

TWO HEADS ARE BETTER THAN ONE: THE INTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER IN THE EARLY SYRIAN AND DUTCH NEOCALVINIST TRADITIONS¹

by Max Rogland

IN HIS INTRODUCTION to Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*, C. S. Lewis speaks of each generation's blindness to its own characteristic errors, which can be counteracted by reading the works of earlier writers:

The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction.²

For some time, there has been a developing trend in biblical scholarship to pay more attention to the "old books" and the history of interpretation. Some obvious examples of this phenomenon are the *Ancient Christian Commentary* and *Reformation Commentary* series published by Intervarsity Press, which gather exegetical insights from a wide range of older works. Other publications have also sought to demonstrate the continuing value of consulting early and medieval biblical interpreters.³

This article will put C. S. Lewis's counsel into practice by examining the Syrian Patristic and Dutch neo-Calvinist traditions with a view to gaining interpretive insight

1. I wish to express my thanks to Sebastian Brock, Timothy Alan Gustafson, Bill De Jong, Takamitsu Muraoka, Lucas Van Rompay, and Erin Walsh for responding to my inquiries or providing assistance in various ways. I am especially grateful to Dr. Walsh for providing me with a copy of her unpublished paper, "Esther in the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat."

2. C. S. Lewis, Introduction to *On the Incarnation*, by Athanasius (reprint; Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1993), 3–10, esp. 5.

3. Two obvious examples are C. A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1998) and I. C. Levy, *Introducing Medieval Biblical Interpretation: The Senses of Scripture in Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

into the book of Esther. At first sight, this unlikely pairing would not seem a very promising source of inspiration. There are no known expositions of Esther in Syriac even by those writers who wrote or commented extensively on the Old Testament, such as Ephrem (ca. 306–373), Isho‘ bar Nun (ca. 745–828), Isho‘dad of Merv (ninth century), and Dionysios bar Šalibi (d. 1171).⁴ Likewise, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century neo-Calvinist writings on the book were relatively few and often insubstantial.⁵ With some careful digging, however, one can unearth insightful comments on Esther by two of the leading figures of these respective traditions, namely Aphrahat (ca. 280–345) and Klaas Schilder (1890–1952). Despite vast differences in language, history, and cultural settings, these two writers show some fascinating commonalities in their interpretations of Esther. In this instance, two heads indeed prove to be better than one, and examining them in tandem provides valuable interpretive guidance for the modern reader.

1. Aphrahat and the Syrian Patristic Tradition

The dearth of literature on the book of Esther is not unique to the Syrian Patristic tradition; the Greek and Latin Fathers likewise produced little of substance on the book.⁶ The first complete commentary on Esther did not appear until 836, written in Latin by Rabanus Maurus, the archbishop of Mainz.⁷ This general lack of attention

4. For a brief survey of Syriac literature on the book of Esther, see M. Wechsler, “Esther (Book and Person)—Near-Eastern Christianity,” in H. J. Klauck (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (20 vols.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009–2022), 8.34–38.

5. There were publications on Esther by writers in the national Reformed Church (*Nederlands Hervormde Kerk*) such as J. J. Knap’s *Onder de schaduw zijner hand* (Kampen: Kok, 1921) and G. Smit’s *Ruth, Ester en Klaagliederen* (72eks ten Uitleg; Groningen-Den Haag: J. B. Wolters, 1930). Neo-Calvinism was primarily associated with the Reformed Churches (*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*), however, and works by these authors consisted chiefly of brief meditations or popular commentaries. See A. Kuyper, *Vrouwen uit de Heilige Schrift* (Amsterdam: Höveker & Wormser, 1897), 150–2; A. Roorda, *Het boek Esther voor de gemeente verklaard* (n.p.; Traktaatgenootschap “Filippus,” 1912); A. Janse, *Eva’s dochteren: Oud-Testamentische opvattingen over de plaats der vrouw in de wereldgeschiedenis* (Kampen: Kok, 1923), 167–71; M. B. van ’t Veer, *De Jodenhaat gedateerd naar Christus. Predikatie over Esther 3:5,6 en 13* (Groningen: Knoop & Niemeijer, 1938); L. Oranje and A. D. R. Polman, *De boeken Ezra, Nehemia, Ester* (De Bijbel toegelicht voor het Nederlandse Volk; Kampen: Kok, 1940); cf. also T. Hoekstra, *Gereformeerde Homiletiek* (Wageningen: Zomer & Keuning, 1926), 174–5. More scholarly work from a neo-Calvinist perspective was produced by G. Ch. Aalders, professor of Old Testament at the Free University of Amsterdam; see his *De historische en religieuze waarde van het boek Esther* (Amsterdam: Kirchner, 1923) and *Esther* (Korte Verklaring; Kampen: Kok, 1947).

6. For surveys, see M. Biddle, “Christian Interpretation of Esther before the Reformation,” *RevExp* 118.2 (2021): 149–60, which is largely dependent on A. Siquans, “Esther in der Interpretation der Kirchenvater: Konigin, Vorbild der Tapferkeit oder Typus der Kirche?” *ZAC* 12 (2008): 414–32; see also T. A. Gustafson, “Ælfric Reads Esther: The Cultural Limits of Translation” (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1995), 50–111.

7. This was published in Migne’s *Patrologia Latina* 109 (cols. 635–670). For an English translation, see P. Wyetzner, “Commentary of Rabanus Maurus on the Book of Esther,” n.p.

can be attributed partly to the book's interpretive challenges, such as its well-known avoidance of references to God in the Masoretic Text (MT).⁸ In the case of the Syrian tradition in particular, however, additional factors played a role as well. The full acceptance of Esther into the Christian canon was a more drawn out and complicated process in the Syrian churches than elsewhere, due in part to the influential status of Theodore of Mopsuestia, who harbored reservations about the book.⁹ As a result, some Eastern lists of canonical books omitted Esther, as did some important Syrian theologians such as Jacob of Edessa (ca. 640–708).¹⁰ The fact that Esther was one of the last books of the Hebrew Bible to be translated into Syriac also appears to have slowed the process toward full canonical acknowledgment.¹¹

Aphrahat is one of the earliest known Syrian church fathers, and he treats the book of Esther as authoritative Scripture, referring to it repeatedly in his “demonstrations.”¹² Many of his remarks on Esther are passing in nature. In his demonstration “On Covenanters,” Aphrahat compiles a long list of those who were enticed into sin: “Haman was rich, and the third in command after the king, but his wife counseled him to destroy the Jews” (*Dem.* 6.3). In his demonstration “On Wars” he points out Haman's pride: “Haman glorified himself over Mordecai, but his wickedness was his own downfall” (*Dem.* 5.3). In other passages Haman is mentioned as an example of jealousy (*Dem.* 9.8), pride (*Dem.* 14.10), strife (*Dem.* 14.13), and greed (*Dem.* 14.40). Conversely Mordecai is praised for his humility, by which he overcame Haman's plotting (*Dem.* 9.3). The eventual elevation of Mordecai over Haman and of Esther over Vashti is mentioned as one of many examples of how the Lord humbles the proud and exalts the humble (*Dem.* 14.33).

