

JOHN PIPER

ESTHER

*Paintings by Glenn Harrington*



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BY JOHN PIPER

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*The Innkeeper*  
*The Misery of Job and the Mercy of God*  
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CROSSWAY

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

*Esther*

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# WHAT'S BEHIND THIS POEM?

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*E*very Advent season for twenty-seven years I wrote narrative poems as a kind of Christmas gift to the church I pastor. *Esther* is one of those gifts.

I have loved poetry since I was a teenager. It has always seemed plain to me that the imagination is a gift of God and is meant to reflect his own creativity. He thought up the universe out of nothing, then created us in his own image. So we do that kind of thing. Not that *very* thing. But that *kind* of thing. Only God creates out of nothing. We are not God. But we are like him when we create.

Perhaps this is why I feel so at home when writing poetry. I don't mean I feel relaxed or in control. I usually don't. I mean: This is who I am—who God made me to be. A creator, a maker. I suspect that deep down that's the way we all feel when we are making what God made us to make. A poem is not necessarily a better thing to make than a birthday cake, or a rose garden, or a website. But it is one of the things I love to make.

What I mean by poetry is this: "An effort to share a moving experience by using language that is chosen and structured differently from ordinary prose." Sometimes it rhymes. Sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it has a regular cadence. Sometimes it doesn't. But almost always the poet has

experienced something—something horrible or wonderful or ordinary—and he feels that he must share it. Using words differently from ordinary prose is his way of trying to awaken something of this experience (and more) in the reader.



When I read the Bible, I experience God. This is the astonishing power and dignity God has given to his Word. He meets us there. "The LORD revealed *himself* to Samuel at Shiloh by the *word* of the LORD" (1 Sam. 3:21). This is amazing. We meet God *himself* by the Word.

And when we do, we are affected. It may be terror, or it may be ecstasy, or it may be an inexpressible peace. But for poets, at least, experiencing something *inexpressible* does not mean silence. It's precisely the *inexpressible something* that poetry is meant to help us see or feel. If it were merely expressible—if there were nothing ineffable about it—there would be no need for a poem. But everywhere in the Bible we meet reality that exceeds our comprehension. We must find a way to at least point or suggest or hint. It's too wonderful—or too something—to keep to ourselves.

So it is with the book of Esther. This book never mentions God. But he is everywhere—the invisible hand that moves empires for the sake of his people. The invisibility of his name in the book is a pointer to the invisibility of his majestic rule in history. Human designs are inexorably undone. And the way God turns the tables is breathtaking.

The king can't sleep. So someone reads to him the royal records of "memorable deeds." All of this just so that

Haman, the arrogant Jew hater, by a fluke encounter, would be forced to honor Mordecai—the Jew (chapter 6). Such things are everywhere in this book. The invisible God is everywhere behind them. Just as he was at Golgotha.

I won't try to say in this introduction what moved me most in reading Esther. That's what the poem is for. But I will say how I go about it. I retell the story by filling in possibilities of what might have been, mingled with what really was. My aim is to respect what really was by creating nothing that could not have been. Nothing has been changed in the biblical story. And what has been created is not Scripture. It is meant to awaken us to the wonder of what is really there. Here are some historical facts that we know:

- The kingdom of Babylon fell before Cyrus the Persian in 539 BC. The people of Israel had, by that time, been in captivity in Babylon for decades.
- In 538 BC, Cyrus decreed that the Jews could return to their homeland.
- Ahasuerus reigned as king of Persia from 485 to 464 BC.
- Esther became queen in Persia about the year 479 BC.
- Susa, where the story of the book of Esther takes place, was the capital of the Persian Empire and lay about 350 miles southeast of Babylon.
- Esther was Mordecai's cousin, "the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai" (Est. 2:15). "She had neither father nor mother" (Est. 2:7).
- Mordecai was "the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminit" (Est. 2:5). I have treated Abihail and Jair as brothers and both as the sons of Shimei, who would then be Esther's grandfather. Shimei was thus old enough

to have been among the Babylonian captives. I treat him as not returning to Palestine but dreaming of some destiny in Persia.

- Nabonidus was the last king of Babylon and was defeated by Cyrus the Persian.
- Borsippa was a city about twelve miles southwest of Babylon.
- Nippur was a neighboring city along with its surrounding region.
- Opis was the Babylonian city where Nabonidus made his last stand against the Persians.
- Hadassah was Esther's Jewish name (Est. 2:7), which means "myrtle."

These are the historical realities I try to honor in my retelling of Esther's story. Don't get bogged down trying to figure out genealogies. Let the story carry you forward.



Perhaps a short comment on reading poetry would be helpful. Beware of thinking the line breaks signal pauses or emphases. They don't. They will do their best work for you if you ignore them. Only pause when there is a punctuation mark. This way the stilted sound we associate with bad poems (ta-DA ta-DA ta-DA ta-DA, pause, ta-DA ta-DA ta-DA) will be, happily, avoided. There is a cadence that matters. But its effect will be felt most if it is read and heard effortlessly and unself-consciously.

