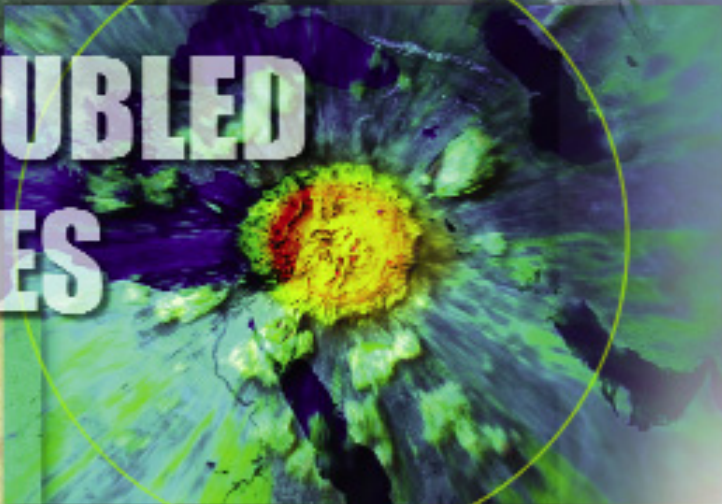


# A Parable for TROUBLED TIMES



**H**istory doesn't repeat itself," Mark Twain once mused. "At best it sometimes rhymes."

If what is happening in Iran is any indication, history seems to be in one of her poetic moods. Today, after all, the country the Bible calls "Persia" is governed by a man who says that "Israel must be wiped off the map;" who proposes to resettle Israel's Jewish population in Canada; who hosts conferences denying what may one day be known as the first holocaust; who boasts about a nuclear program deemed illegal by the international community, a program he promises to use only for "the development of Iran and expansion of peace in the world." And incredibly, an oblivious world accepts Iranian leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's promises of peace while overlooking his warlike words.

The Bible tells a similar story—the story of how the great nation of Persia was nearly hijacked by a madman with plans to destroy all Jews, the story of a wise man who sounded the alarm when others averted their gaze and shut their ears, the story of a hero-in-the-making who wrestled with her purpose in the world and her responsibility to the future.

Amid the rumors of war, the Book of Esther may offer a parable for our time.

## A Hero in Sackcloth

The Book of Esther could just as well have been

called the "Book of Mordecai"—

and perhaps it should have been. After all, it was Mordecai who raised Esther, watched over her like a father, counseled and challenged her, emboldened and encouraged her, interceded for her.

Mordecai took responsibility for his younger cousin, Esther, upon her parents' death. He was morally centered and faithful to God—and stubborn when it came to right and wrong. In fact, it was Mordecai's goodness and stubbornness that caused the drama described in Esther to unfold.

After Esther became queen of Persia, Mordecai visited the royal courtyards daily to make sure she was all right. During one of the visits, he overheard a plot to assassinate the king and dutifully reported it to Queen Esther.

Mordecai could have stayed out of it. After all, Xerxes wasn't his king, but that didn't matter to Mordecai. He knew right from wrong, and he did what was right.

During another visit to the gates outside the king's courtyard, Mordecai refused to bow before a powerful royal official named Haman. "When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor, he was enraged"—so enraged that he resolved "...to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom..." (Esther 3:5-6).

Driven by hate and conceit, Haman persuaded the oblivious Xerxes to issue a death sentence against

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Indeed, when fused together with Iran's burgeoning nuclear program, Ahmadinejad's words move from the realm of the merely appalling to the terrifying. Iran has called for the destruction of Israel for decades.

But since Iran has never possessed the one weapon that has the capacity to erase an entire nation, the threat was just a nightmare. But soon, the nightmare could come to life—U.S. intelligence agencies estimate that Iran could deploy a nuclear weapon in five to eight years. Some Israeli officials estimate just a year.

Is it hard to imagine a nuclear-armed Ahmadinejad giving Israel an ultimatum between a latter-day holocaust and a latter-day Diaspora?

Yet that's not the only nightmare scenario. Launching a war against Iran to deprive it of nuclear weapons could create a nightmare all its own.

- Iran could retaliate by using its arsenal of missiles to strike U.S. bases and allies across the Middle East and even parts of Europe.

- Tehran has already shown its capacity to inflict great harm on coalition forces in Iraq. But as former Iranian leader Hashemi Rafsanjani warns, "If Iran wanted, it could make their problems even worse."

- Iran could block all oil shipments transiting the Persian Gulf, wreaking havoc with the global economy.

- And Iran would not confine its military operations to traditional fields and forms of combat. The fact that Iranian-backed Hezbollah has more agents in the U.S. than Al

Mordecai and his people. "Dispatches were sent by couriers... with the order to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews...." (Esther 3:13). While the city around them trembled in fear, Haman and the king shared a celebratory drink.

Mordecai did the only thing he could do—he traded in his garments for sackcloth, began to intercede for his people and told Esther of Haman's terrible plans. But she initially balked, explaining that "...for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death" (Esther 4:11). Her fears were well-founded. Xerxes had deposed the previous queen simply because she didn't respond to his summons.