[cited 26 January 2022]. Online: <http://www.yoramhazony.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Rabanus-Maurus-Esther-Commentary-English-v.-1.1-1-Dec-1-2015.pdf>.

8. The LXX and the Greek “Alpha Text” (AT) of Esther are considerably longer than the MT and include entirely new sections of text along with several added references to God. The Syriac translator excluded these additions, however, and only sporadic influence of the LXX can be observed on the Peshitta of Esther. See M. P. Weitzman, *The Syriac Version of the Old Testament: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 68, 82, 181.

9. See R. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 307–10.

10. It is a gross oversimplification to say that the book was not accepted as canonical in the East until the 8th century, as claimed by, e.g., C. Meyers, “Esther,” in J. Barton and J. Muddiman (eds.), *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 324–330, esp. 325. Wechsler (“Esther,” 34) more accurately describes the book's canonical status as “fluctuating” chiefly between canonical and deuterocanonical understandings, with non-canonical views being exceptions rather than the rule.

11. Beckwith, *Old Testament Canon*, 297 and 310.

12. The “demonstrations” are essentially treatises on biblical topics, addressed to an individual but intended to edify the larger Christian community. See J. F. Coakley, “Syriac Exegesis,” in J. C. Paget and J. Schaper (eds.), *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: From the Beginnings to 600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 697–713, esp. 699. A partial selection of the demonstrations was included in Schaff's *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 2.13, and a complete English translation was made by A. Lehto, *The Demonstrations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (Gorgias Eastern Christian Studies 27; Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2010), which is quoted here.

2. Aphrahat's Demonstration "On Fasting"

Aphrahat provides more sustained interaction with the book of Esther in two demonstrations in particular. In his work "On Fasting," he assumed, like many other church fathers, that the practice was normative for Christians, but he recognized that it was not always virtuous. After mentioning the unacceptable fasting practiced by heretics such as Marcion, Valentinus, and Mani (*Dem.* 3.9), Aphrahat proceeds to praise acceptable fasting, and he lists many biblical saints who fasted, including Mordecai and Esther.¹³ For them, fasting provided protection against the plots of Haman:

Listen again, my friend. I will show you the acceptable fast which Mordecai and Esther undertook. Their fast was a shield of salvation for all of their people. They made the boasting of Haman, the one troubling them, cease, and his impiety fell back on his own head. (*Dem.* 3.10)

Aphrahat proceeds to wax eloquent on the downfall of Haman and how "he was judged with the judgement he wanted to impose," ultimately suffering the fate he had sought for Mordecai and the Jews. Aphrahat does not view the book simply as a morality tale illustrating the *lex talionis*, however, and he explores the underlying reasons for Haman's wicked plot:

But why, my friend, did Haman demand and seek from the king that all the Jews be destroyed? It was because he wanted to avenge his people, and wipe out the name of the Israelites, as the memory of Amalek had been wiped out under heaven. For Haman remained as a remnant of the Amalekites. (*Dem.* 3.11)

Thus, the reason for Haman's violent plot was not merely the personal affront caused by Mordecai's refusal to bow before him (*Est.* 3:2–5). Rather, it is to be attributed to the ancient Israelite-Amalekite conflict initiated in Exodus 17 and renewed in 1 Samuel 15:

Because of this [refusal], Haman wanted, under this pretext, to be avenged on Mordecai's people, and to exact payment from them for the slaying of the Amalekites. For Haman was of the family of the house of Agag, king of the Amalekites, whom Saul brought back and whom Samuel cut to pieces before the Lord. Mordecai was of the lineage of the house of Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin, one of the descendants of Kish. Since Saul had destroyed the Amalekites, Haman wanted to take vengeance on Israel for his people, and [in particular] on Mordecai for the death of Agag. But he did not know (his

13. Aphrahat's use of lengthy lists of examples is characteristic of his exegetical method; see M. Koster, "Aphrahat's Use of the Old Testament," in B. ter Haar Romeny (ed.), *The Peshitta: Its Use in Literature and Liturgy. Papers Read at the Third Peshitta Symposium* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 131–141, esp. 139–40; Coakley, "Syriac Exegesis," 699.

reason had left him) that there was a decree against Amalek, and that the memory of him would be wiped out under heaven. For it is written in the holy Law: “*God said to Moses, ‘Tell Joshua son of Nun to choose some men and to make war against Amalek.’*” [Exod. 17:9] Joshua armed himself and made war against Amalek, and Amalek was defeated by the sign of the Cross, in the extension of the hands of Moses. (*Dem.* 3.11)¹⁴

Perhaps surprisingly, although Aphrahat acknowledges the sin of Saul’s sparing of Agag (1 Sam. 15:26–29), he also maintains that the Amalekites’ continued survival demonstrated God’s “great patience” with them in giving them an opportunity to repent.

Repentance would have also been given to the Amalekites, if they had believed when God was patient with them for four hundred years. But after all this time, when he saw that they did not repent, his anger overcame them, and he remembered what Moses had inscribed in his holy book. For when Saul reigned over the kingdom, God said to Samuel, “*Tell him: I remember what Amalek has done to you when you came out of Egypt, when he attacked you with the sword. Now go and destroy the sin of Amalek.*” [1 Sam. 15:2–3] And Saul went and destroyed the Amalekites. But because Saul had mercy on Amalek, his kingship was rejected, since he had left a remnant among them. Haman was a remnant of the house of Agag, which Saul had allowed [to survive], and it was Mordecai, a descendant of the house of Saul, who destroyed the one from the house of Agag. (*Dem.* 3.11)

As he traces the history of conflict, Aphrahat argues that its theological root cause lies in the elevation of Jacob over Esau: Amalek hoped to reclaim the firstborn blessing from the sons of Jacob.