I read recently that one well-known English teacher tells his students that we must rid ourselves of the notion that poems can be made sense of in a single reading.

That's probably true. It takes one or two times through to discover even *how* it should be read, let alone what it means. When the cadence is caught, and the wording is familiar, the stroll through the poem does not require much attention to the path, and you can lift up your eyes to the vistas.

I must stop. I've perhaps already said too much. Poems are poems. They should stand pretty much on their own. I hope you enjoy *Esther*.



*F*ar east of ruined Palestine

The year five hundred thirty-nine  
Was filled with hope. The western sun  
Set once for all on Babylon;  
And Nabonidus fell before  
The Persian forces at the door  
Of Opis. Mighty Cyrus, king  
Of Persia, set his signet ring  
Upon the seal of victory,  
And published in his first decree  
That Jews could now return to live  
Again in Jacob's land, and give  
Themselves to serve the living God.

*B*ut there were some who took the rod  
Of God's chastisement so to heart  
That now their faith and hope would chart  
Another course: at least one clan  
Within the tribe of Benjamin,  
The clan of Shimei, would stay  
In pagan Babylon and pray

That now, and generations hence,  
God might, in gracious providence,  
Be pleased to use them for some great  
And saving work—to penetrate,  
Perhaps, some curse beyond the bounds  
Of Israel, with joyful sounds  
Of sovereign love.



*S*ome forty years

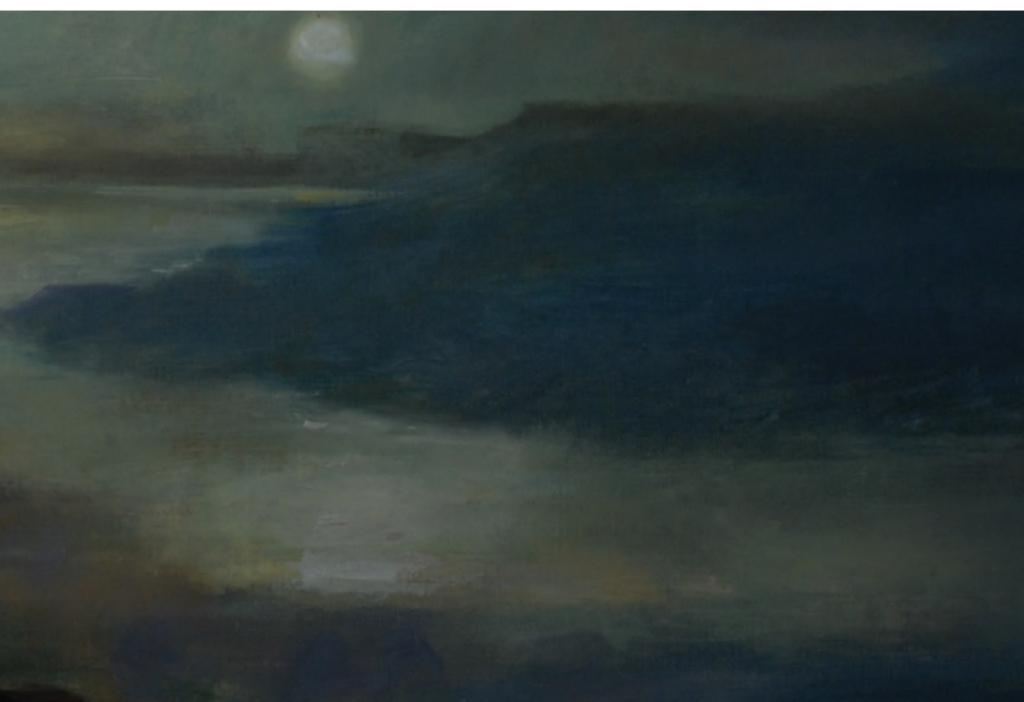
Of hope and prayer and frequent tears  
Went by in Babylon. One night  
A million brilliant stars sang bright  
Against the sable Persian sky,  
And called the aged Shimei  
To climb the ancient cliffs beside  
The dark Euphrates, up the pride  
Of Borsippa. With Abihail  
His youngest son he took the trail  
That led to Nippur Ridge, and stood  
There with a woolen traveller's hood  
Hung halfway on his snowy head.  
And facing to the east he said,



*J*had a dream, my son, that some  
Day what we've longed to see will come,  
Not here, but even farther east,  
And that for you and me, at least,  
The promise that the Lord has planned  
Is not found in the Promised Land.  
  
But I am old, and so the dream  
Is yours, my son. And if it seem  
Too slow, doubt not the faithfulness



Of God; one generation lives  
And dies to serve the next; he gives  
A glimpse to Moses 'cross the vale,  
And me tonight. But, Abihail,  
Tomorrow take your wife, though she  
Is great with child and frailty,  
And set your face toward Susa where  
The king sits on his throne; and there  
Beyond the Tigris serve the Lord  
Of hosts, and wait until the cord  
Of providence is woven full.