Undeterred by Esther's rationalization, Mordecai answered his wavering cousin with both reason and passion. Reminding her that she would not escape Haman's sword and that she had a special duty because of her special place, he finally convinced her to act with words that still pierce our hearts: "...who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14).

With that, Esther asked Mordecai to gather God's people

together to fast on her behalf. "I will go to the king," she vowed, "...if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).

When Esther finally spoke to the king, her words were plain and pointed. "The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman," she explained, courageously confronting her enemy face to face (Esther 7:6). "...Spare my people—this is my request" she declared, finally revealing her Jewish ancestry. "For I and my people have been sold for destruction and slaughter and annihilation" (Esther 7:3-4).

Awakened to Haman's motives and plans, Xerxes repealed Haman's mass-murder sentence and then issued an edict granting "Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves..." (Esther 8:11).

**Nightmares**

Others have noted that God is not mentioned anywhere in the Book of Esther, yet he is everywhere in the story—in Esther's unexpected rise to queen, in Mordecai's timing and words, in Xerxes' sleepless night, in the peoples' prayers, in Haman's undoing.

That gives me a strange sense of peace as I absorb the daily dose of bad news from Iran. Iran has enough oil to meet its energy demands for 256 years. In other words, Iran doesn't need nuclear power.

WE CAN INTERCEDE IN PRAYER FOR OUR LEADERS, FOR OUR WORLD, FOR OUR FRIENDS AND EVEN FOR OUR ENEMIES—ASKING GOD TO EITHER GET US THROUGH THIS LOOMING STORM OR TO STEER US AROUND IT.



Qaeda did before 9/11 should give us pause.

## The Worst

The good news is that there are options other than war. But time is running out. And the success of these options depends on Europe and Japan rising to the occasion.

Why are Japan and Europe so important? They account for one-third of Iran's imports and 45 percent of its exports, which means they can shut off Iran's existing trade channels. The U.S. can offer no such disincentive to Ahmadinejad and his puppet masters. But America can maintain the threat of something worse—namely, the loss of their regime.

Americans, Japanese and Europeans have the leverage to force Ahmadinejad to back down, which could avert a regional war.

As French President Nicolas Sarkozy recently declared, if peace-loving countries don't close ranks and apply stronger sanctions, the consequence will be "an Iranian bomb or the bombing of Iran."

Either alternative, he warns, would be "catastrophic." His foreign minister ominously adds that "It is necessary



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to prepare for the worst. The worst is war."

But leaving the impression that there is disunity among peace-loving nations may make war inevitable. And many obstacles to a peaceful resolution to this crisis remain:

- Russia, which has supplied Iran with the components for its nuclear program, seems intent on blocking any concerted diplomatic undertaking at the United Nations.

- The head of the U.N.'s nuclear watchdog agency is resigned to Iran joining the nuclear club.

- For five years, European nations have talked tough but repeatedly backed away from doing more than issuing warnings. When Iran

flouts the warnings, the Europeans issue more warnings. But this is finally changing. In late 2007, European leaders agreed to join the U.S. in applying what *The Washington Post* called "broad military and economic sanctions," regardless of Russia's actions.

This is where you and I can help. We can intercede in prayer for our leaders, for our world, for our friends and even for our enemies—asking God to either get us through this looming storm or to steer us around it.

Mordecai was an intercessor. He followed the example of Samuel, who "cried out to the Lord on Israel's behalf, and the Lord answered him," and of the psalmist, who beseeched God to "bring to an end the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure."

In the same way, we can ask the Lord to transform or overcome our enemies, to protect our fragile world, to guide our leaders to do what is right and wise.

Don't misconstrue this as an argument that we should ask God to approve America's foreign policy. Our posture should be like Lincoln's in the midst of the Civil War. "My concern," he explained,

"is not whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God's side."

## The Best

Of course, even if we turn to God, he may remain silent. The Bible reminds us that God moves and sometimes doesn't move in mysterious ways.

Joseph went through hell before he became a prince. The Israelites were enslaved for 400 years before God freed them from Pharaoh, and Moses never entered the Promised Land. Jesus escaped Herod's mini-holocaust, yet hundreds of other baby boys did not. The early Church waited expectantly for the Lord to return and rescue them from Roman persecution, and

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2,000 years later believers are still being persecuted in China, the Middle East and Africa. Six million children of Israel were erased before the Allied armies destroyed Hitler's murder machine.

We must remember that we live on the far fringes of understanding the One who created us. "As the heavens are higher than the earth," he reminded Isaiah, "so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9).

But that didn't stop Mordecai from turning to God. His intercession and God's intervention changed Esther's mind and saved countless innocents. Mordecai had the faith to believe that deliverance would come, with or without Esther's help. Esther had the courage to do what was right, no matter the consequences. And we should learn from them.

There is no guarantee that we won't have to endure the trial. As Jesus warned, the storm comes for both the man who builds on rock and the man who builds on sand. To be prepared for the approaching storm in Iran, the best we can do is turn to the Rock.

The grace of God in Jesus Christ is sufficient to deal with any and all situations we will ever face. Trust in him! □

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