But why, my friend, was it the Amalekites, more than all the [other] peoples, who came to meet Israel for war? For the Amalekites had thought, ‘Let us go out and destroy the sons of Jacob and abolish the blessings of Isaac!’ Indeed, they were afraid of the domination of the sons of Jacob, for this is what Isaac had said to Esau: “*You will serve Jacob your brother, but if you repent, his yoke will pass away from your neck.*” [Gen. 27:40]¹⁵ For this reason you

14. Ephrem also noted that Moses’s hands were in the sign of the cross: K. McVey (ed.), *St. Ephrem the Syrian: Selected Prose Works* (FC 91; Washington, D.C.: CUA Press, 1994), 255–56. Writing in the ninth century, Isho’dad of Merv mentions this as the view of the “allegorists.” See C. van den Eynde (ed.), *Commentaire d’Išo’dad de Merv sur l’Ancien Testament, II. Exode-Deutéronome* (CSCO 179 Scriptorum Syri 81; Leuven: Peeters, 1958), 48.

15. This unique rendering of Genesis 27:40 differs from the MT (ESV: “By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you grow restless you shall break his yoke from your neck.”), but it is faithful to the Peshitta version. Cf. R. J. Owens, *The Genesis and Exodus Citations of Aphrahat, the Persian Sage* (Leiden: Brill, 1983), 152–3, and Weitzman, *Syriac Version*, 232.

ought to know that Amalek was the son of the concubine of Eliphaz, the son of Esau [Gen. 36:12], and he did not want to become enslaved to the sons of Jacob. (*Dem.* 3.13)

Aphrahat traces this back even further to the Noahic blessing of Shem's line over the line of Canaan.

The scriptures indicate that it was because Esau had taken his wives from among the daughters of Canaan, who was cursed by his father Noah.... Abraham and Isaac, knowing that the Canaanites had been cursed, did not take any of their daughters for their sons. Abraham did not take any for Isaac, nor did Isaac for Jacob, for the cursed lineage of the Canaanites did not mingle with that of Shem, whom Noah had blessed. This is why Amalek, son of Eliphaz, son of Esau, wanted to abolish the curses of Noah and the blessings of Isaac, and fight with the sons of Jacob.... Of all the sons of Esau, it was Amalek who wanted to fight with the sons of Jacob, and it was the memory of him that was wiped out. (*Dem.* 3.13)

It appears then that Amalek, as a descendant of Canaan and Esau, hoped to undo the Patriarchal blessings and curses by violence.

Aphrahat's discussion of the virtues of fasting has thus turned into a significant theological digression on the history of salvation since the time of Noah and Jacob, attributing the Amalek-Israel conflict in its various phases to the elevation of Shem over Canaan and of Jacob over Esau. Aphrahat only briefly returns to the topic of fasting as he concludes his discussion of Mordecai and Esther (*Dem.* 3.13), at which point he turns to consider examples of other saints who fasted, such as Daniel.¹⁶ The main point of interest for Aphrahat is the role of Mordecai and Esther in the Bible's redemptive narrative rather than their value as examples of piety. The relative weight given to the history of salvation vis-à-vis fasting cannot simply be explained as a function of the brevity of the book's references to the latter (Est. 4:16–17; 9:31). After all, the references to Mordecai and Haman's ancestry are also very brief (Est. 2:5; 3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24), yet these are what enable Aphrahat to link their conflict to the larger flow of redemptive history. It is evident, then, that Aphrahat's interest in the book of Esther is profoundly theological and is not merely due to its illustrative use.

3. Aphrahat's Demonstration "On Persecution"

Aphrahat also interacts substantially with the book of Esther in his demonstration "On Persecution," in which he includes Mordecai in a discussion of the righteous who suffer unjustly. Here he presents a series of parallels between Mordecai and Jesus, both of whom endured unjust persecution.

16. Ephrem also viewed Esther's fasting as a model for later Christians; for examples from his writings, see Wechsler, "Esther," 36, and C. A. Scott, *St. Ephrem the Syrian's Spiritual Guidance: A Study of the Verse Homilies on Reproof* (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 2020), 197.

Mordecai was also persecuted, just as Jesus was persecuted. Mordecai was persecuted by the wicked Haman, and Jesus was persecuted by the rebellious people. Through his prayer, Mordecai rescued his people from the hands of Haman, and through his prayer, Jesus rescued his people from the hands of Satan.¹⁷ Mordecai was rescued from the hands of his persecutor, and Jesus was delivered from the hands of his persecutors. (*Dem.* 21.20)

By means of these parallels, Aphrahat develops a typological interpretation of Mordecai as a prefigurement of Christ. Aphrahat's comments pertain to Queen Esther as well.

Because he sat and put on sackcloth, Mordecai saved Esther and his people from destruction. Because he put on a body and humbled himself, Jesus saved the Church and its members. Because of Mordecai, Esther pleased the king, and entered and sat in place of Vashti, who did not do his will. Because of Jesus, the Church pleased God and has gone in to the King in place of the assembly that did not do his will. Mordecai admonished Esther and her maidservants to fast, so that she and her people might be rescued from the hands of Haman. Jesus admonished his Church and its offspring, so that she and her children might be saved from wrath. (*Dem.* 21.20)

Aphrahat thus propounds a typological understanding of Mordecai as a type of Christ and Esther as a type of the Church. This perspective became commonplace among later Christian writers and can even be detected within the sparse Syriac exegetical tradition pertaining to Esther,¹⁸ although the remainder of Aphrahat's attention is given to Mordecai. He continues to develop this typological perspective as he notes the parallels between Mordecai's victory over Haman and Christ's victory over his enemies:

Mordecai received the honour of Haman, his persecutor, and Jesus, instead of his persecutors from the foolish people, received a great glory from his Father. Mordecai stomped on the neck of Haman, his persecutor, and the enemies of Jesus will be placed beneath his feet. Haman proclaimed before Mordecai, "*This is what will be done for the man whom the king wishes to*

17. Prayer is not mentioned in the MT and Peshitta, but the LXX and AT add a brief reference to it in 5:1, along with Addition C (which follows MT Est. 4:17), consisting of the prayers of Mordecai and Esther. It is possible that Aphrahat had these additions in mind, although the constant association of prayer and fasting in Scripture would probably have led the ancient audience to infer that prayer accompanied Mordecai's fasting, even if left unmentioned.

18. In his *Nisibene Hymn* #57 (lines 27–28), Ephrem exclaims: "Be thy wickedness returned on thy head, Hater of man: as his wickedness was returned on the head, of Haman thy fellow! May the King's Bride mock thee, as did Esther: when thou beseechest her in the judgment to plead for thee!" (*NPNF* 2.13, 211) See Wechsler, "Esther," 36, and J. E. Richardson, *Feminine Imagery of the Holy Spirit in the Hymns of St. Ephrem the Syrian* (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1990), 215.

honour!” [Est. 6:11] The proclaimers of Jesus went out from the people, his persecutors, and said, “*This is Jesus, the Son of God!*” [Matt. 27:54] The blood of Mordecai was avenged upon Haman and his children, and the persecutors of Jesus received his blood upon themselves and upon their children. (*Dem.* 21.20)

Aphrahat encourages his listeners, who themselves were suffering for their faith, by reminding them of Christ’s teaching that when they are persecuted, the Holy Spirit will give them words to speak in their defense (e.g., Matt. 10:19–20): “the Spirit that saved Mordecai and Esther in the place of their captivity” will work through his listeners as well (*Dem.* 21.21).

