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History Lessons from Esther

The Leopold Von Ranke Lecture delivered at the Phi Alpha Theta Induction Ceremony
Olivet Nazarene University's chapter of the History Honor Society
Presentation by Dr. Kent Olney, October 1, 2023

I am honored to be invited to deliver the Leopold Von Ranke Lecture at this year's induction ceremony for Phi Alpha Theta, America's History Honor Society.

Let me begin by making a few comments regarding my own interest and background in studying history:

1. While my doctoral work at the University of Oregon was in sociology, it was in a class called "Historical Methods," in the fall of 1993 – 30 years ago this semester – that I discovered my research passion. As a class, we were taken to the University's archives to explore and come up with a project. I discovered there several documents on eugenics and turned that discovery into a study of the eugenics movement and its impact on the American Deaf Community, between 1880 and 1930. My resulting 20-page paper eventually contributed to my 478-page doctoral dissertation, entitled *Religion and the American Deaf Community: A Sociological Analysis of the Chicago Mission for the Deaf, 1890-1941*. By the way, that same dissertation includes a 25-page chapter entitled "Historical Methods." So whereas most sociologists do surveys, resulting in quantitative data; I followed in the footsteps of another German historian, Max Weber, and immersed myself in historical sociological research, resulting in rich qualitative analysis.

2. My interest in history has been shared by several family Members. My oldest son majored in History and has done archival work at two distinct universities. My youngest son majored in Political Science – studying here at Olivet under Dr. David Van Heemst. And my niece, Amanda, a 2007 Olivet graduate, majored in social science education, before going on to Cornell University and earning her Ph.D. in Russian history. She now lives in St. Petersburg, Russia.

It's not much of a stretch to say history is part of the Olney family DNA.

3. But perhaps my best history story dates back to when I was a senior in college. My wife and I married just before our senior year, and then took a course together on the American Civil War. As we approached the end of the semester, we had one more exam just before the final. Our assignment was to read the 1974, 800-page book, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, written by Columbia University historian and prolific author, Eugene Genovese. Our professor told us that anyone who earned an “A” on the *Roll, Jordan, Roll* exam, would be exempt from the final. I didn’t have time to read the book because I was working a job and studying hard for a Greek class. But my wife read the entire book, cover to cover. Then she told me the thesis of the book was “paternalism,” with an emphasis on how both slaves and slaveowners responded to that paternalism. Test day came, and we wrote our thoughts in blue books for a full hour. I earned an “A” and didn’t have to take the final; my wife earned a “B” and had to take it. The results nearly led to another civil war – within our own household. My wife, understandably, was not too happy.

Well, no one came today to hear my history stories. Rather, we have come to consider a statement made by Leopold Von Ranke, the German historian known for emphasizing primary sources and archival research – that which had sparked my interest back in graduate school. Von Ranke said: *“Every epoch is immediate to God, and its value is not based on what emerges from it, but on its very existence.”*

I will return to that thought, but first I would like to share some brief observations under the general title: **“History Lessons from Esther.”** Yes, I am referring here to the Esther of the Old Testament, whose story takes us back to the Persian Empire around 500 B.C. This little 10-chapter book, *Esther*, has much to teach us about history.

My observations can be summarized in 4 two-word sentences:

1. Truth matters.

The book of Esther begins with simple Hebrew word, *wayhî*. It’s a common word that literally means “And it was.” The KJV most often translates it, “Now it came to pass.” The NIV begins Esther with these words: “This is what happened.” This

singular Hebrew word makes a truth statement. We do not read “once upon a time in a far off land,” which is how we begin our fairy tales and fables. Rather, the word is *wayhî*, “*and it was.*” In other words, the author is claiming what is written here is factual, true, and accurate.

Interestingly, several OT books begin with the same word: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, Esther, Ezekiel, and Jonah. Beginning these books with *wayhî* is a way of intentionally drawing the reader’s attention to what was considered true, not allegory. Sometimes Hebrew writers didn’t even bother to interpret the word. It existed as a marker that said: *pay attention, for what I’m about to tell you is true.*

Though *wayhî* is a small word, we ought not overlook its importance. For truth matters. Of course, you historians get that. That’s the task of history: to speak truth. The 20th-century Russian dissident and historian, Aleksandr Solzhenistyn was exiled to the West in 1974. His parting words to the people of Russia were captured in an essay, wherein he admonished the Russian people to “live not by lies.” He was referencing, of course, the ideology pushed by a repressive communist government. In his “Live Not By Lies” essay, Solzhenistyn wrote: “the simplest and most accessible key to our . . . liberation lies right here: Personal non-participation in lies.”

Truth matters. It always does. Don’t allow lies to dictate your life.

The reality is: You . . . young Christian historians are the last best hope when it comes to truth telling. For if you don’t, who will?

Esther opens with a profound reminder that what we the readers are about to encounter is credible and historical: *wayhî And it was! This is what happened.* Consistently make truth the central feature of your life and work.

2. Years matter.

Another lesson Esther teaches is this: years matter. We in the 21st century are conditioned to live *in* and *for* moments. It’s really not our fault, for we have grown up in a world obsessed with here-and-now experiences, that emphasizes

the instantaneous. Perhaps our smart phones illustrate this best. Everything is instantly at our fingertips: texting, social media, photos, world news, contacts, calculators, cameras, maps, movies, weather reports, scores of ballgames, you name it. No waiting necessary! In fact, if we have to wait too long, we feel compelled to upgrade to a new model. In such a world as this – with instant information available at a click – who cares about years? “Live for today” is our motto! The expression “that’s so last year” has come to reflect our disdain for whatever is not immediately accessible and in front of us.

