Reading Esther as an Invitation to Play with Biblical Texts

by

LINDA MONYAK

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THESIS ADVISOR: DIANE JACOBSON

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Ignored or derided, the book of Esther has always held an uneasy position in the canon. Esther’s position in the biblical canon has long been a puzzle since the book neither mentions the name of God, nor makes any overt allusions to religious practices. Named after its heroine, Esther has been considered by many to serve the primary purpose of giving the historical background of the Jewish festival of Purim. Since Purim appears to be mainly a holiday of political liberation rather than religious salvation, with possible origins in an older Persian holiday, even this justification has been called into question.

The date of Esther’s origin is no doubt late, with scholars assigning it to periods ranging from the Persian Period to the Hellenistic Period.¹ The setting of Esther in the Persian court at Susa has obviously determined the earliest date assigned to Esther. Later

dates often reflect the genre a particular scholar has discerned for Esther. The types of genre proposed for Esther are many and varied, including: historical novel,\textsuperscript{2} festival legend,\textsuperscript{3} historical account,\textsuperscript{4} wisdom narrative,\textsuperscript{5} Persian chronicle,\textsuperscript{6} and comedy or farce.

\textsuperscript{2}The Persian setting of Esther and the use of many Persian loan words in conjunction with some similarity to Hellenistic romances have made the historical novella a favored genre for some scholars. See Niditch, \textit{Hebrew Bible}, 446-448.

\textsuperscript{3}This is the view held by Gaster, Ringgren, Dommershausen, and Bickerman as documented by Niditch, \textit{Hebrew Bible}, 447. For certain peculiarities surrounding the celebration of Purim, such as its late establishment and the mixed linguistics of its name, see Sybil Sheridan, “The Five Megilloth,” in \textit{Creating the Old Testament}, ed. Stephen Bigger (Cambridge, Ma: basil Blackwell, 1989) 293 & 315.

\textsuperscript{4}Few scholars adhere to the view that Esther is based on historical events. For two who accept the historical basis of Esther, see Yamauchi, \textit{Bibliotheca}, 99-112 and Robert Gordis, “Religion, Wisdom, and History in the Book of Esther: A New Solution to an Ancient Crux,” \textit{JBL}, 100(3) 382-388.

\textsuperscript{5}For a discussion of Talmon’s analysis of Esther as a wisdom narrative based on the secular nature of the book and its congruence with wisdom theodicy in which the righteous flourish and the wicked perish, see Gordis, \textit{JBL}, 366-368.

\textsuperscript{6}The “Persian Chronicle” genre was developed by Gordis to explain the seeming lack of religiosity of Esther, its connection to Purim festivities, and the literary refinement found in Esther as a whole. For a complete explanation of Esther as a Persian Chronicle, see Gordis, \textit{JBL}, 375-378.
The humor of the book of Esther has been noted by many scholars and is evident in the opening lines of the book with the lavish setting in the Persian court of Susa and its exaggerated aspects (such as 127 provinces). Other elements which contribute to the comic aspects of Esther include the clear distinction between heroine/hero and villain and the ubiquitous use of irony. Sasson has called Esther a travesty in the best literary sense of treating serious matters with levity.7

Sasson has captured the spirit of Esther nicely. This book is serious fun. When the times are threatening and danger looms all around, what else is to be done but laugh? An analogous contemporary situation existed in this country during the cold war era. When Cuban missiles were pointed at American cities, many children and not a few adults went home to watch “The Rocky and Bulwinkle Show.” The names of the villains were all it took to identify Boris and Natasha as Russians and the heroes that we cheered for were a squirrel and a moose. The author of Esther did not use “Fractured Fairy Tales,” but did, I believe make use of “messed-up mythologies.” The ancient reader of Esther got the author’s point because they knew those myths so well. In short, I believe that the author of Esther relied on his audience’s knowledge of biblical texts as well as other

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ancient texts to make his point with the finesse of humor. Small phrases remind the reader or listener of entire biblical narratives such as creation, passover, and those associated with biblical characters like Joseph, Ruth, and Abigail, among others. The range of biblical narratives addressed allows the author to present a complex viewpoint of the monarchy and related power issues. Who has power? How is power used wisely? Who is really king here?

In the time of Samuel’s service to Eli, we are told that “the word of the Lord was rare in those days” (1 Sam 3:1). In Esther, even the word “Lord” is absent from the text. What are the people of God to do in times like this? How does one behave in the courts of those traditional “enemies” of God, Egypt and Babylon? Could the author of Esther be telling us something about living in times when God seems so distant as to be absent? What does it mean when the people of God are indistinguishable from everyone else? Where is God when “the word of the LORD is rare”? Do the actions of God’s people matter? Do they make a difference? Can we remain people of God and participate in secular society? Does the presence of God’s people bring anything of value to those who claim no relationship to God?