Aphrahat has obviously departed from the “plain” or “literal” sense of Scripture to some degree. In a recent study, Biddle suggests that Aphrahat was a pioneer in the allegorical reading of Esther, though he also speaks of Aphrahat’s typological interpretation of the book,¹⁹ thus seeming to conflate the two categories.²⁰ However, others who have studied Aphrahat’s exegetical method have taken pains to distinguish typology from allegory. Koster, for example, acknowledges Aphrahat’s typological approach, while at the same time asserting that he understood the Old Testament in “a concrete, historical sense” and that he had “no need of allegorical exegesis.”²¹ According to Koster, a key feature distinguishing Aphrahat’s typological approach from an allegorical one is that in the latter, the historical component is either obscured or ignored, while the former affirms and incorporates it into the exegetical analysis.²² The conceptual distinction is a significant one, even if terms such as “type” and “allegory” were used somewhat indiscriminately in the early sources.²³ A number of studies of biblical intertextuality have noted that questions of historicity and of observing the original context are crucial factors in distinguishing the two categories. Lunde remarks that “the importance of history is what sets typology apart from allegory. Whereas the former is interested in the natural and historical sense of the context, allegory is mainly interested in the interpretation of words, which are believed

19. Biddle, “Christian Interpretation of Esther,” 154 and 160.

20. Analogously, in a study of early commentaries on Exodus, B. ter Haar Romeny argues that Theodore of Mopsuestia advocated typology as a form of allegorical interpretation acceptable to Antiochene exegetes: “Early Antiochene Commentaries on Exodus,” *Studia Patristica* 30 (1997), 114–19, esp. 117.

21. Koster, “Aphrahat’s Use of the Old Testament,” 138–140. See also J. Neusner, *Aphrahat and Judaism. The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth Century Iran* (StPB 19; Leiden: Brill, 1971), 6–7 and Coakley, “Syriac Exegesis,” 700–1.

22. Cf. Koster, “Aphrahat’s Use of the Old Testament,” 132.

23. The standardized use of terms today does not always correspond to their use in the early sources. E.g., despite Paul’s use of the word “allegory” in Galatians 4, his interpretation is best understood conceptually as typological in nature. Cf. S. Moyise, *Paul and Scripture: Studying the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 51–52; E. E. Ellis, *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 53.

to be inspired symbols.”²⁴ Similarly, Moyise argues that typology maintains a link with the original redemptive-historical meaning of a text, thereby distinguishing it from allegory in two ways: “first, while the original context and meaning is transcended, it is not ignored; and second, there is a salvation-history logic that connects the two events.”²⁵ In view of such observations, the most accurate description of Aphrahat’s interpretation of Mordecai would be as typological but not allegorical in nature. A similar distinction will be observed as we turn to examine the neo-Calvinist tradition’s approach to the book of Esther.

4. Klaas Schilder and the Dutch Neo-Calvinist Tradition

In recent years there has been a surge of interest in the Dutch neo-Calvinist movement, with new studies on and translations of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck appearing at a rapid pace. This increased popularity has not yet extended to Klaas Schilder, despite his significant impact on the Reformed churches of the Netherlands in the 20th century. The lack of interest in Schilder is not hard to explain: With some notable exceptions, the vast majority of his works remain untranslated, and only a modest amount of biographical material about him is available in English.²⁶ Hence it is not surprising that he has remained relatively inaccessible to a broader readership.

Schilder graduated in 1914 from the theological seminary of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in Kampen and served congregations in Ambt-Vollenhove, Vlaardingen, Gorinchem, Delft, Oegstgeest, and Rotterdam-Delfshaven. In 1920 he began contributing to the influential church newspaper *De Reformatie* and joined the editorial ranks in 1924, eventually becoming the editor-in-chief in 1935. He received a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Erlangen in 1933 and the same year was called as professor of dogmatics in Kampen, in the role once filled by Herman Bavinck. He was an independent thinker and a sharp polemicist, unafraid to criticize the most esteemed figures within the conservative Reformed tradition, most notably Abraham Kuyper. Indeed, his criticism of several distinctive Kuyperian doctrines such as common grace, presumptive regeneration, and the relationship between baptism and covenant brought him into increasing conflict with many leading figures in the denomination, such as Valentijn Hepp of the Free University of Amsterdam. The growing intensity of these conflicts eventually led to an ecclesiastical trial for his views and his deposition by the General Synod in 1944, at a meeting presided over by G. C. Berkouwer, also of the Free University. One immediate result

24. J. Lunde, “An Introduction to Central Questions in the New Testament Use of the Old Testament,” in K. Berding and J. Lunde (eds.), *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 7–41, esp. 19 n. 31.

25. Moyise, *Paul and Scripture*, 51–52.

26. For a very partisan biography written by a close associate and supporter, see R. van Reest, *Schilder’s Struggle for the Unity of the Church* (Dutch original 1962–63; tr. T. Plantinga; Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1990); see also J. Faber, “Klaas Schilder’s Life and Work,” in J. Geertsema (ed.), *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1995), 1–17.

of this action was the formation of the “Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (Liberated),” in which Schilder played an even more influential leadership role.

Nowadays, Schilder’s name, if recognized at all, is chiefly associated with a controversy in the Dutch Reformed churches in the late 1930s and early 1940s over “Redemptive-Historical Preaching” and “Exemplary Preaching” (henceforth “RHP” and “EP,” respectively).²⁷ The history of the debate, which was largely about how to interpret and preach the historical texts of the Old Testament, has been treated extensively by Sidney Greidanus and others.²⁸ At the risk of oversimplification, the RHP movement was a reaction to moralistic sermons, which often treated a biblical character as an example of virtuous (or sinful) behavior. According to Schilder’s younger colleague Benne Holwerda, such an approach “dissolves the biblical history into various independent histories that becomes illustrations (examples) for us.”²⁹ As such, EP breaks up the unity of God’s historical working of salvation and therefore fails to interpret a passage faithfully within its canonical context. Stating it less polemically, Holwerda maintained:

The Bible does not contain many histories but *one* history—the one history of God’s constantly advancing revelation, the one history of God’s ever progressing redemptive work. And the various persons named in the Bible have all received their own peculiar place in this one history and have their peculiar meaning for this history. We must, therefore, try to understand all the accounts in their relation with each other, in their coherence with the center of redemptive history, Jesus Christ.³⁰

Therefore a faithful exposition of Scripture, according to the RHP school, requires one to understand a text’s particular location in salvation history and thus its unique contribution to the redemptive message of the Bible.