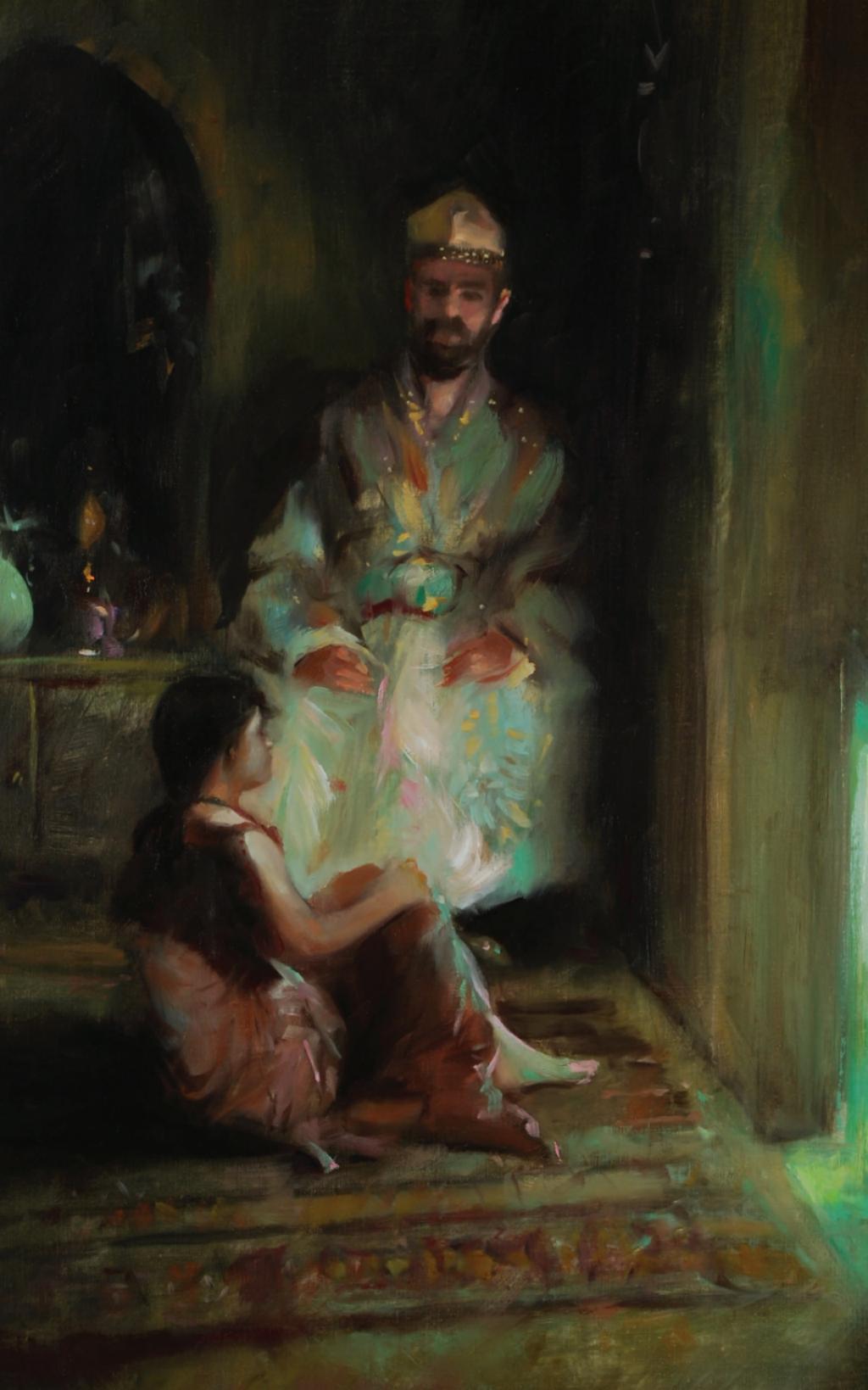
Then God will set his heel, and pull  
The powers of the world into  
The service of his love for you,  
And for his children scattered through  
The empire. Yes! Mark now, and do  
As I have said. God will provide  
For you, doubt not, and for your bride,  
And for the child. Be strong, my son,  
You will not be alone. The one

Who governs dreams, and gives  
Us everything we need, and lives  
On ev'ry inch of ground we tread,  
Will be with you. You will be led;  
And lest you feel alone, he spoke  
These words, 'My soul will not revoke  
The promise I have made. Go now,  
My chosen, Abihail. My vow  
And pledge is this: that with you I  
Will send your nephew, Mordecai.'"