These are serious questions. So let us accept the invitation of Esther’s author and play with the biblical texts which are suggested in Esther.

Overview of Biblical Themes Suggested in Esther

In this thesis, I am proposing that certain key
phrases, often in connection with other aspects of Esther, such as narrative events or even other phrases, evoke many other biblical narratives. Some phrases, such as רָאָה הָרָע (a good day) are associated primarily with one specific narrative, in this case, the creation narrative. Other phrases, such as __ יְזָר (to send a hand against), are associated with a variety of narratives, including the creation text, other exilic narratives, and the Psalmist’s description of God’s salvific action.

Creation themes are evoked in Esther primarily through the use of the phrase “a good day,” repetitive statements which center on those things which please the king, women who are pleasing to the eyes, the phrase “to send (or stretch out) a hand,” the frequent use of the number seven, and the towering importance of a tree (as gallows, in this case). While none of these alone recall the creation narrative, together they play with critical aspects of that older story in a new setting.

Other phrases and aspects of Esther are reminiscent of the narrative of Passover. In Esther, the verb עֶבֶר for pass over, is used more frequently than it is in the Passover narrative of Exodus. The presence of horses and consultation of wise men plays a significant role in both texts as well. In addition, the phrase “to stretch out a hand” also appears as a minor element of the Passover narrative. These elements in Esther are heightened by another key event in Esther, the casting of lots by Haman, which occurs on the day before Passover.
The themes of law and power and the place of the monarchy are overtly played with in Esther. The law (תֵּעָכָד) of Persia is not the Torah or instruction given by God. When combined with other aspects of Esther mentioned above such as the role of horses, wise men (and wisdom), “stretching out a hand,” and trees, I believe it is possible to discern the hand of an author who is skillfully evoking the entirety of biblical traditions for a people who think they have lost everything.

Religion as a theme in Esther is generally held to be unexpectedly absent in this canonical book. However, given the high level of literary skills exhibited by the author of Esther, it is probable that this author is also at home with other texts of the ancient world, especially the mythological narratives of Babylon. The names of the central characters (Esther, Mordecai, and Haman) play a critical role here. Even Esther’s Jewish name, Hadassah, which means myrtle, may play a role in suggesting the intent of the author in giving undeniably Jewish characters the names of pagan deities.

Additional phrases in Esther recall a variety of biblical narratives. In particular, the phrase “to be merry with wine” recalls a group of narratives including the story of the Levite and his concubine, Abigail and Nabal, Amnon and Absalom, and Ruth. This phrase in combination with the role of horses in Esther may point to a clever author making a moral point with humor.

The role of רֵעַ or favor in Esther is critically
important to the plot of the book. also plays an important part in several other biblical narratives such as Joseph, the search for Rebekah, Ruth, Daniel, and Passover.

Using a few well-placed phrases and devices in this short narrative, the skillful author of Esther has managed to suggest a wide range of other biblical narratives without ever mentioning God. Without the use of religious language, Esther addresses the serious religious questions of a people who thought they had lost their ties to their religious heritage. With tongue well in cheek, the author reminds his people of their identity even when appearances suggest that they are indistinguishable from the pagans among whom they live.
As mentioned in the introduction, creation imagery in Esther revolves around the use of certain key phrases and other elements shared with the creation narratives in Genesis. The phrases include: ־רומ חָּבָּה (the good day), בֶּרֶבֶּה יָמָּלָה (by a word of the king), and ַלְּשֵׁלְּתָה יֶדֶ (to send or stretch out a hand). Elements shared with the creation narrative in Genesis include the importance of the number seven and the prominence of the tree in the narrative of the fall. In addition, both Vashti and Esther are described as ־רומ חָּבָּה or “good to look at.” ־רומ חָּבָּה appears in Esther in three verses (Esth 8:17, 9:19 and 9:22). In all these verses, the good day is a holiday, the result of the resolution of the problem presented by Haman’s edict. When the word of the king reaches the people that the Jews are commanded “to be prepared to avenge themselves against their enemies” (Esth 8:13), it is for the Jews an occasion for a feast and a holiday (a good day) (Esth 8:17). Esther 9:19 speaks of the feast and holiday (good day) which is instituted by the people themselves after they have assembled to defend themselves. Similar links are made in Esther 9:22 after Mordecai issues the proclamation formally instituting for all time the
holiday which the people have spontaneously celebrated. In this verse, a more explicit link is made between the holiday and a day of resting from their enemies. The notion of rest in connection with this victory is also alluded to in Esther 9:17. This notion of a good day as connected with rest tends to suggest a new creation. Where before there had only been death, annihilation, and extermination; now there is feasting, joy, sending gifts of food to one’s neighbors, and giving alms to the poor. Before there was no possibility; now there are new possibilities even in a land of exile.