What often made it difficult to pinpoint the precise point of difference between the two approaches was the fact that the proponents of EP also acknowledged the importance of taking redemptive history into account when interpreting a text. It was typically when speaking about the applicatory component of a sermon that differing conceptions of Old Testament historiography emerged, along with the homiletical

27. The labels are not particularly felicitous, since the terminology was not standardized and labels were typically given by the opposing side in the debate, lending them a sense of opprobrium. For some of the alternate terminology used at the time see S. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura. Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Kampen: Kok, 1970), 19–21.

28. See Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 18–55 for the history of the conflict. For additional analysis, see C. Trimp, *Preaching and the History of Salvation: Continuing an Unfinished Discussion* (Dutch original 1986; tr. N. D. Kloosterman; Dyer: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1996).

29. Cited in Trimp, *Preaching and the History of Salvation*, 87. To further complicate matters, at times RHP advocates utilized the Dutch word “example” (*voorbeeld*) in a positive sense. See n. 41 below.

30. Cited in Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 41.

method best suited to such texts.³¹ Advocates of EP insisted that biblical characters could serve as characters within the biblical narrative of divine redemption and simultaneously as examples of good or bad behavior. RHP advocates completely rejected this synthesis, countering that this in effect created bifurcated sermons in which the exposition could focus on the redemptive message of a text but then the application, being based on exemplary-moralistic readings of characters, would in effect be severed from the exegesis.

EP practitioners keenly felt the exclusive claims of the RHP school, and polemical rejoinders began to proliferate. The controversy was effectively cut short, however, by the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands and the deposition of Schilder, with the ensuing denominational split. The differing sides in the RHP controversy largely divided along denominational lines, with EP proponents remaining in the continuing denomination and RHP advocates aligning with the newer Liberated churches.³² It is with good reason that Trimp's attempt to build on the previous work of Greidanus was subtitled "Continuing an Unfinished Discussion" since the debate clearly was cut off prematurely.

5. Schilder's "Christ in His Sufferings" Trilogy

Klaas Schilder was an important pioneer in the development of the RHP perspective. His appreciation for the significance of redemptive history had developed in part through his polemics against Barthianism and his defense of the statements of the 1926 Synod of Assen, which had deposed the Rev. Dr. J. G. Geelkerken for casting doubt on the historicity of the creation narratives.³³ He developed his understanding more positively in other writings, particularly in his trilogy on the Passion narratives *Christ in His Sufferings*, published in 1930.³⁴ This trilogy was lauded as a major achievement in its day, and its English translation even made an impact outside Dutch-speaking circles. In it, Schilder emphatically examines the Passion narratives from a redemptive-historical and Christological standpoint, consistently focusing on Christ

31. See Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 46–47. Although this cannot be pursued here, some of the disagreements in the controversy may have been due to an overly sharp distinction between "exegesis" and "application" assumed by both sides in the debate, when in fact there is more of a "permeable" barrier between the two. See the discussion in D. M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work. The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 2001), 18–23.

32. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 50–52.

33. For a concise discussion of the Geelkerken case, see M. Rogland, "Ad Litteram: Some Dutch Reformed Theologians on the Creation Days," *WTJ* 63 (2001): 211–33, esp. 217–27. More extensively, see G. Harinck (ed.), *De kwestie-Geelkerken. Een terugblik na 75 jaar* (Barneveld: De Vuurbaak, 2001) and M. J. Aalders, *Heeft de slang gesproken? Het strijdbare leven van Dr. J. G. Geelkerken (1879–1960)* (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2013).

34. A revised second edition of volumes 1 and 2 appeared in 1949–1952 which introduced several changes, including some of the material examined here, but none of them affect the present discussion in a substantive way. For an extensive analysis of the trilogy in the context of Schilder's body of work, see J. J. C. Dee, *K. Schilder: Zijn leven en werk. Deel I (1890–1934)* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1990), 174–205.

rather than other characters. Schilder's concern for history and historical movement is evident throughout: "By means of the chronological development Schilder tries to accentuate the progression in Christ's suffering, a progression from stage to stage as well as within each stage."³⁵

Schilder's entire trilogy is full of original observations and draws many fascinating connections between the Old and New Testaments. Although he never appears to have dealt specifically with the book of Esther in his other published works,³⁶ he does invoke it in the second volume of the trilogy, *Christ on Trial* (henceforth "COT"), in a meditation on Luke 23:6–7 entitled "Christ Before Herod: Israel Before Esau."³⁷ The chapter's title itself suggests that Schilder saw parallels between Jacob and Christ and between Esau and Herod. It will be argued below that, despite a number of critical remarks he made regarding typological interpretation, Schilder presents Jacob and Mordecai as Christological types in this meditation.³⁸

Schilder begins his meditation by noting that Jesus' examination by Herod was "an expression of the wise counsel of God, and also of God's exalted justice" and represents a very deliberate step in the historical execution of God's redemptive plan in Christ.

We must know that all things in the world must co-operate in pronouncing the death sentence upon Christ. Every manifestation of human, social life, every classification of the life of the world, every *modus vivendi* must say to the Christ: Do Thou go out and die. (COT, 369)

Specifically, in Herod's judgment hall, this cosmic coalition against Christ involved a final confrontation between the ultimate son of Jacob and "the false brother," Esau (Edom). Schilder notes that Herod's Idumean lineage reveals him as a kind of *Esau redivivus*, thus setting the stage for this climactic meeting, which was a necessary part of Christ's sufferings.

35. Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 178.

36. For a list of his publications, see J. v. d. Hoeven, "Bibliographie Prof. Dr. K. Schilder," *Almanak-FQI* (1953), 122–67.

37. With a few minor corrections, I cite the English translation of Henry Zylstra published by Eerdmans in 1938–40.

38. M. B. van 't Veer, who was closely associated with Schilder and a major voice in the RHP movement, explicitly rejected a typological interpretation of Esther; see his "Christologische prediking over de historische stof van het Oude Testament," in R. Schippers (ed.), *Van den Dienst des Woords* (Goes: Oosterbaan & le Cointre, 1944), 117–167, esp. 154–5. An English translation of this essay is available as "Christological Preaching on Historical Materials of the Old Testament," n.p. [cited 29 January 2022]. Online: <https://spindleworks.com/library/veer/veer.html>. On the other hand, S. G. de Graaf, a pastor in Amsterdam who was also associated with Schilder and other neo-Calvinists such as Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, presented Mordecai as a Christological type in the first volume of his *Verbondsgeschiedenis*, 2 vols. (Kampen: Kok, 1937–1938), 1.5 and 1.634. This was later translated into English as *Promise and Deliverance* (4 vols.; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1977), 1.22 and 2.439. See further n. 41 below.

