

**April 14, 2013**

Fourth Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

### **Esther: Historical Setting**

The story told in the Book of Esther is set during the Persian period, the interval of two centuries between the fall of Babylon to Cyrus in 539 B.C. and Alexander's defeat of Darius III in several battles, notably at Issus in 333 and Gaugamela in 331. During this time the Jews who lived outside the Holy Land were politically free to return if they wished. They did not live in exile, that is to say, but in what in Greek is called Diaspora, "dispersion." The expression indicated some sense that they were living away from home, but it barely camouflaged the fact that they had no serious intention of returning home; for whatever reason, they lived abroad deliberately. Some of their descendents are still there to the present day.

Why was there a Diaspora? Well, during the period of Judah's Babylonian Captivity (597-538)—an exile in the strict sense—most of the deported Jews settled down peaceably in Mesopotamia where their captors had brought them.

They did exactly what Jeremiah had counseled them to do: "Build houses and settle in, plant gardens, and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters—that you may be increased there, and not diminished. And pursue the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its peace you will have peace" (Jeremiah 29:5-7).

Prospering in the land of exile, most of these Jews were reluctant to take leave of it when, in 538, a decree from Cyrus permitted them to return to the Holy Land. Relatively few of the exiles returned from Babylon---perhaps only fifty thousand---during the century after 538, and only a fraction of these---mainly young, unmarried men---came back in the first wave with Zerubbabel.

This means that the greater mass of the Jews remained in the eastern half of the Fertile Crescent, where they had managed to make good lives for themselves during the Exile. They, along with those who fled to Egypt when Jerusalem fell in 587, came to form the Diaspora. Significantly, as I mentioned,

the word is Greek; few Jews could any longer read Hebrew, much less speak it. They adopted Greek as their own international tongue, much as later Jews learned to communicate in a Germanic variant called Yiddish (Juden Deutsch) and a Romance dialect known as Ladino (Latina). (Both these alien languages are written in the square script adopted for Hebrew during the Persian period.)

From the Persian period forward to the present day, the Jews of the Diaspora have always outnumbered the Jewish population of the Holy Land. Even the losses of the Holocaust and the modern formation of the State of Israel have not completely reversed that historical pattern.

The Jews in the Book of Esther, then, belonged to the Diaspora. They lived in the Persian capital, Susa, known to modern archeology as Shushan. The excavations at that site uncovered evidence of great wealth, supporting the indications of prosperity in the book.

The Persian emperor in this story is Ahasuerus, known in classical history by his Greek name, Xerxes (486-465 B.C.). The fourth emperor of Persia and the first to bear this name, he is often called Xerxes the Great. He ruled an empire that covered the entire Fertile Crescent and extended from the Danube River in the northwest to the Indus in the southeast. When Xerxes invaded the Greek mainland in 480, his massive international army included even Jews.

The most famous of his battles, I suppose, was that at Thermopylae later that year. Because the heroism of the small band of Spartan defenders who faced him---and perished---at Thermopylae, Xerxes left a rather unfavorable impression in the West, nor did he improve it by his subsequent burning of Athens. Indeed, Xerxes' unfavorable reputation endures to the present day. (Recall how he was portrayed in that awful movie 300 a few years back.)

There is precious little in the Book of Esther to improve the classical remembrance of Xerxes/Ahasuerus. He is portrayed as a willful man, whose will tolerated opposition from neither wife nor public sentiment. Although Xerxes is not directly blamed for the plot to massacre all the Jews, the reader suspects he could have squelched the idea early if he had a mind to. His presence overshadows the whole story, but he is not, strange to say, one of the dominant personae dramatis. Indeed, we generally find him reduced to acting in situations determined by other characters.

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