Esther is a short story, containing only 10 chapters. And when we read it the action moves so quickly that we get the feeling everything happened immediately – perhaps within 24 or 48 hours. But the careful reader will discover the events outlined here cover many years, not just moments, hours, days, or even weeks.

In fact, that’s one of the central, though forgotten, themes of all Scripture: the God who is capable of the instantaneous miracle, most often works in years. Need evidence?

- Consider Abraham: you’ll have a son . . . in 25 years!
- Consider Moses: these people will get out of the desert . . . in 40 years!
- Consider Isaiah: tell those people the Messiah will come . . . in 700 years!
- Consider the disciples: Jesus will return . . . but it’s now been 2,000 years!

Years matter; they are a gift from God. Don’t minimize them. Don’t grow impatient waiting for them. The historian, of all people, should appreciate years. They are important in the economy and time of God, signaling what He is doing on this earth. Again, the Christian historian is uniquely equipped with a long-range perspective that helps us understand the valuable treasure found in years.

3. Obscurity matters.

Granted, on the surface this seems to be an oxymoron, for the dictionary tells us that to be “obscure” is to be unknown, unnoticed, or unimportant. By definition, then, we might say obscurity is that which does *not* matter. Yet I want to suggest that obscurity does matter to two people: (1) God and (2) the historian.

God specializes in seeking and using the obscure. For example,

1. He used the youngest, most-unimpressive-looking brother, David.
2. He showed up in small villages like Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Capernaum.
3. He called unsuspecting people like Mary and a group of Galilee fishermen.

Esther fits that category. The story takes place in a remote place called Susa – a citadel of the Persian Empire, in what is now modern day Iran. This was hardly the center of Judeo-Christian history; and was far from cosmopolitan hubs like Jerusalem, Athens, or Rome – all of which are much more familiar to us. Further, the book of *Esther* seems to be filled with unimportant details like these:

- A Persian queen gets ousted from her throne.
- A Jewish woman gets selected from a Miss Persia contest to replace her.
- That same Jewish woman happens to have a cousin named Mordecai.
- The cousin happens to hear about an assassination plot against the King.
- The plot gets recorded and the Persian king eventually reads the report.
- The whole chain of events ends up saving the lives of untold number of Jews. And that event is still celebrated today. The Jews call it *Purim*.

We have here an obscure place, with obscure people, and dozens of obscure details and events. God takes them all and weaves them together for His purpose. Yes, God thinks that what some people deem obscure really matters.

But so, too, does the historian. In a world of selfies and personal home pages, where “friends” and “likes” measure meaning and success, the historian stands out by still finding delight in what is hidden and obscure. Historians bring to light what other have overlooked or missed. Obscure documents, artifacts, and places matter to the historian. In fact, one might argue that historians would be out of a job without obscure objects to discover and interpret.

For example, my own historical study in the early 1990s began by reading an obscure book recommended to me by an obscure acquaintance from Maryland. I later found many of my primary sources in an obscure attic in Wheaton, IL, which led to visiting an obscure cabin at Delevan Lake, WI, and an obscure gravesite in Willow Springs, IL (a SW suburb of Chicago). One obscure discovery led to another, until an entire story was told.

So yes, obscurity matters to God and historians. Value, meaning, texture, and clarity are found therein. The Christian historian, of all people, knows better than to dismiss what initially appears to be obscure.

4. Heroes matter.

Finally, Esther teaches us that heroes matter. In the last chapter of Esther – whose 3 verses form the shortest closing chapter of any book in the Bible – we read that Mordecai is remembered and recorded in the history books of the Medes and Persians. Mordecai became an adopted hero to the Persians. And of course we are still telling the story of Esther 2,500 years after the events happened. She, too, remains a hero; and the book that bears her name is a perpetual reminder that heroes matter.

Just what is a hero? The dictionary defines a hero as one who is admired and remembered for courage, achievements, or noble qualities.

We humans want heroes. Our bookshelves are lined with their stories. From those stories we receive inspiration, encouragement, hope, and guidance. We are better people for having heroes who uphold standards of virtue, integrity, and persistence against all odds. And it's historians, like you are preparing to become, who write their stories. May that process never stop. Every generation seeks heroes.

My hope and prayer is that some of you will do the hard work of writing and introducing us to some new heroes – heroes that set a high standard for us to emulate in the days and years ahead. But more than that, I hope you won't just write about heroes; I hope you will aspire to be one. For heroes matter! And they are needed today as much as ever.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me return to Leopold Von Ranke's statement: *"Every epoch is immediate to God, and its value is not based on what emerges from it, but on its very existence."*

At least three affirmations are found in this statement that I suspect we can all embrace:

1. God is aware of and present in every epoch. No era escapes His notice; no time period is devoid of His sovereignty. The life of Esther in ancient Susa and the life of a 21st-century student at Olivet are both under His rule.
2. Every epoch has inestimable value. That should encourage every historian, for every historical period is significant to God. He is Lord of all times and seasons – from the Persian Empire to the American experiment.
3. Existence, by itself, implies and confers value. Since God is the Creator of all that exists, we can declare with confidence that significance is rooted in “being,” not in achievement. God cared for Esther, whether she was queen or not; and God cares for you whether you make the Dean’s list or not.

Finally, I want to submit to you that truth, years, obscurity, and heroes – those lessons we identified from the book of Esther – are the building blocks of every epoch over which our Sovereign God rules. In a sense, these are the raw materials of the historian’s craft.

- **Truth** is what historians pursue.
- **Years** provide historians with context.
- **Obscurity** awaits the historian’s unmasking.
- **Heroes** inspire historians to tell their story in every era.

And no one is better equipped to understand and interpret these matters to the next generation than a Christian historian, motivated and moved by the hand of God. May God bless you as you embrace this noble calling.