Christ's appearance before Herod, therefore, represents the appearance in judgment of Jacob, who is called Israel, before Esau. Had Esau's voice been silent in that last chorus of all the great singers in the oratorio of death, who, tearless, gnashing their teeth and mocking, take their places presently at the grave of Jesus—had Esau's voice been silent among those, the judgment of the world and of the flesh against the Elect One of God would have been incomplete. (COT, 369–70)

Schilder explores the biblical precursors to this trial scene in the conflict between Jacob and Esau and between their various descendants. According to Schilder, Israel's conflicts with Edom and Amalek were "a recurrence, or better, a continuation and culmination of the old conflict between Jacob and Esau" (COT, 372). Most fundamentally, he claims, this is not simply a conflict between different ethnic groups but is rather an expression of the "antithesis between election and reprobation, faith and unbelief, spirit and flesh, the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent" (COT, 373).

The lion's share of Schilder's meditation explores the Jacob-Esau conflict as providing the interpretive backdrop for Christ's appearance before Herod. But the mention of the Amalekites leads Schilder to explore "that very remarkable struggle between Haman and Mordecai" as a later manifestation of this ongoing warfare (COT, 374). Like Aphrahat and many others, Schilder picks up on the notice of Haman's lineage as an "Agagite" (which he understands as a collective title for the Amalekite royal house), and he argues that "the conflict between Haman the Agagite and Mordecai is a revival, and a sharply accentuated one at that, of the old antithesis between Israel and Esau" (COT, 374).

Having situated the Mordecai-Haman conflict within this sweep of biblical history, Schilder is able to discern a Messianic message in the book of Esther relating to Israel's kingship.

In this small book Israel's kingship is indeed depicted as having degenerated and been destroyed according to the flesh; but note that it tells us also, when the hewn-down stem of Israel's kingship, of Jacob's beautiful inheritance, seems to be left alone, unfruitful, and twice dead, God discovers the marvelous influences of His extraordinary providence. The spirit of Esau-Agag-Haman may attempt to destroy Jacob but it cannot succeed in the attempt. Mordecai who bears within himself the flesh of "Jacob" and the spirit of "Israel" triumphs over Haman after a while. He triumphs over Esau. Esau may demand Jacob's birthright again and again, and it may be that this birthright sometimes reverts to Esau entirely on this or that occasion, but by way of faith and repentance, and by way of a spiritual struggle for the real essence of the seed of the woman, that birthright will remain Jacob's, Israel's into all eternity. Yes, by way of the Messiah, the birthright will remain Israel's. (COT, 375)

Schilder's interpretation of the book of Esther can thus be described as both redemptive-historical and Christological in nature, being rooted in the person of Mordecai as a representative of the seed of the woman who will eventually crush the serpent's head.

For additional confirmation of this line of interpretation, Schilder refers to the oracles of Balaam, in which the Israelite-Edomite and Israelite-Amalekite conflicts coalesce (Num. 24:18–20). Similar to Aphrahat, Schilder views these as Esau's attempt "to get his birthright back from Jacob. For 'Esau' cannot reconcile himself to the fact that he has given his birthright away" (COT, 375). In other words, the conflict is fundamentally a question of the theological reality of divine election.

Just what are these two quarreling about? We have already indicated the answer: The feud concerns the birthright. According to the good pleasure of God's sovereign election that birthright was Jacob's due. But Esau cannot reconcile himself to Jacob's having it. When the Spirit of prophecy acting through Balaam's agency presently thunders, it announces that Israel's kingship shall be exalted above that of Agag.... [Balaam] sees that this kingship of Israel's future will far transcend the power of Agag, and greatly supersede the strength of Amalek and of Edom. (COT, 375–76)

The Jacob-Esau conflict, along with all the ensuing manifestations of it in history, thus finds its roots in the sovereign decree of God.³⁹

Such prophecies of Israel's eventual victory are all very well, but it must be kept in mind that Schilder's trilogy is intended as an extended meditation on the *sufferings* of Christ, not his exaltation. To shift the focus to Christ's Passion, Schilder argues that at the culmination of the Jacob-Esau conflict in Luke 23, it is "Jacob" who must ultimately have his birthright taken away.

Jacob's great Son stands in the presence of the epigone of Esau. He stands there bound and fettered. The concealment of God in the man Christ Jesus, in the incarnation of the Word, is now having its effects. It is expressing itself more specifically in this concealment of Jacob's birthright, of the birthright of the firstborn, in the man Christ Jesus. God, and the seed of the woman, and the Spirit of election, and the Word of God's sovereign good pleasure, and the calling by the free grace of God—all these are contained in the humanity of Jesus. The wind blows under the canvases of the tent in which Jacob once dealt with Esau about the birthright. The tent pins are being jerked away. Alas, Jacob stands empty-handed under the naked sky. There is nothing which he can call his inheritance. (COT, 377)

39. Similarly K. Popma, *Joden in ballingschap* (Amsterdam: H. J. Paris, 1950), 49. Popma, who taught at the universities of Groningen and Utrecht, was not as directly associated with Schilder as others such as Holwerda and Van 't Veer, but he was highly involved with the Calvinistic philosophy movement pioneered by Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven.

Accordingly, Schilder shifts from the scene of Jacob in Isaac's tent acquiring the firstborn's birthright to Jacob at Peniel wrestling with God: "The mystery of Peniel re-enacts itself in the courtroom of Herod. There it reaches its denouement; there it comes to rest" (COT, 379). In a dramatic rush of words, Schilder explains:

Now something must happen to Jacob. Just as Jacob once trembled as he awaited the coming of Esau after Jacob had squandered the birthright, and just as he could regain that right only by a struggle with God at Peniel, so Christ stands before Herod. He is bound; He bears the burdens of His father Jacob, and is able to achieve His birthright only by a struggle with God. Come, Father, struggle against Him: *veni pugnator spiritus*.⁴⁰ Hurl Jacob to the ground, Father; He must experience His Peniel. God must attack Him. O God of all history, wrench more than His thigh out of joint; bruise His heels, for He is a Jacob having no rights. Esau rules in Herod now. And Jacob in Christ Jesus is a poor, robbed, manacled, and despised Man. Moreover this Christ-Jacob has no rights in the world; He can make no claims. He stands in Edom's presence, and can only wait. (COT, 377)

At this new Peniel, however, it is not the pre-Incarnate Christ wounding the man Jacob; instead, it is the mystery of God "punishing and warring against Himself.... Just as in Christ He who offers, offers Himself, so the night of Peniel is being fulfilled there where the Son inflicts the blows upon Himself which once He inflicted upon Jacob" (COT, 380–1).

