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Esther and Our Lady

By RONALD A. KNOX

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR . . .

One of England's foremost converts, professor and apologist, chaplain, retreatmaster, biblical scholar and translator, author of a wide variety of books for all classes of people, Monsignor Ronald A. Knox was undoubtedly the most widely-known English clergyman in the United States until the time of his death last August. His many scholarly and popular works are too well-known to need any enumeration here.

The present reprint taken from the author's Retreat for Priests (Sheed and Ward, New York, 1946) is a brilliant exposition of our Lady's intercessory power.

A previous reprint (number 41) featured Msgr. Knox's sermon on Our Lady's Serenity.

(published with ecclesiastical approval)
ESTHER AND OUR LADY

By RONALD A. KNOX

This law is not made for thee, but for all others. Esther XV. 13. Remember the days of thy low estate and speak to the king for us, and deliver us from death. Esther XV. 2.

The promises made by Almighty God to his chosen people were, so far as the material part of them was concerned, conditional promises. The coming of the Messiah was an absolute promise; it was part of the fore-ordained purpose of God. But that the people of Israel should live secure from foreign aggression, that they should have dominion over their neighbours, that they should possess in perpetuity the fertile land of Chanaan—all that was conditioned upon their own actions. I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people—if the Jews ceased to recognize the unique majesty of Almighty God, if they fell into idolatry, and worshipped other gods besides him, then the covenant was retracted, and he was no longer pledged to protect or to redeem them. Again and again this situation arose, until finally, some seven hundred years before the beginning of our era, foreign conquerors took captive, first the ten apostate tribes and then the true Jews of Juda, and carried them all away to the East, where they lived in exile for nearly two centuries.

God utilizes our faults; it was not without his intent that his people thus became scattered among the nations. For he knew that, as long as they dwelt in their own country and held closely to their own home life, the Jews would be the last people on earth to exercise a missionary influence, and so prepare the way for the preaching of his gospel. “For this reason,” says the canticle of Tobias, “hath he dispersed you among the nations who know him not, that you may tell forth his marvellous works, and make them to know that there is no other God Almighty, save him alone.” In order that our Lord’s crucifixion in an obscure province at one corner of the Roman Empire might have a world-wide repercussion in its influence on men’s hearts, it was necessary that the world should be sprinkled with little colonies of Jewish citizens, keeping alive their own national traditions and yet in touch, to a certain extent, with their Gentile neighbours. That end was
secured by the captivity. But it was secured not without ill-feeling. The Jews have no instinct of colonization; they neither impose on others a culture of their own, nor acclimatize themselves perfectly as the citizens of an alien kingdom. Their stubborn independence, which is their chief religious virtue, is their chief political drawback. And accordingly, not once nor twice in the world's history, the Jewish people has been threatened with extinction by neighbours piqued at the insularity of its outlook, and jealous of its commercial success.

One of these crises happened, it would seem, at a time, not certainly identified, when the whole Eastern world lay under the dominion of Persia. Under the reign of Assuerus, a plot had been hatched against the Jews by their enemies, and all preparations had been made for a pogrom which was to cover the whole extent of the Persian empire. The facts were public; the Jewish people was in mourning, its adversaries triumphant. In that crisis, two influences saved God's people from destruction. A Jew, Mardochoaeus, had preserved the king's life by giving timely information of a plot laid against him; and his name had been enrolled, according to Persian custom, among those who were described as "the King's benefactors." And his niece, Esther, had pleased the king by her beauty, and had been publicly acclaimed as his queen. But there was a difficulty to be overcome. The good service Mardochoaeus had done was, it is true, on record, but he had no means of recalling it to the king's memory. No means, unless his niece Esther would act for him; and she, in her turn, was cramped by the etiquette of the Court. It was not lawful for her to enter the royal presence unless she were summoned to it; and the penalty for a breach of this ordinance was death. Esther, vanquishing her own fears for the sake of her fellow-countrymen, made bold to enter the presence unbidden. She received a royal welcome: "What is the matter, Esther? I am thy brother, fear not; thou shalt not die, for this law is not made for thee, but for all others." So she obtained her audience and won her suit; and the Jews, instead of being massacred, were in a position to take vengeance on their persecutors.