*T*

The pretty girl sat on the floor  
Beside the fire and said once more  
To Mordecai, "Abba, how did  
My mother die? You haven't hid  
Such things from me for all these years;  
And late at night I see the tears  
Roll down your cheek, and I must feel  
That it would help if we could kneel  
Before the Lord and bear this thing  
Together. You and I could sing,  
Then, eye to eye about the ways  
Of God. And wouldn't those dark days  
Reveal the same God that you've taught  
Me these twelve years to trust? And ought  
I not to know then, Mordecai,  
How both my parents came to die?"



*T*he road from here to Babylon

Is hard, Hadassah. It's not fun,

And even less if you're a Jew.

And we were three—or four, with you.

Three hundred miles of sweat and hate.

And you were big and three weeks late.

And no one gave us room. The heat

Was indescribable. Her feet

Were swollen, scarlet hot. He prayed,

Your father, Abihail, for shade.

That's all! Not for a house or nurse,

Or stream or birthing stool or purse

To bribe the keepers of the inn.

Just shade! And just in time (we thought)

There was a myrtle tree. She fought,

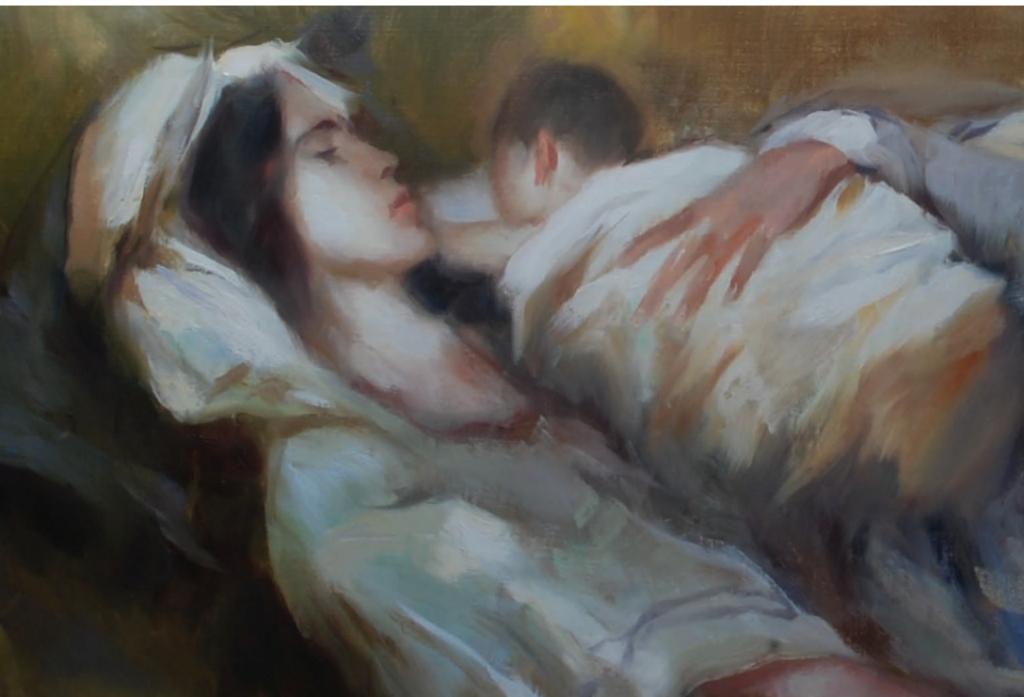
But you were big and she was thin,

And there was blood, and we were men . . . ”