Schilder has thus returned to his starting point in Jacob as the elect one of God, except he is now considering a different point in the Patriarchal narrative that prefigures Christ's Passion. This would seem to be a natural point for Schilder to conclude, but he unexpectedly invokes the book of Esther once last time as he concludes with the paradox of Christ's simultaneous humiliation and exaltation.

Bow low, bow very low, O son of man, before the mystery of redemption which is in Christ Jesus. God is in hiding; zenith and nadir, the climbing of official heights and the bending low in the vale of the martyrs are one and the same thing. Do you yourselves say now whether such nonsense to the unregenerate mind is not an expression of the vision of God? Can it astonish you, then, that the kingship of Israel is exalted above that of Agag in the very moment in which that kingship was humiliated before it? Ah, Mordecai must be sent to the gallows: I mean that Mordecai's Mediator must be nailed to the tree of disgrace. Only then will Haman who is from Esau walk before Christ's white horse. Only then will the red horse of Esau's vaunt of war lead in the victory march of Christ's white horse of triumph. Who would miss Herod's intermezzo? For all the threads of history come together in it. (COT, 381)

40. "Come, fighting Spirit," a striking twist on the early Christian invocation, "Come, Creator Spirit" (*veni creator spiritus*).

The foregoing summary does not do justice to Schilder's creativity, theological vision, and rhetorical flair, even in this single meditation from his massive trilogy. The chapter displays several characteristic features of Schilder's theology, such as his strong emphasis on the decrees of God in election and reprobation, coupled with his fascination with the historical expression of those decrees in God's progressive plan of redemption in the unified narrative of the divine covenant, traced from Old to New Testaments. Rather than allowing God's decrees to be placed in opposition to his covenant in history or subordinating one to the other, Schilder maintains them as a mysterious unity by maintaining a focus on the person of Christ. As he observes, "the incarnation of the Word is the only interpretive principle of all the mystery of this world" (COT, 381).

What might be unexpected here for someone familiar with Schilder's work is his interpretation of the characters of Jacob and Mordecai, which can hardly be described as anything other than typological in nature. Although such an approach was observed above in the writings of Aphrahat and can be found throughout the later Christian exegetical tradition, advocates of RHP typically expressed an aversion to typology.⁴¹ Schilder himself harbored concerns that typology would lead to a de-historicizing of narrative texts and would flatten out the unique redemptive-historical message of each passage; in essence, then, he feared that it would result in the same sort of fragmentation of the Bible's one story that he criticized in the EP method.⁴² Even in this meditation, Schilder speaks critically of "the habit of looking for parallelisms on the part of those who discover them too facilely" (COT, 371). He admits that protests would be in order if the proposed Jacob/Christ and Esau/Herod connections were "the product purely of human allegorizations or of the arbitrary habit of seeking out 'parallelisms'" (COT, 372). Nevertheless, he insists that his interpretation "is not a game of allegory; nor is it a far-fetched 'type' study," but rather represents "the effect of the fact of election and reprobation" (COT, 376). This fundamental dogma serves as the *regula fidei* for understanding the biblical scenes under consideration.

Whoever sees the antithesis of election and reprobation going on between Jacob and Esau, he will be the one to see the real meaning of that conflict. If we can detect in this meeting of Esau and Jacob, of Herod and Jesus, only a chronological connection, we will not see half as much significance in it, as he who sees the shadow of Jacob and Esau playing behind Jesus and Herod. But if we acknowledge according to the rule of faith that the Logos and the Spirit use all that history brings forth as a stage and sphere of operation for

41. See Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 83–85; cf. 48–49 and Trimp, *Preaching and the History of Salvation*, 96–101. Despite their hesitancy in this regard, the RHP school did in fact acknowledge the presence of foreshadowings of Christ in the Old Testament. Confusingly, they employed the Dutch word *voorbeeld* for this, not in its common use of "example" but rather as a "pre-figuring" (*vóór-beelding*). See, e.g., Van 't Veer, "Christologische Prediking," 162–64; B. Holwerda, "De heilshistorie in de prediking," in *Begonnen hebbende van Mozes ...* (Terneuzen: Littooj, 1953), 70–118, esp. 94–96. An English translation of Holwerda's essay is available online as "The History of Redemption in the Preaching of the Gospel," n.p. [cited 12 February 2022]. Online: <https://spindleworks.com/library/holwerda/holwerda.htm>.

42. See especially Dee, *K. Schilder*, 339 n. 83.

the law of election and reprobation, we shall be guilty of gross ignorance, if we fail to find in this meeting of Herod and Christ a fulfillment of the former meeting of Esau and Jacob. What, pray, is Jacob's role in the world, if God's purpose for him is not related to the appearing of the Christ? The womb of the seed of the woman gives him birth solely in order that in and through him Christ may make His appearance (COT, 376–77).

According to Schilder, then, it is only by seeing these Old Testament “shadows” or prefigurements to Christ's trial before Herod that one will be able to appreciate the theological significance of the precise moment in salvation history.

The treatment of Mordecai in *Christ in His Sufferings* thus presents a curious paradox: Schilder is critical of “type studies” while at the same time engaging in typological exegesis of Jacob and Mordecai. One could simply dismiss this as an inconsistency on his part; after all, others have noted that Schilder was not always consistent in his application of RHP principles.⁴³ In this instance, however, it is worth paying closer attention to the qualifiers Schilder includes in his critical remarks. For example, he objects to types that are “far-fetched,” “facile,” “arbitrary,” “the product purely of human allegorizations,” and so on. Other RHP advocates expressed themselves in similar terms.⁴⁴ It seems fair to say, then, that RHP proponents did not object to every instance of typological interpretation but rather to those cases when it was done poorly and bled over into allegory. If a typological message is the intended product of the inspiration of the Spirit (rather than speculative “human” allegorizing) and can be grounded in sound (not “facile”) biblical and theological arguments, it can be embraced and not avoided, even when it points toward a Christological type such as Mordecai, who is not explicitly identified as such in the New Testament.⁴⁵ Schilder's hesitancy regarding typology can be taken as a salutary caution that not every proposed Christological type is *ipso facto* valid; one has to provide some convincing rationale to support one's interpretation.