Why am I telling you this story? From other incidents in the Old Testament, however crude their atmosphere, however primitive their setting, it may be possible for us to derive moral exhortation. But these intrigues of the harem, these tales of plot and counterplot in the corrupt politics of an
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oriental despotism—what message have they for us, what instruction can they convey? I am only choosing this story out of a dozen others I might have chosen, to illustrate the principle, familiar to Christian piety, that there is a mystical significance in the Old Testament everywhere; and that, above all, the history of the Jewish people foreshadows and typifies the glories of our Blessed Lady. The Old Testament is, largely, the record of barbarian times; blood flows freely in its chronicles, and there is treachery, and violence, and lust, and crafty revenge; there are dull passages, too, long lists of names, and prescriptions about ceremonial ordinances which have ceased to have any interest for us; there are interminable moral precepts, and prophecies baffling in their obscurity. But through this tangled skein runs a single golden thread; between these soiled pages lies, now and again, a pressed flower that has lost neither its colour nor its sweetness. That thread, that flower, is the mention, by type and analogue, of her whom all generations of Christendom have called blessed, the Virgin of Virgins, the Queen of Heaven, the holy Mother of God.

It is not wonderful that it should be so. For our Lady is, after all, the culmination of that long process of selection, of choosing here and rejecting there a human instrument suited to his purpose, which is so characteristic of God’s dealings with his ancient people. I think we can observe, throughout the whole of that process, two principles at work. One is, that God chooses, every now and again, the unlikely candidate, that one we should not have chosen; chooses the younger son rather than the elder, the despised character rather than the prominent character. You see, he will show us that grace is free; that his choice falls upon this human instrument or that, without any antecedent merits on their part to account for it. And at the same time, he proves that his choice was justified; as the history of their dealings unfolds itself, we realize that the unlikely candidate was the right candidate, corresponds with the grace given and, not under compulsion but with free election of the will, seconds God’s purposes and proves a ready accomplice for his salutary design. God’s grace and man’s free will corresponding with it—that ancient mystery is illustrated at every turn of the Old Testament and find its ideal illustration in the life of our Lady herself.

The promises were made to Abraham’s seed—nothing was said about his wife Sara; was it impossible, then, that an illegitimate child should inherit? Here is Ishmael, a sturdy son of the desert; will he not suffice for
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God’s purposes, since Sara is barren? Oh that Ishmael might live before thee! But no; we must allow God to do things in his own way; Ishmael is rejected, and the promise is not fulfilled until, out of due time, in the extreme old age of his parents, Isaac is born. Isaac again has two sons, this time both legitimate sons, yet here again the selective process is at work. Even before the children are born it is prophesied that the elder shall serve the younger. And so it is; Jacob is chosen, not the world’s candidate, not the more vigorous character, to all outward appearance, and yet the choice is justified. Jacob has twelve sons; on whom will the choice fall? On Ruben, the eldest? No, unstable as water, he shall not excel; no, not on him. On Benjamin, then, the youngest, his father’s darling, the child of the beloved Rachel? No, not on him. On Joseph, surely, the boy who was sold into slavery and became the governor of all Egypt—he, surely, is pointed out by his career as the ancestor of the Messiah? No, the choice is not to fall on him. It is the treacherous, bloodthirsty Juda who is selected this time—a choice that was justified later, when his descendants conquered the most difficult and most secure fastnesses of the Canaanitish country. A king is appointed, and he comes of the tribe of Benjamin; is this, then, to be a reversal of God’s plan that royalty should belong to the tribe of Juda? No, God allows him to lead his people for a time to victory, but only for a time; this is not the man after God’s own heart. At last a man is found after God’s own heart, the son of Jesse in Bethlehem of Juda; but once more it is not the likely candidate. Jesse’s eldest son, Eliab, appears before the prophet Samuel, who supposes at once that this is the Lord’s anointed; but no, we are not to look on his countenance, nor on the height of his stature, because God has rejected him. Seven sons of Jesse pass before Samuel, and still the horn of oil has not done its work. Is there no other? Yes, there is a young one; a mere boy, who has been left to look after the sheep. So David is brought in: and the Lord said, Arise, and anoint him, for this is he. And among David’s sons too, it was not Absalon or Adonías, princes who could lead a people into rebellion; it was the peaceful Solomon on whom the lot of the kingdom fell. Always God sees the human agent he wants, and makes him what he wants him to be.

In what, then, does all this long, careful process of selection culminate? By two separate streams the blood of David came down to Zorobabel, the hero of Israel’s return from captivity. After that, it will have crossed and
recrossed; we cannot even tell for certain the name of St. Joseph's father. Nor do we know in what degree of relationship St. Joseph stood to Our Blessed Lady. We only know that somehow, through cadet branches, that royal lineage came down to the second Eve, and the cycle of Old Testament history was complete. To what had the divine promises looked forward? To Solomon, the wisest of all princes? To Zorobabel, the deliverer of his people? No, to one village girl, a shepherd's daughter and a carpenter's bride. She is the culmination of all that process; for in her, human nature reached its highest dignity, to greet the divine condescension of the Incarnate. In her, as nowhere else, God had found the human instrument suited to his purpose; the worthy receptacle of a grace that had not dwelt on earth since Adam lost his paradise. The work of selection is consummated; mankind stands ready for its Redeemer.