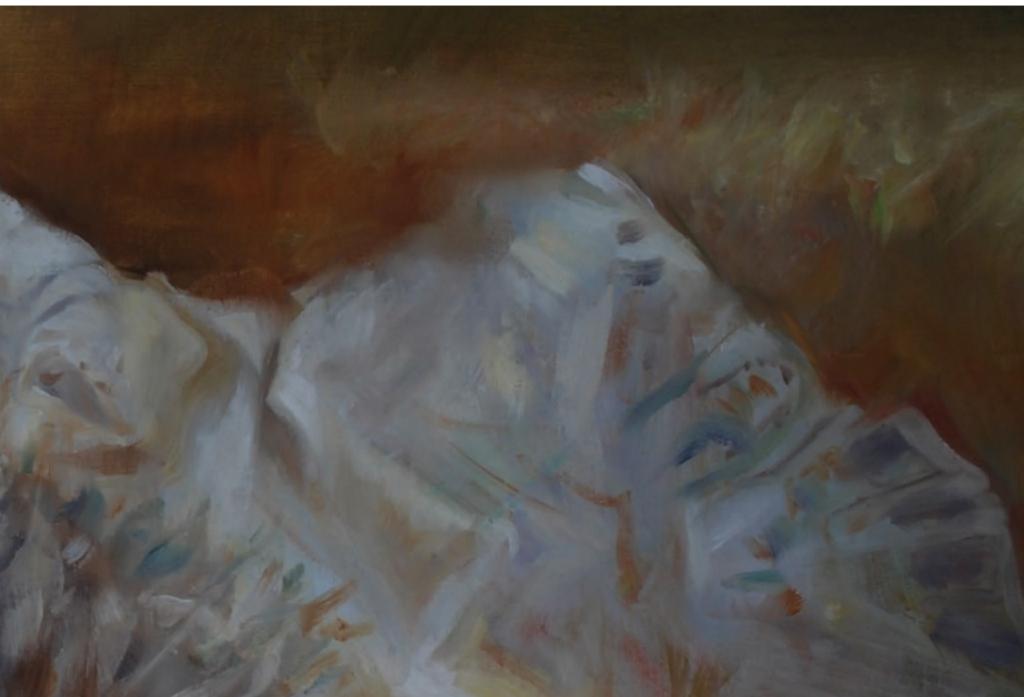


*D*id mother ever hold me—once?"

*Y*es, right away! And your response  
Was perfect peace. I wish that I  
Could tell you what she said, but my  
Heart moved me back as Abihail  
Knelt down to kiss your mother's pale  
And sweaty face and stroke your hair.  
I couldn't hear what happened there,  
And Abihail would never say



Too much. Just this: 'The myrtle was  
A gift of God. Jehovah does  
What he must do. But there was shade!  
And we agreed, the girl is made  
To be a myrtle, comfort, shield.  
And so together there we sealed  
Her name: Hadassah in the tongue  
Of Israel. May she be sung  
In festival for centuries  
To come.'

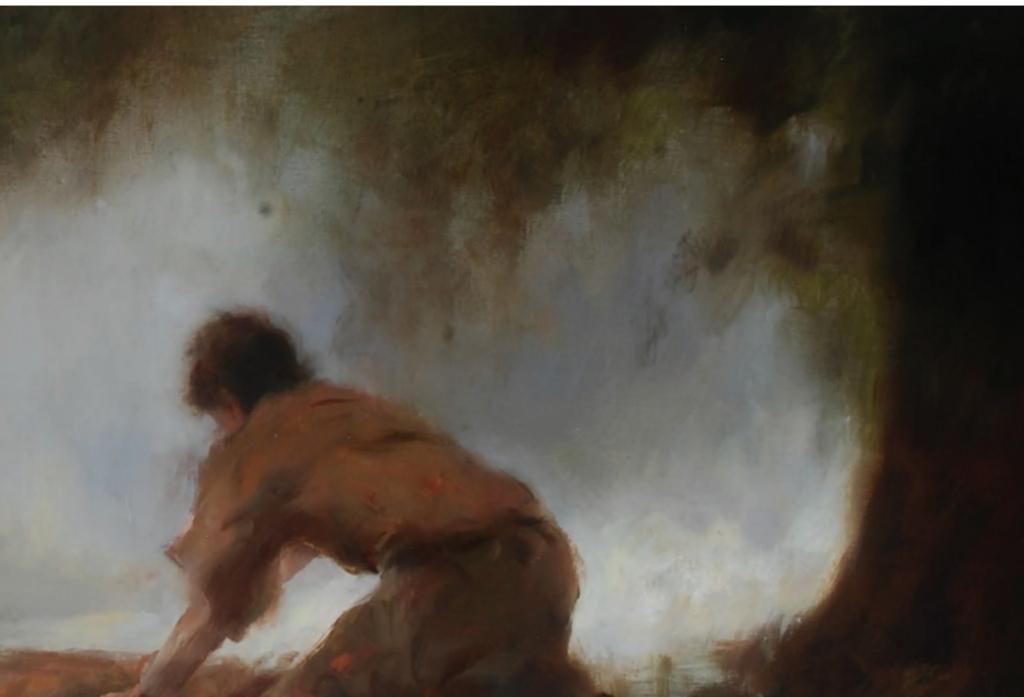


*A* lone and on his knees

Your father dug her grave beneath  
The myrtle tree, and pushed the dirt  
In with his own strong hands. The hurt,  
As you may guess, was deeper than  
The grave. We prayed and then we ran  
With you. God led us to a house,  
And we besought the farmer's spouse



For mercy and a nurse. 'You're Jews,'  
She said, 'Perhaps my man could use  
A few "employees" for a spell.  
Whose kid is this?' 'She's mine, you tell  
Your husband I will work his farm  
If you can keep this child from harm.'



*F*or two long years, Hadassah, we  
Were Jewish slaves, but you were free  
From harm, and grew up like a tree  
Beside the brook of loyalty—  
The loyalty of God to his  
Design. He never doubted this,  
Your father, Abihail, I mean.  
The tree of hope stayed ever green  
That Shimei had planted in  
His heart. And neither pain nor sin  
Nor death could break the fibers of  
His mighty faith: that sovereign love

Would somehow take your mother's death,  
His father's dream, your living breath,  
And weave them with some loving lace  
Into a tapestry of grace.  
I've never known a stronger man  
Than Abihail, your father."



