizier passes is almost beaten to death" (Morier, the English minister to the court of Persia, quoted by Dean Stanley). And if it is perhaps only too probable that a vizier would use his position for the gratification of spite, and if even the blood-thirstiness of Haman is not inconceivable, still the circumstances connected with the decree for the destruction of the Jews are almost more than even "the peculiarly extravagant and capricious character" of Xerxes (Canon Rawlinson) can render easily acceptable.

The proper names of Esther, at any rate in their present form, do not all of them stand philological tests. Some of them are genuinely Persian, but others wear a somewhat questionable appearance. These may either be corrupt, or, as Noldeke suggests, framed by the author himself on Persian models. Among the most accurate is Ahasuerus or rather Akhashverosh (= Persian Chshayarsha, i. e., Xerxes). The character of this king, too, agrees admirably with that given of Xerxes by Herodotus (cf. Herod. iii. 69, ix. 108). But then, it has been replied, it only agrees so well because Xerxes was a typical Oriental despot, magnificent, swayed by favourites, proud, amatory, capricious. Here we must leave this part of our subject—nothing short of a detailed commentary on the book would give the reader a satisfactorily complete view of the facts. It must, however, be observed that the serious chronological difficulty in Esther ii. 5, 6 (where Mordecai is, apparently said to have been carried captive with Jeconiah) can hardly be removed by maintaining with Canon Rawlinson (contrary to Hebrew usage) that Kish, and not Mordecai, is the person referred to. It must, it would seem, be concluded that the theory that the book of Esther is a strictly historical narrative is not proof at all points against objection. The question then arises, is it a work of pure imagination? This was the view of the 18th century rationalistic critics. Semler, for instance, says, "Illud videtur esse certum, confictam esse universam parabolam, fastus et arrogantiae Judæorum locupletissimum testimonium" (Semler, *Apparatus ad Liberal. Vet. Test. interpr.*, p. 152 sq., quoted by Keil). By this theory, we might at once put a happy end to the guerilla warfare of rationalistic objectors. It is very necessary, however, to see how much is involved in accepting it. For the book of Esther expressly appeals to the authority of the royal Persian chronicles (ii. 23, x. 2) and of a contemporary memoir (ix. 32). If untrue, remarks Canon Rawlinson, the book might easily have been proved to be so at the time when it was published, by reference to those chronicles (*Speaker's Commentary*, iii. 472). The only way to turn the point of this objection would be

to show that the narrative was written subsequently to the fall of the Persian empire, and not earlier than the end of the fourth century, about 150 years after Xerxes. This has been maintained by several eminent critics (e.g. Zunz, Herzfeld, Ewald, Bertheau, Kuenen) on the following grounds. (1) The absence of any reference to the story in the books (or rather book) of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah, in Daniel, in Ecclesiasticus (see chaps. xlv. -1.), or in Philo. (2) The way in which the Persian monarchy is described. A book so far from complimentary in some of its details to a great Persian king cannot, it is urged, have been written during the continuance of his dynasty, any more than the so-called song of Solomon can have been written under the rule of the Solomonic family. True, the opening of Esther portrays in brilliant hues the outward splendour of Ahasuerus's empire, but the very brilliance, and still more the particularity, of the description, indicates that that empire was a wonder of the past, already beginning to be invested with the glamour of fairy-land. The necessity for an explanation of Persian customs (i. 13, viii. 8) is thought to point in the same direction. (3) "The absence of the religious spirit in the writer, or rather the absence of its manifestation. Had the writer lived soon after the events narrated, it is improbable that he would have omitted all [direct] mention of divine providence and the name of God, because the religious feeling had not so far degenerated among the Jewish captives who did not return to their own land with Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah" (Dr Davidson, *The Text of the Old Testament considered*, 1856, p. 609). In the Greek period, on the other hand, we know for certain from Ecclesiastes that the religious spirit was declining, at any rate in some circles, even in Judea. (4) The lateness of the style. This has been carefully investigated by Zunz, who remarks that there are more than fifty expressions which point to a late date, and which include, besides Persisms, three also found (and found only) in Ezra, Nehemiah, Ecclesiastes, one in Nehemiah, Ecclesiastes, and Ps. cxix., one in Chronicles, five in Ecclesiastes, one in Daniel, one in Chronicles and Daniel, one in Nehemiah and Daniel, also six belonging to later Hebrew, two to Aramaic, and four resembling the usage of the Mishna. The value of this argument, however, depends partly on the date which we assign to Chronicles, Ecclesiastes, and Daniel, also on the relation of Ezra and Nehemiah to Chronicles. The weighty reference to the Mishnaic usage remains, however, in full force, however conservative be our decision on the date of Chronicles, &c. We have said nothing at present of the festival of Purim, which, according to Keil, is "the principal evidence of the historical truth of the whole narrative," and which, even according to the more critical Friedrich Bleek, "undoubtedly presupposes the occurrence of what is narrated in our book." To many scholars, however, the connexion of the book of Esther with the festival of Purim is rather a difficulty than otherwise. It is hardly necessary to refer to Mr Tylor for evidence of the tendency to invent stories to account for popular festivals. Dr Kuenen, who speaks as the representative of a growing school, maintains that the book of Esther is through and through unhistorical, that "the explanation it offers of the Purim feast is not taken from the reality, but invented to make that feast popular. A Persian word *pur* meaning lot is quite unknown" (*Religion of Israel*, iii. 148). He then fortifies his position by a reference to the numerous improbabilities which we have already mentioned. According to him, Purim was originally a Persian feast, and was by degrees adopted by the Jews, first in Persia, and then in other countries, and the object of the author of Esther was to make the observance of the feast still more general. He is not, however, prepared with a satisfactory explanation of