In the first chapter of Esther, it becomes apparent that the number seven is significant for the author. The king’s banquet for the populace which celebrates his firm control of the kingdom lasts seven days (Esth 1:5). It is on the seventh day of the banquet that the king commands his seven eunuchs to bring Queen Vashti before the banquet guests so that her beauty may be admired by the entire kingdom (Esth 1:10). When Vashti refuses to become merely another decorative object among all the king’s possessions, the enraged king consults not only with his wise men, but also with the seven Persian princes, or high officials to ascertain his next course of action. When Esther enters the house of women with the other young women, vying for the now vacant position of queen, she catches the eye of the eunuch in charge, Hegai. And her favorable status in his eyes is indicated not only by a better position in the required beauty regimen, but also by the assignment of seven maidens, presumably as her personal attendants (Esth 2:9).
Esther’s fateful night with King Ahasuerus takes place in the seventh year of his reign (Esth 2:16). The king declares his love for Esther, makes her his queen, and gives a banquet in her honor, again in the seventh year of his kingdom (Esth 2:18). It is interesting to note that as part of these festivities in the seventh year, the king proclaims a holiday or gives rest (חגון) to his people (Esth 2:18).

While based on the hiphil of the verb חָגָן (rest), this is the only use of the feminine noun form of this root. It is interesting to note that in the past, both the KJV and RSV translations have followed the LXX in translating this word as a remission of taxes despite the fact that the Vulgate uses requies or rest here.8 Although the creation narrative in Genesis 2:3 uses a different verb for rest (שָׁנָה), the parallels are nevertheless interesting.

Given the possible allusions to the creation narrative discussed so far, it is enlightening to take a look at what happens at the word of the king. In Esther 1:12, Vashti refuses to come “on a word of the king” (בְּקֹדֶשׁ וּבְרֶם וְלֶמֶלֶךְ). Later, “a royal word will go out” (רְצָה לְבַרְרֵי מִלְשָׂנָה) which will forbid Vashti from coming into the king’s presence again (Esth 1:19). Beautiful maidens are gathered throughout the kingdom because of the word of the king (Esth 2:8). Haman’s edict becomes synonymous “with the word

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of the king” and is speedily carried throughout the kingdom (Esth 3:15). It is distribution of this very “word of the king” which causes all the Jews to begin their great mourning (Esth 4:3). Esther promises to “do according to the word of the king” (‘אֶבֶּרֶת הָלָה) if the king will come to her banquet with Haman (Esth 5:8). After Esther successfully defeats Haman, Mordecai writes a new edict which calls for the Jews to defend themselves against their enemies, and once again the royal messengers are dispatched “with the word of the king” (Esth 8:14). When this “word of the king” arrives in the provinces there is great rejoicing (Esth 8:17). It is this “word of the king” which allows the situation of the Jews in the Persian Empire to be reversed (Esth 9:1). The word of King Ahasuerus is law; it is the royal command. Unfortunately, the commands of this king lead mainly to the loss of life. The least innocuous of his commands is the order to gather the maidens of Persia for his personal enjoyment.

When Haman’s words are considered, they accomplish the reverse of what he has intended. For, after giving the king advice on how to go about honoring someone, Haman is instructed to “do according to what you spoke” (קֶנֶשׁ אֶבֶּרֶת וּפָשַׁת) for Mordecai, rather than for himself (Esth 6:10).

In contrast, “the words of Mordecai” are weighed carefully by the palace officials other then Haman (Esth 3:4). There is a period of testing in which these minor palace officials simply wait to see if Mordecai’s words will stand. When Haman’s edict is issued and
Mordecai goes to Esther for help, it is the “words of Mordecai” which Hathach reports to Esther (Esth 4:9). When Haman is “unmasked” before the king, Harbona reminds the king that it was “Mordecai who spoke for the good of the king” (Mordecai who spoke for the good of the king) (Esth 7:9). Mordecai’s words, though not equated with royal commands, have weight. They convey at the same time loyalty to his people and loyalty to the king.