And, as she is the culmination of the Old Testament, so Christian devotion has found in the Old Testament titles and symbols everywhere that can be referred to her. She is the second Eve; in her the serpent's head is crushed. She is the new Ark of our salvation, ready to repopulate the world with the seed of grace. She is Jacob's ladder, by which our prayers go up, and graces come down upon us in return. Her Virginity is the bush Moses saw in the desert, burning ever yet never consumed. She is the ark of the New Covenant, where God keeps tryst with man; she is Aaron's rod—the single bloom of innocence that sprang from our corrupt nature. As Rahab betrayed Jericho to Josue, so through her Jesus our Saviour entered the rebellious citadel of man's heart. She is Gedeon's fleece, wet with the dew of heaven while all the ground was dry. She is the king's daughter, of whom David sang, and the faithful Sulamite of the Canticles, and Respha the daughter of Aia, weeping for her sons that were crucified. She is the Rod of Jesse, and the well of living waters, and the gate shut up, save for the prince. Daughter and Crown of the Old Testament, what wonder if patriarchs, and kings, and prophets spoke of her?

On the feast of her birthday, the gospel is a long string of names, all the names of those ancestors she shared with St. Joseph. Do you ever wonder, as they are read, why we should pay so much attention to them—Aram begetting Aminadab, and Aminadab begetting Naasson, and Naasson begetting Salmon? Well, of course, it is appropriate that St. Matthew should begin in that way. We may find it sticky reading, but it is this sticky page
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which joins the New Testament onto the Old. But for myself I like to think
of this long list of names as a list of the names our Blessed Lady forgot.
"Harken, O daughter, and consider, and incline thy ear; forget also thy own
kindred, and thy father's house." When we think of St. Joachim's house-
hold, we must remember that it was a family which had come down in
the world. We saw David, the shepherd boy, raised up to be King of Israel,
and now we see St. Joachim, descended from so many kings, brought low
again and taking up the call of a shepherd—back at the old trade. Very
often, if you meet some member of a family which has come down in the
world, you will find that he, or more probably she, is apt to think a good
deal about those important ancestors who enjoyed the family fortunes; there
will be books containing the family history; there will be books containing
family trees, and the pathetic little drawing-room will be decorated with
prints of the portraits by Kneller and Romney that were sold long ago. Was
our Lady like that? They had called her Mariam, and they probably thought
that the name meant "Princess." I know the scholars say it does not, but
St. Joachim, probably, was not much of a scholar. Did he, perhaps, choose
this popular name, which comes in the pedigree of the Herods about the
same time, with a sort of holy irony, to remind himself and his neighbours
of the height from which the family had fallen?

Our Lady was not like that. We know, from her own words, what she
thought about it all. Surely that is the point of the verse, "He has put down
the mighty from their seat, and exalted the lowly." What have the mighty
got to do with it (we naturally ask)? Why, surely our Lady is referring to
those ancestors of hers, who had once been kings. It would have passed
almost without comment, if God had chosen a princess to be the Mother
of the Christ. How much more impressive, that he should have put down
the mighty line of David from its royal throne, and then have chosen a
descendant of theirs, born in a shepherd's cottage, to be the Queen of
Heaven! No, our Lady did not waste her time in meditating on the glories
of the past, like those people we were talking about. She was, if I may
dare to put it in that way, so splendidly sensible: knew so well how to make
the best of things. We know that our Blessed Lord was born in a stable.
How do we know that? St. Luke does not say so; you will not find the word
"stable" in the New Testament at all. No, the fact comes out (as it were),
inaudverently; "she brought forth a son, her first-born, and laid him in a
manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” Can’t you hear our Lady saying that? “Unfortunately there was no room in the inn; so I had to put him in a manger” as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

We value, then, this story of Mardochoeus and Esther because we find in it a type of our Lady’s position in the economy of grace. How often a face or a scene arrests us, only because it bears some resemblance to a face or a scene we love! So it is with these Old Testament figures; they borrow their interest from the future. Like the people of the Jews, the Church of God has its enemies and its detractors; its peace is continually threatened by the world’s hatred for its strictness of principle. And, when times of trouble come upon us, we too would win a royal audience; we would ask redress from our grievances from the King of kings. As the Jews could plead on their own behalf the loyal act of Mardochoeus, so we would plead before God, our one hope of pardon, the all-sufficient sacrifice of his Son. But who will plead it for us? It is not that we distrust his goodness; but, conscious of our need and of our own unworthiness, we would find some advocate who has a better claim on his attention than ourselves. Who has a better right to stand in God’s royal Presence than our Blessed Lady? The law which included us all under the curse of original sin was a law made for all others, but not for her. Who else dare touch the sceptre that sways a universe?

