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WHO IS AHASUERUS?

Ahasuerus. Who is this king? He appears in the book of Esther, but this Hebrew version of his name only appears there. Was he really like the picture that book gives of him? Should we know him?

The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, says he is Artaxerxes. Josephus, probably based on that translation, says the same thing. Modern scholarship, however, almost universally claims that Ahasuerus is Xerxes the Great. He ruled Persia from 485-465 BC.

If Ahasuerus is Xerxes, and the Hebrew is an approximate transliteration of the Persian version of his name, that might explain some things in the book of Esther. Xerxes inherited power from his father, Darius the Great, of Battle of Marathon fame. His mother was a daughter of Cyrus the Great, who had allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem. (Did you ever notice how many kings of that time called themselves “the Great”? Even a Macedonian who adopted Persian ways after he conquered the world is known by that title.) Xerxes spent much of the first two years of his reign putting down rebellions in Egypt and Babylon. The first chapter of Esther, in which the king banishes Vashti, takes place in the third year of his reign. This might explain the massive party that the king put on, as well as his desire to show off his beautiful queen. This national party may have been ostensibly a celebration of his victories. More importantly, it may have been Ahasuerus’ way of gaining popularity with the populace. It may have been an early attempt at what the Romans later practiced regularly, keeping the people happy with “bread and circuses.” It seems to have worked, at least for a short while.

During the next three years, Xerxes was preoccupied with conquering Greece. When his first attempt to bridge the Hellespont failed, he had the water in the strait flogged and had shackles thrown into the strait. After that he successfully built a bridge into Europe. Xerxes’ army was dealt a blow at Thermopylae, but was successful in capturing Athens. He then lost a battle to the “wooden walls” of the Athenian navy at Salamis, as “predicted” by the Oracle at Delphi. But then, if he had been defeated at the city walls the oracle would still have been right.) He returned home to quell some unrest, but

his army subsequently lost a crushing battle at Plataea. In the seventh year of the reign of Ahasuerus, the king decided to hold a beauty pageant for a new wife. This is the “Miss Persia” pageant that Esther won. Why did it take him four years to replace Vashti? Perhaps it was because he was out of the country fighting the Greeks. Everyone knows that kings would rather go to war than find a new wife.

The book of Esther pictures Ahasuerus as a pawn of his advisors. Memucan tells him how to deal with Vashti. He orders the genocide of the Jews on Haman’s advice, with seemingly little consideration. He even reverses this order at the request of Esther. This does not seem to be the same Xerxes who flogged the ocean into submission. It may be more like the Xerxes that followed the bad advice to fight at Salamis rather than waiting for his armies to destroy the Greeks on land. Again, though, the history of Xerxes may explain his apparent shift in character. During the first years of his reign, Xerxes was flying high. He was the emperor of the eastern world. In the incident with Vashti he followed good advice. Then he went to war with Greece. The war started well, but after Salamis nothing seemed to go right. Xerxes was listening to bad advice, and seemed no longer to trust his own instincts. When he got home, he was so beaten down that he listened to whomever he trusted, regardless of how good their advice truly was. That he virtually disappears from history after the Jews defend themselves and establish the feast of Purim lends credence to the idea that he was a crushed man. The war with Greece took everything out of Xerxes and left the man that appears in the book of Esther.

(*Purim* is March 21st this year.)

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WATCHING WORSHIP

In an interview on a local classical music station, the artistic director of a particular women's vocal group stated that unlike most countries, the American view of music is that it is to be watched or listened to. We go to concerts or listen to radios and compact disks. Most Americans do not think of music in terms of something in which you personally participate or that you personally make. This attitude has even crept into many churches.

History

The earliest church music appears to have been congregational and vocal. Paul told both the Ephesian and Colossian churches to sing. (Eph 5:18-20; Col 3:16) Ability was not a consideration. It did not have to be pleasing to the ear. It was an offer of worship to God from the individual members of the congregation.