Esther’s words are also given due consideration in the narrative. After considering Mordecai’s plea for intervention on behalf of her people, “they reported to Mordecai the words of Esther” (Esth 4:12). Later, in verse 17, we learn that “Mordecai did all which Esther had commanded him.” Even the king hurries Haman “to do the word of Esther” (Esth 5:5). How interesting that both Mordecai and the king take action based on the words of Esther.

When the words of God in creation are compared with the effect of the words of characters in Esther, two conclusions can be drawn. The words of God bring about an abundance of life, in contrast to the death dealing words of King Ahasuerus. It is important to note here that the last commands of the king may bring about the possibility of escape from annihilation for the Jewish segment of the populace, but only at the cost of numerous lives throughout his kingdom. Second, God’s words are effective. God speaks and there is light; God speaks and the sea produces an abundance of life, as does the earth (Gen 1:3,11, and 20).
Another theme which is repeated in Esther is that of the pleasant appearance. In Esther 1:11, we are told that Vashti is “good to look at” (ברちゃんと פראה). Vashti’s replacement is to be sought among virgins who are good to look at (תובלות פראות) (Esth 2:2-3). Among those virgins is Esther, who is not only good-looking, but also “beautiful in form” (ותובה פראות) (Esth 2:7).

A related theme is that which is pleasing to the eyes. The king is presented with the plan to replace Queen Vashti with the “maiden who is most pleasing in the eyes of the king” (אשה תשב בונילא). Not only that, but this very plan is “pleasing in the eyes of the king” (Esth 2:4). So very early in the story, we know that appearances are of the utmost importance to this king. When Esther arrives with the other maidens, we learn that “she was pleasing in his (Hegai’s) eyes” (Esth 2:9). As the eunuch entrusted with keeping and preparing these women for their night with the king, Hegai’s eyes are really the eyes of the king. It is his duty to screen this already select group of women for the one who will tickle the fancy of the king, a duty for which Hegai seems well suited. When Esther presents the case of her people before the king, she requests that the king base his response on whether “I am pleasing in his eyes” (אני בשמני והפשע) (Esth 8:5).

The remaining examples of what is “pleasing to the eyes” have little to do with what is visible, but instead relate to schemes. When Haman visits the king seeking approval for his pet project, the king tells
Haman to “do with the people as is good in your eyes” (וַהֲשִׂימוֹלָה כְּסֹאֹב בִּשְׂדַי הָאָמֶר) (Esth 3:11). Later, the king will instruct Esther and Mordecai to “write on behalf of the Jews as seems good in your eyes” (כְּסֹאֹב יְהוָה כְּסֹאֹב בִּשְׂדַי הָאָמֶר) (Esth 8:8). At the very least, we can conclude that this king is no micro-manager of the affairs of state.

What is the creation connection with all these “good-looking” women and matters which are “pleasing to the eyes” of the king and his advisors? In Genesis 3:6, “the woman saw the tree was good to eat and desirable to the eyes.” Surely the author of Esther is playing with this image through this story of a kingdom in which the king and his advisors continually do what is good in their eyes. It is also worth noting that Esther is a tale of reversal in which the women are good to look at, as opposed to a woman admiring the fruit of a tree.

The tree also plays an important role in Esther, though as a gallows. The gallows tree of Esther first makes its appearance as a method of dispensing with the two eunuchs who plotted to “send a hand against the king” and whose plot was discovered by Mordecai (Esth 2:21 and 23). The tree reaches its greatest heights through the efforts of Mordecai, who constructs a gallows tree of fifty cubits (Esth 5:14).

As mentioned above, “sending a hand against” or “stretching out a hand for” led to the gallows tree for the two eunuchs in Esther 2:21. When the king, who is unable to sleep has the chronicles of the kingdom read to him, he is told again of the plot of the eunuchs
in terms of those “who sought to send a hand against” him (Esth 6:2). And when things get shady, Haman can be found “despising in his eyes to send a hand against Mordecai alone” (לְשָׁלָה יִזְכָּר עֵינָיו יִמְרָא לְמוֹדְכַּאי) (Esth 3:6). Ultimately, Haman is hanged on the gallows tree because he “stretched out a hand against the Jews” (אָשֶׁר עָלָן יֵזְכָּר לְעָיוֹן) (Esth 8:7). The last reference to “stretching out a hand” is in Esther 9:2 where the Jews are reported to have gathered “to send a hand against the ones seeking their evil” (לְשָׁלָה יִזְכָּר לְפִלְמֵשׁ רַעָּמֵם).