You tell me, Abba, what became  
Of him? To me he's just a name.  
But I would like to know him, see  
His face, his hope, especially  
The dream."

*H*e worked himself so thin

That when the fever came, his skin  
Hung on his bones like dough. I nursed  
Him to the end. He never cursed  
A soul, not one, alive or dead,  
But near the end looked up and said,  
'Could you please take me, Mordecai,  
Down to the myrtle tree to die?'



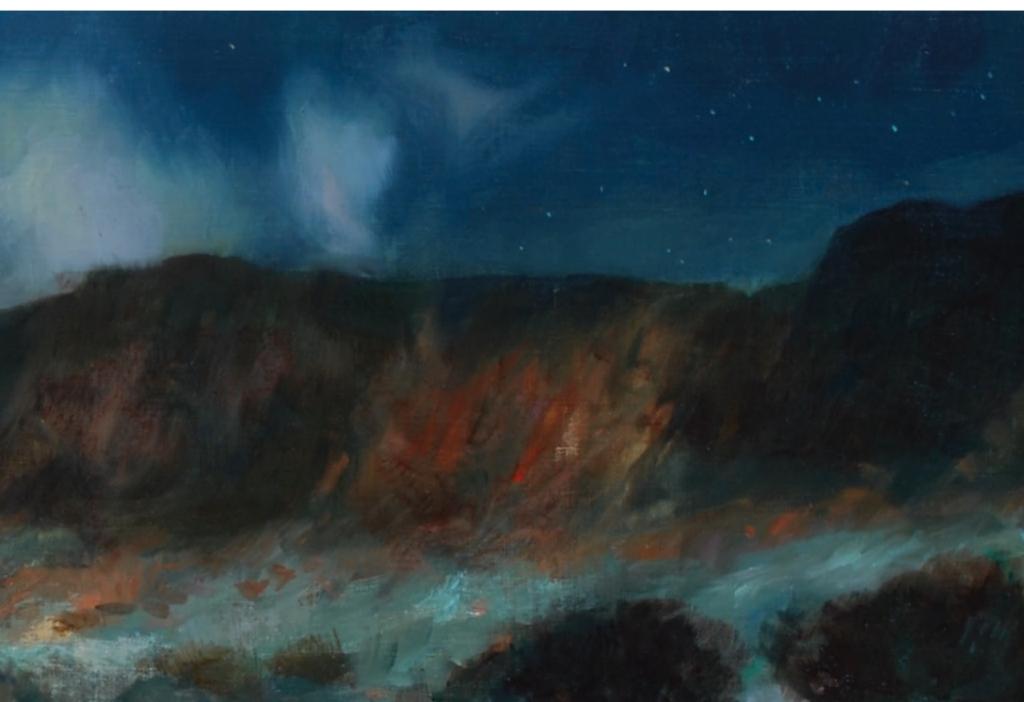
*J*laid him by your mother's grave,  
And waited through the night. He gave  
His final thought for you: once more  
He whispered motionless, 'Before  
I die give me your word, my friend,  
To bring her to the journey's end,  
To Susa, as my father dreamed.  
For it must be that God has deemed  
For you and for Hadassah there  
To see the answer to our prayer.'



*H*e took my hand, 'Swear, Mordecai,  
As long as there's a Persian sky,  
You will not take Hadassah back  
To Israel. And if you lack  
For anything, then perish if  
You must, but not beside the cliff  
Of Borsippa or Jordan stream.  
Forsake not, Mordecai, the dream  
Of Shimei and Abihail.  
The plan of God can never fail.  
We have not followed him in vain.'



You see, Hadassah, even pain  
Could not suffice to break the hope  
Of Abihail, or dim the scope  
Of his design for you. I took  
You yet that night, and we forsook  
The shame of slavery and came  
To Susa. Here another name  
I gave to you to make your way  
As easy as I could. They say  
That *Esther* means 'a brilliant star.'"



*J*thank you, Abba. Ten years are  
A lot of love for fathering  
A cousin.”

*E*sther, let us sing

Now, like you said, together eye  
To eye. The God who made the sky  
And rules the earth with awesome might,  
Is wielding all the world this night  
To bring this story to an end  
Beyond our power to comprehend."



*A*t thirty-five her hair was fine  
And cinder black. Nor was there sign  
Of aging in her queenly face.  
And those who saw the tiny trace  
Of tragedy left in her eyes,  
Compared it to the Persian skies  
When storms have purged the gloomy air,  
And left the faintest rainbow there.

*S*he gave her firstborn son the name  
Of Abihail, and hoped the flame  
Of faith would burn in him, as pure  
And bright as once burned deep and sure  
Within her father's breast.



O  
ne night

The boy said, "Mamma, am I right  
That you became the queen because  
You were so beautiful? And laws  
Were changed because you were so brave?"

Q  
ueen Esther smiled, "Can you behave  
If I let you stay up a while?  
If so, we'll put another pile  
Of logs into the fire, and I  
Will tell you, Abihail, just why  
Your mommy is the Queen of all  
The land—from Egypt to the tall  
And snowy Himalayas."