As time went by, some churches developed choirs that did some or all of the singing. Whether this was due to a desire for a pleasing sound or due to apathy on the part of the congregation, most people stopped participating actively in the musical aspects of worship. They let other people sing, and became observers. When churches finally started using musical instruments, after

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the church had been in existence approximately 500 years, this only aggravated the problem. Since fewer people could play instruments than could sing pleasantly, a professional corps of worship musicians developed, and more people were content (or forced) to become observers of the professional worship. It was about that time that the Roman Church officially banned the congregation from participating in the musical worship. The natural result has been the tendency the interviewee noted, that Americans in particular and for the most part have lost the desire to participate in music, whether religious or secular. This tendency has continued in many churches, particularly of the "high church" tradition.

Even worse, the attitude spread from just the musical aspect of worship to include other aspects as well. If a professional cadre of musicians was acceptable, why not a professional priesthood? If the congregation could observe the music, why not also the

prayers, testimony, aspects of the Lord's Supper, and public reading of scriptures. The only aspect of congregational worship that seems unaffected was the giving of money, in which everyone is still expected to participate. Two natural consequences seem to have followed. If worship is purely to be participated in by the professionals, why does the congregation even have to be there? People began to believe that they had no direct part in the worship, so attendance dropped. "Let the professionals do the worship for us, and don't bother us," became the attitude. For some who did not go quite that far, the television church developed. More recently we have online churches where you e-mail your prayer requests and send your contribution by PayPal™.

Socialization

Why is all this such a bad thing? What is wrong with television church, for instance? The assembly of the church, and specifically the singing in the church, has two components. If either component can be said to be of lesser importance, perhaps it is the component of worship to God. People can worship individually. God hears our individual prayers as readily as if thought or recited by a group. The advantage of the assembly in worship to God is focus. When in a structured or semi-structured environment, in which a number of people are thinking about God, it is easier for the individual to concentrate on the corporate worship. Granted, many people let their minds wander, but something always brings you back to the idea that you are there for worship. This component may not be lost in watching worship alone. But that emphasizes the second aspect of the assembly. You are not alone.

Many people quote Hebrews 10:25 at this point, saying that we are commanded not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. The point of that assembly, though, is in the preceding verse.

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

Paul tells us that the singing in the assembly of the church is more than worship. "Speaking to yourselves...and making melody in your hearts to the Lord." (Eph 5:19) "Teaching and admonishing one another...singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." (Col 3:16) Yes, singing is worship to God, but it is also directed to one another. When you worship God in song by yourself you are not fulfilling the scripture. Music is

part of the human makeup. We respond to music. We memorize by putting things to music. It is no strange thing that the bards and seanachies of old sung their stories and genealogies. There are many places in the world today where that tradition still lives. We teach one another in song. We don't need to teach God. We do need to teach and encourage one another. In those churches where congregational singing is still practiced, how many people remember what the preacher said later that day? How many still have a song in their head?

One can sing along with the television. Sometimes people are embarrassed to do so. Even then, they are only teaching themselves. God gave us the church, and participation in the church, so that we can encourage one another. Perhaps most churches have lost sight of that. We build auditoriums (the meaning is a place to hear) rather than places to encourage. When we sing, if we sing, as a congregation it is usually with everyone looking the same direction. How can you say that you are admonishing one another without looking the other person in the eye? Church architecture has been influenced by the professional mode of worship.

Watching Worship

Worship is a natural reaction to God's character, power, and personality. When we let the professionals do the worship, we are telling God that we don't recognize him for what he is. When we stop worshipping and start watching others worship, we are lessened thereby.

The words translated worship carry the idea of bowing or prostrating oneself before the greater. People bowed to the king. The typical way of doing this in the Middle East, then as now, is to kneel on both knees, then bow until the forehead, hands, and knees are touching the ground. This posture ensures that the one worshipping acknowledges their inferiority. One cannot feel superior when eating the dust.

Our worship is an acknowledgement of the superiority of God. Does God need to know that he is superior? Hardly. But he needs to know that we know that he is superior. "For thou shalt worship no other god: for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God." (Ex 34:14)

When Americans (or Europeans or anyone else) take the attitude that music in worship is something to be watched rather than participated in, they are saying that others may acknowledge God's superiority, but they don't need to. At first some may even say that they are participating in the worship by watching worship. Such spiritual voyeurism soon pales, and watched worship becomes something to be endured rather than acknowledged.