the word Purim. Von Hammer's derivation from *furdigán*, the name of a Persian festival, falls through, as Dr Kuenen points out, owing to the fact that *furdigán* was not a spring feast, and, as Purim was kept on the 14th and 15th of the month Adar, a spring feast is obviously required. A more plausible form of the hypothesis adopted by Dr Kuenen is perhaps that of Zunz. The Jews during and after the exile were much influenced religiously by the nations among whom they lived (so at least many critics believe, quoting as instances the belief in the seven archangels and in Azazel). It was the policy of the doctors of the law to adopt as many of the new popular usages as they could, without detriment to the purity of their religion. Purim, a joyous, secular festival, enjoyed (as it still does enjoy) a great popularity among the Jews. The religious authorities, desiring to check the exuberance of its celebration, determined to give it a quasi-consecration by connecting it with an event (real or imaginary) in the history of the nation. They omitted the name of God, not from indifference to religion, but to prevent it from being profaned at the secular celebration to which Purim was liable (cf. Esther ix. 19-22). It must be observed, in conclusion, that while the doctors of the law attached great importance to Purim and to Esther—witness the statement that the men of the Great Assembly "wrote" (? edited) the book of Esther, also the various interpolated passages, and the devotion of an entire Talmudic treatise to the feast of Purim—the sacerdotal authorities (of a more conservative turn) did their utmost to disparage the intrusive festival. No psalms were sung in the temple at the feast of Purim—not even those which were usual at half festivals (see Bloch, *Hellenistische Bestandtheile im biblischen Schriftthum*, pp. 39-41). The first mention of Purim occurs in 2 Macc., xv. 36, where the thirteenth day of Adar is said to have been observed as a festival in memory of the death of Nicanor, "the day before Mardocheus's day." Unfortunately the second book of Maccabees was written little, if at all, before the Christian era, while the first book (of much greater authority) simply says (vii. 49):—"They ordained to keep yearly this day, being the thirteenth of Adar." Would the Jews, asks Dr Zunz, have made a new festival on the 13th, if the 14th were recognized as the feast of Purim? This, however, may well be called hypercriticism. And we may sum up by the remark that if direct historical evidence is deficient for the traditional view of the book of Esther, it is equally deficient for the rival critical theory. Probability is our only guide. Yet even if the book contain a larger or smaller romantic element, it is of real historical value as a record of the Jewish spirit in a little known age, and is edifying even to Christians from its powerful though indirect inculcation of the lesson of divine providence.

See, besides the Introductions to the Old Testament of Keil, Bleek, and Davidson, Baumgarten, *De fide libri Estheræ commentatio historico-critica*, Halle, 1839; Bertheau, *Die Bücher Ezra, Nehemia, und Esther*, Leipzig, 1862; Zunz, *Zeitschrift der deutsch. morgenländ. Gesellschaft*, 1873, p. 684, &c.; Oppert, *Commentaire historique et philologique du livre d'Esther*, Paris, 1864; Herzfeld, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*, Leipzig, 1863, Bd. ii. pp. 1-9, 357-366; Ewald, *History of Israel*, Lond. 1874, vol. v., pp. 230-234; Gratz, "Die Kanonicität des Buches Esther," *Monatsschrift*, 1871, pp. 502-511; Bloch, *Hellenistische Bestandtheile im biblischen Schriftthum*, 1877. (T. K. C.)

ESTHONIA (in German *Esthland*, or more correctly *Ehstland*, in the native language *Wiroma*, "the frontier country," or *Rahvama*, "the country of the Rahwas or Esthonians," in Lettish *Iggam Senna*, probably "the land of the banished"), one of three Baltic or so-called German provinces of Russia, is bounded on the N. by the Gulf of Finland, on the E. by the government of St Petersburg, from which it is separated by the river Narowa, on the S. by Livonia, and on the W. by the Baltic. Inclusive of the islands of Dago, Mohn, and Oesel, it has an area of 7817