*J*'ll

Behave," he said, and tried to smile  
And look as wide awake as he  
Could look for being five. "And we  
Can sit here by the fire," he said,  
"And later I can go to bed  
When you're all through. Okay?"

*W*e'll see,"

She said (the way moms do). "Could be  
We'll need another night, you know.  
We can't talk till the roosters crow!"

*A*nd so they stoked the fire once more,  
And Esther shut the royal door,  
And Abihail climbed in her lap,  
And nestled with his little cap  
Beneath her royal chin.



*Y*our great-

Grandfather had a dream: 'Now wait  
No more in Babylon,' a voice  
From heaven said, 'But come, rejoice,  
For God has made a plan to save  
His people through your son. A slave  
Will turn the powers of unbelief  
Upon their heads, and all the grief  
Of captive Israel will turn  
To joy.' Of course, we had to learn,  
In time, that what the dream had meant  
Was that, though Abihail was sent—  
The son of Shimei—'twas I  
And your good uncle Mordecai  
Would come at God's appointed time,  
And block the hate-filled, bloody crime  
Of Haman."

*M*ommy, he was bad.”

*I*'ll tell you, Abihail, the sad  
And ugly truth: Indeed he was  
A wicked man. A coward does  
A lot of sneaky things to make  
Himself look good when he's a fake.  
And Haman even tried to bring  
Ten thousand talents to the king,  
And all in silver, if the Jews  
Could all be caught and killed. And why?  
Because he hated Mordecai!”

*B*ut, Mommy, Mordecai is good.”

*I*ndeed he is! And solid wood,  
My son, makes rotten timber rage.  
The wicked Haman in his cage  
Of cowardice could not abide  
The freedom of the man outside.”

*A*nd did the king, my dad, agree?"

*S*ometimes, dear Abihail, we see  
Things different than they are, and make  
What later seems a big mistake.  
He did agree. But God did not  
Allow success for Haman's plot,  
Nor of the king's decree. It seems  
That this is what the noble dreams  
Of Shimei were all about,  
And why my father didn't doubt.

*G*od had a plan to save the Jews  
From Haman's wicked scheme: to use  
Not Shimei, nor Abihail,  
Nor mighty armies to assail  
The Persian palace walls, but me,  
A Jewish orphan girl, to free  
The sons of Israel from death.  
And even now it takes my breath  
Away to think about the ways  
Of God, and how from ancient days  
He planned it all, and ruled the world,  
Right down to how my hair was curled,



When all the girls were gathered for  
The king to see, and what I wore,  
And how I walked, and everything  
It took to cause a Persian king  
To choose from all the women in  
The world this exiled Jewish kin  
Of Shimei. O, Abihail!  
I hope you see, and never fail  
To know that there's a God in charge  
Of all the world. He governs large  
And small. He sets up kings to reign,  
And takes the lion by the mane.  
None moves without the Lord's command,  
And none can stay his mighty hand."

*B*ut, Mommy, weren't you ever scared?"

*Y*es, Abihail, but God prepared  
A special gift for me one night:  
He showed me that by doing right  
And trusting him, there would be less  
To lose and more to gain! And yes,  
Should I have even lost my life,  
It would be true: to be the wife  
Of Persia's king, and false to God,  
Is no reward. What good to trod  
A bridge of gold above a flood  
Of icy hate and Jewish blood?"

*W*hat did you do to save the Jews?"

*Y*our uncle Mordecai sent news  
To me about the king's decree,  
And said that I should try to see  
The king, and tell him I'm a Jew.  
And even when your uncle knew  
That I could lose my life this way,  
He said, 'If on this dark'ning day  
You hold your tongue, God will provide  
Protection from some other side,  
And you will die. But, Esther, think:  
Is not there now some holy link  
Of precious providence between  
The Jewish plight and who is queen?'



*A*nd so your uncle Mordecai  
Filled me with hope. 'If I must die  
Then I will die,' your mother said."

*T*

he sleepy prince picked up his head

And asked, "Did Daddy change his mind?"

*I*'d rather say, God touched the blind,"  
The queen replied. "You see, dear son,  
If you would truly know what's done  
Upon the earth, you have to ask:  
What power is hid behind the mask  
Of man's design? Am I the queen  
Because of looks? What does it mean  
That Haman hung on gallows made  
For Mordecai, and that the blade  
Aimed at the Jews, instead of these  
Was thrust against their enemies?"