Of what value is watched worship? There may be some, but little in comparison to participatory worship.

When Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," (Acts 20:35) he knew that it is more blessed to give, seeing the result, than to give from compulsion or without even seeing the gift. So it is in worship. When we watch others perform our worship for us, we are like the athlete that who sets up a charitable foundation as a tax write-off and then practically forgets its existence. We claim that we are worshipping, but we fail to get the benefit of actually acknowledging God's superiority. We don't really know that worship has been accomplished. When we participate, particularly in song, we are like the athlete who interacts with the recipients of the money and sees the good he is doing. Watching worship is like trying to get the thank-you note without having contributed to the gift.

It's not all like that

There is still a tradition of participatory music in worship. Primitive Baptists and the churches of Christ, particularly, use only congregational singing. Other Baptists and some Restoration Movement churches have

God doesn't need to know that he is superior; he needs to know that we know he is superior.

gone to a blend of choral and congregational singing. Thus it is difficult for some to comprehend the idea that Americans primarily watch music. The tradition of participatory singing is still strong in some churches.

Some have said that the churches of Christ and the Baptists have played a major role in preserving four-part harmony. About the only place you will still find shape notes (notes with different shapes for different values on the scale) are in the songbooks published for use in the Church of Christ. But then, there is little wonder in these things. The so-called evangelical congregations put so much emphasis on personal practice of one's Christianity that the emphasis on personal worship is only natural. Even in some churches with a strong choral tradition the movement today is back toward congregational involvement.

When we worship together, rather than watch worship together, God is praised more fully. He can't help but like that.

WALKING AWAY FROM GOD

Avraham and God were sitting in the shade of the tent flap, talking. God was in the process of telling Avraham something important. Maybe it was the meaning of the universe; maybe it was how to accomplish a lasting world peace. Whatever they were discussing, while God was mid-sentence Avraham said, "Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, please wait right here for your servant." (Gen 18:3) Then he walked away from God. Imagine the effrontery. This is the Creator of the Universe. This is the One that promised you a son in your old age. This is God. And Avraham chooses to walk away from him during a conversation? Moreover, he even asks the Lord of Armies to wait for *him*. What could cause one of the most righteous followers of God in history to do such a thing?

He saw three travelers. That is it. That is all. God was just going to have to wait while he went to wait on three hot, weary, dusty, smelly wanderers. And God let him. God waited while he slaughtered, dressed, and cooked a calf. God sat and watched Sarah bake bread. God calmly sat by while Avraham stood waiting on these three guests until they were done eating a sumptuous meal. The God of gods, who was about to tell one of his few followers that his nephew was facing certain destruction, waited while a simple man played host to some travelers.

Why? Why did God not tell Avraham to hurry, he had something important to say? Why did he not just roast the calf with a word? Why did he not tell Avraham that if he set one foot out of the shade of the tent he would smite him dead? Maybe it was because God is patient. Even more, maybe it was because Avraham was doing what he had to do and still claim to be a follower of God.

Hospitality was a part of who Abraham was. It was his nature. God knew this, and admired it. Hospitality, a lover of strangers, was important to Abraham, because it was important to God. How did he know that these three were really angels of God? How could he know that God may even have had them appear at just that moment? He didn't and he couldn't. The scripture doesn't even make it clear that Abraham ever knew that these three were not mere men.

We can know that if Abraham had not done just as he did, God would have been displeased. We can suspect, even, that this was a test. Even after all that Abraham did, God still asked the travelers if he should tell Abraham what would happen. (Gen 18:17-19) It was apparently Abraham's hospitality that showed God that he would truly merit being the father of many people.

There are those today who are not children of Abraham. There is the person who passes someone on the road in obvious need of help, just because it might make him "late for church." A friend says that the only time he can study Bible with you is on Sunday morning, so you say you just can't do it (or, almost as bad, just ask him to go with you). Worship is important. Assembling with the saints is supremely important (Heb 10:24-25) But God understood when Abraham walked away from him to serve others. God created us for good works. (Eph 2:10) What would he think if we refused to do what we were created for, and used him as an excuse? He commands otherwise. "Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift." (Matt 5:24) Hospitality is greater than mere worship. Hospitality is one of the greatest forms of worship.

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