And if the Church, rich in the merits of so many saints, still has recourse first of all to her, still prefixes her name to every solemn invocation, what of ourselves, so unventuresome in our faith, so conscious of weakness and of past failure? Shall we not too call her in as an advocate for our private needs, and of our own unworthiness? The Queen of Heaven, yet she is a woman, of the same fashioning as ourselves. We say to her, as Mardochoeus said to Esther, “Remember the days of thy low estate; and do thou speak to the king for us, and deliver us from death.” We have all of us this instinct about our Blessed Lady, that she is not merely the Mother of all our fallen race, but the Mother of each individually; not our Mother, but my Mother. Protestants sometimes laugh at us because we address ourselves, now to our Lady of Perpetual Succour, now to our Lady of Good Counsel, now to our Lady of Lourdes, and so on, as if they were so many different people. But the case is much worse than that, if they only knew;
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every individual Catholic has a separate our Lady to pray to, his Mother, the one who seems to care for him in so many difficulties, as if she had no other thought or business in heaven but to watch over him.

Let us commit to her, then, the outcome of this retreat, entrust to her keeping whatever lights and graces we have received in the course of it, as children hand over to their mother some coin that has been given to them, because they know they would only lose it if they tried to keep it for themselves. We shall forget, sometimes, to pray for this or that grace, according to our resolutions; she will not forget to offer the petition for us, if we will take it to her now. Let us say the Salve Regina in her honour, meditating it to ourselves as we go.

Hail, holy Queen—crowned in heaven by the piety of your ascended Son, crowned on earth by the gratitude of a million suppliants. How little you regarded your royal lineage as a daughter of the house of David! “Hearken, O daughter, and consider, incline thy ear, and forget thy people and thy father’s house: instead of thy fathers thou shalt have children, whom thou mayest make princes in all lands”— you are crowned, not by some accident of birth, for the sake of those saints who derive from you their spiritual succession. Hail, holy Queen, still remembering in the courts of heaven your low estate, the anxieties of womanhood and the simple cares of home!

Mother of Mercy—if it be true that we inherit from our parents not our bodily features only, but something also of the stuff of our minds, the make-up of our temperaments, then he, whose sacred Humanity was perfectly human, must have received from you some gift of human tenderness. At least, as his Mother, you brought into the world Incarnate Mercy; at least, by your own compassion, you have won the title Mater Misericordiae!

Hail, our Life, our Sweetness, and our Hope—our Life, because we owe all our supernatural activities to our incorporation into him, who lay in your Womb and was nursed at your Breast; our Sweetness, because there are times of melancholy and spiritual dullness when nothing will throw a ray of light across our minds except the thought of a trusted friend; and, of all the friends we have, none is more trusted, none dwells in the memory more gratefully, than you; our Hope, because life has shadows ahead of us, and the shadow of death lies behind those, and beyond death itself, terrors
still more formidable, unless you will relieve our cares, brighten our death-beds, and safeguard our passage into eternity.

To thee do we cry, poor banished children of Eve—there is a duality of purpose in us, that still spoils our best aspirations and betrays our highest resolutions. Victims of a baffled hope and an unsatisfied desire, we, Eve’s children, carry in our troubled foreheads the sentence of our exile; we cannot find ourselves here. But you knew nothing of that mortal weakness, that divided purpose; Eve’s daughter, inheriting from her what no other daughter of hers ever inherited, her innocence, you replaced her and made atonement for her fault, God’s perfect creature of woman as God meant woman to be.

To thee do we send up our sighs, mourning and weeping in this vale of tears—God has given us in our mortal lives so much that is gracious, so much that is comforting, the beauty of storm and sunset, books and music, and the love of friends and the smiles of children; and yet, how few steps we take on our daily path without meeting some disappointment in our own lives, some tragedy in the lives of others! All this reminds us of our fallen state; earth’s joys may suffice us for the moment, but in time of trouble we fly for consolation to you.

Turn then most gracious Advocate, thine eyes of mercy towards us—we see you pictured, standing by the Crucifix, with all your eyes and all your soul directed upwards in compassionate regard towards him who hangs there. But let us not think of you as turning away your eyes from earth, away from the tragedies of human sorrow and the crucifixions of human injustices; rather, look upon all these, and then turn back your eyes, troubled with compassion for our human misfortunes, to him.

And after this our exile, shew unto us the blessed Fruit of thy Womb, Jesus—we see you again, bending over the manger at Bethlehem, uniting in one ecstasy of love the pride of a Mother with the adoration of a Creature. He who dwells in heaven, the first-born of all Creation, came down to earth and was a Child for our sakes; we in our turn, children of earth, pray that we may be exalted to the joys of heaven; through the merits you won for us by sharing his Calvary on earth, we hope, in heaven, to share your Bethlehem with you. O clement, O loving, O sweet Virgin Mary! Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.
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