*B*ut Abihail was breathing deep,  
And soon the lad would be asleep.  
So Esther closed his drooping eyes  
And prayed that God would make him wise.  
And then she sang a lullaby  
That she had learned from Mordecai:



*T*here once was a baby born under a tree,

*Her dear mamma died, and nobody could see,*

*Her daddy knelt down by her side on his knee,*

*And no one but God knew what this girl would be.*

*H*er branches spread out and their beauty was seen,

*The shade that she made was a deep myrtle green,*

*An orphan and lovely as she turned eighteen,*

*And no one but God knew: Tomorrow a queen.*

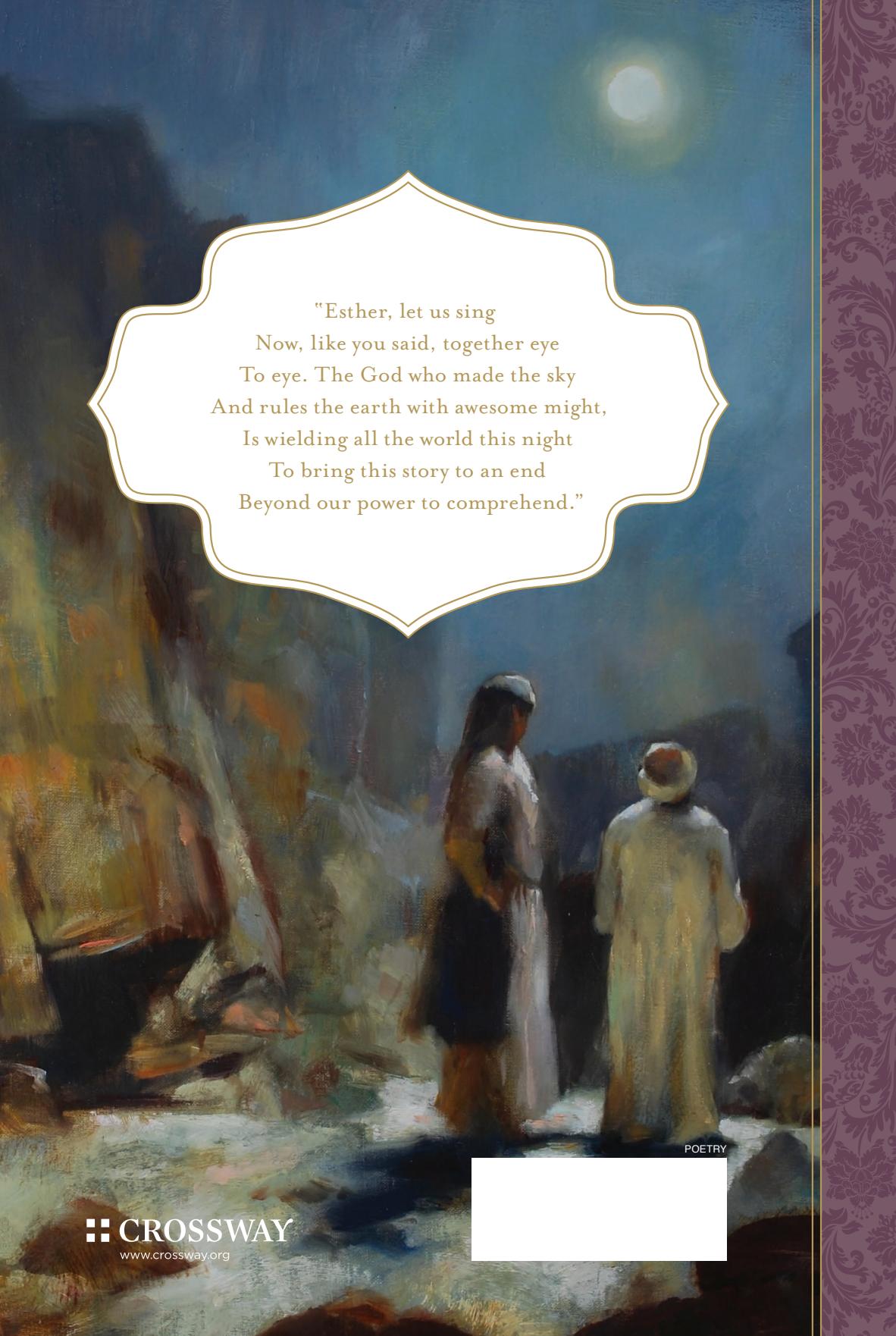
*R*est well, my precious Abihail,  
When you are weak, God will prevail.  
Trust now the Lord your soul to keep,  
He rules the nations while you sleep.”



*N*

ow listen, children, young and old,  
God multiplies ten thousandfold  
The little power that we bring.  
He makes our winter weakness sing  
Of his full summer's strength, and burns  
The rags of shame to ashes, turns  
The course of human history, blocks  
The haughty schemes of strutting cocks,  
And brings the prophecies of men  
To naught. And rising up, he then,  
Against all high conspiracies,  
And proud imperial machines,  
Makes orphans into kings and queens.





"Esther, let us sing  
Now, like you said, together eye  
To eye. The God who made the sky  
And rules the earth with awesome might,  
Is wielding all the world this night  
To bring this story to an end  
Beyond our power to comprehend."

POETRY