5. Conclusion: Comparison and Contrast

With respect to the theological interpretation of Esther, the similarities between Aphrahat and Schilder are striking. Obviously, both of them maintained the historicity

43. See Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 52–53; cf. 180–1.

44. E.g., Trimp speaks of Holwerda's resistance to “allegorical and *superficially* typological” interpretation (*Preaching and the History of Salvation*, 88, emphasis added).

45. This would not apply to all those associated with the RHP approach. For example, Van 't Veer appears to advocate “Marsh's dictum” in allowing only for those types explicitly endorsed by the New Testament authors: “We do not have the right to make and multiply ‘types;’ the Lord gave them to us. We must hold to the types and typical expressions that He gave us” (“Christologische prediking,” 154). Regardless, it is worth observing that despite many claims to the contrary, there are discernible intertextual references to the book of Esther in the New Testament; see M. Rogland, “Book of Esther,” in: G. K. Beale, D. A. Carson, B. Gladd, A. Naselli (eds.), *Dictionary of the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, forthcoming).

of the narrative and sought to integrate that into their theological analysis. Hence, both of them situated the Haman-Mordecai conflict within the larger redemptive-historical context of Scripture. Theologically, both traced this conflict back to the divine decree of election, manifested in the choosing of Jacob over Esau (and, in Aphrahat's case, of Shem over Canaan). Their interpretations of Mordecai would best be described as typological rather than allegorical, based on the abovementioned distinctions. This becomes even more apparent when one compares their readings of the book with later writers for whom typological and allegorical interpretation of the Bible was standard interpretive practice. The early medieval commentary by Rabanus often provides what are clearly *ad hoc* explanations of incidental narrative details, such as the flax of Esther 1:6 signifying "the mortification of the flesh" and the ivory indicating "the chastity of the body." What makes the typological reading of Aphrahat and Schilder more persuasive is its basis in Mordecai's narrative arc from humiliation to exaltation within the book's conflict-based plot structure, set against the redemptive-historical background of the Israel-Amalek struggle.⁴⁶ By focusing on the bigger picture of the characters within the narrative rather than minor details, Aphrahat and Schilder have provided a much more convincing redemptive-historical and Christological reading of the book.⁴⁷ As such, they confirm Frei's perceptive observation that narrative types are not static but emerge in the "intersection of character and particular event-laden circumstance."⁴⁸

The chief point of contrast between Aphrahat and Schilder lies in how they approach the exemplary element of the Esther narrative and the question of application. Aphrahat unabashedly holds up Mordecai and Esther as positive models of fasting and of suffering persecution, which enables him to make straightforward applications of the biblical text to his listeners. As noted above, the RHP movement strongly resisted this homiletical approach. In his meditation, Schilder makes no attempt to place his readers in the position of any biblical characters for the purposes of application. In his trilogy, Schilder insists on keeping the focus solely on Christ in his suffering, and to present Mordecai as any sort of moral example would distract from that purpose. It would be hard to pinpoint what specific application, if any, Schilder had in mind for his readers. He does not use Esther to directly address any sinful action or attitude that his hearers might have been struggling with, though one must remember that his meditation is really a consideration of Luke 23:6–7, not the

46. Schilder focuses exclusively on the character of Mordecai, and Aphrahat virtually never mentions Esther without naming Mordecai as well, though as noted above he does view her as a typological prefiguration of the church. For further exploration of this as it pertains to Esther, see M. Rogland, "'And So I Will Go Unto the King': Prayer and the Book of Esther," in M. Rogland (ed.), *Faithful Ministry. An Ecclesial Festschrift in Honor of the Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 153–67.

47. This is not to say that the descriptive details of narrative setting are completely irrelevant. In the case of Esther, for example, a variety of lexical terms serve to evoke the priesthood and the temple, which are significant for the book's interpretation. See M. Rogland, "The Cult of Esther: Temple and Priestly Imagery in the Book of Esther," *JSOT* 44.1 (2019): 99–114.

48. H. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1974), 15; cf. also Walsh, "Esther in the *Demonstrations* of Aphrahat."

book of Esther.⁴⁹ Perhaps an application was implicit when he spoke of the “way of faith and repentance” being the means by which the descendants of Jacob could reclaim a birthright that had “reverted” temporarily to Esau (COT, 375). If so, his final exhortation to “bow low, very low” may have been intended as a general call to this “way of faith and repentance.” In any event, it must be admitted that the applicatory component of the meditation is not prominent.⁵⁰

Aphrahat’s application for his audience is straightforward and is based on an “exemplary” reading of Mordecai and Esther. Nevertheless, based on their principles, proponents of RHP would not be able to object to Aphrahat’s work since his *Demonstrations* make no pretense of being full-fledged expositions of the book of Esther. Rather, they are clearly intended to be thematic treatises that happen to employ various biblical characters as illustrative material. RHP advocates *admitted* this to be legitimate, whether or not they actually utilized it as a homiletical technique. As some have observed, textual application can be developed from several different features of biblical texts, and historical narratives can describe redemptive acts as well as exemplary ones.⁵¹ Nevertheless, what makes the remarks of both Aphrahat and Schilder so powerful is their focus on the redemptive-historical and Christological component of the book rather than on the exemplary value of Esther, Mordecai, or even Jesus himself. For the faithful preacher, the redemptive work of Christ, regardless of where it falls on the timeline of Old or New Testament history, will always prove to be the most compelling message.

49. To employ the framework of Bryan Chapell’s *Christ-Centered Preaching* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), Schilder makes almost no attempt to delineate a “fallen condition focus” from the text of Esther. Other Neocalvinistic writers often found fault with the Jews of Susa for failing to return to Israel after the decree of Cyrus and as such they were considered guilty of faithlessness or of abandoning the church. See, e.g., De Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, 2.439 and Popma, *Joden in ballingschap*, 7–9. This perspective can also be found in later writers from the Liberated churches; see J. W. Smitt, *Pinksterens triumpf over Purim. Heilshistorische verklaring en prediking van het boek Esther* (Kampen: Van den Berg, 1985), 34. On the other hand, F. van Deursen, who served Liberated congregations before transferring to the Netherlands Reformed Churches, dissents from this general consensus; see his *Ruth—Klaagliederen—Esther* (De Voorzeide Leer; Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1991), 235.

50. For suggestions as to how the RHP method might be more effectively developed in this regard, see E. B. Watkins, “Redemptive Historical Preaching and the Drama of Redemption: A Marriage in the Making?” *MAJT* 30 (2019): 101–116.

51. See Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 86–90.