The tale of Esther has numerous, though sketchy ties, to the creation narratives. There are the themes of the good day and what pleases the king which evoke the rhythm of God creating and declaring creation good, and another day. Critical events in Esther occur on the seventh day or seventh year or involve seven eunuchs, princes or maidens. The author plays with trees and what is desirable to the eyes as well as with stretching out a hand to take what is desirable.
CHAPTER 3
PASSOVER THEMES IN ESTHER

Several studies of Esther have noted a close connection between Esther and Passover. The most striking evidence that Passover may be involved comes from the date on which Haman issues his edict, the thirteenth day of Nisan and the day before Passover (Esth 3:7). The story of Esther, like the Passover narrative in Exodus, is a story of liberation. In both stories, the liberation depends in part on well-placed members of the oppressed group within the locus of power, the palace. The heroes and heroine have names which reflect the oppressing power rather than their own heritage. Moses is an Egyptian name; while Esther and Mordecai are Persian names. Deliverance takes two people working together: Esther and Mordecai in Esther, and Moses and Aaron in Exodus. It is even possible to see similarities in the reluctant responses of both Moses and Esther when

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confronted with their task.\textsuperscript{10}

In the light of the above observations, the frequent use of the verb גבר in the text of Esther is striking. The first use of this verb occurs in Esther 1:19 where we are told that “the laws of the Persians and Medes may not be passed over” (ברAmerica1 הילא ישמור). In Esther 3:3, the king’s servants take note of the fact that Mordecai has passed over the king’s command to bow to Haman with their question, “Why are you passing over the command of the king?” (מצמא המלך). In both of these verses, the use of גבר signals that the law of the Persians and Medes is not to be trifled with, in particular, that the law is irreversible. But we already know in Esther 1:19 that the law being referred to in the context of the great tradition of Persian law is a trifle. It is the law which forbids Vashti to come into the presence of the king because she has refused to come into his presence. In Esther 3:3, when Mordecai dares to by-pass the law of the

\textsuperscript{10}Andrew, \textit{Australian Biblical Review}, 26. Here, I differ slightly by not reading Esther’s long-distance dialogue with Mordecai as that of a weak and fearful woman acting on the wishes of the men in her life. Esther is the only character who takes the time to consider all the aspects of the problem under consideration. Her people are in trouble. She is queen. She needs to speak with the king on behalf of her people, but there is a law about taking the initiative in speaking to the king and the king has not called on her for a month. All these factors and more are suggested by the text as relevant to Esther before she makes her decision.
king, what is at stake is clarified. Is this really a contest between Mordecai and Haman, or is it a contest between Mordecai and the king? The question of the servants also adumbrates Mordecai’s later action. Mordecai does indeed by-pass the law of the king, not only the law to bow before Haman, but also the law which calls for the extermination of all the Jews in the Persian Empire. These actions also recall the contest of God with Pharaoh.

The next occurrence of עִבְרָה is found in Esther 4:17 in which Mordecai passes on or through the city after speaking with Esther. There is, of course, the simple sense in which Mordecai goes from one part of the city to another in order to execute Esther’s commands. However, it is interesting to compare the verses in Exodus in which עִבְרָה is used to describe the action of God who passes over to save the people of Israel. In Exodus 12:12, God says, “I will pass through the land of Egypt that night” (וַיָּדַע יְהוָה לָוָגָה לִקְרַב לִי עֲלֵי לֹא-יִשְׂרָאֵל). And Exodus 12:23 says, “the LORD will pass through to strike down the Egyptians” (יוֹתֵק לָוָגָה לְאֱרָם עֲבָרָה). Upon Haman’s downfall we learn that the king’s ring has been made to pass over from Haman to Mordecai (נָחַל יְהוָה אֵשֶׁר עָבֹר אָשֶׁר עָבֹר עָבֹר) (Esth 8:2). Then in the very next verse, Esther is pleading with the king to pass over Haman’s evil plan (לָפֵץ גֶּבֶל יְהוָה מֵעָבָרָה לְחָשָׁב אֵשֶׁר עָבֹר עָבֹר) (Esth 8:3).

11While this behavior is expected courtly behavior before a
after her request for her own life at the second banquet. Then recall that at that second banquet Esther claims she would not even trouble the king if it were only a matter of being sold into slavery, since the king would be compensated for the sale of slaves, while a massive slaughter of his people will yield nothing for the king (Esth 7:4). It is also important to remember that the wicked scheme which Esther seeks to avoid is one which Haman devised the day before Passover. Esther is already known for its use of irony. Here we have the additional ironic touch of Esther requesting that the king pass over a plan devised the day before Passover, and Esther words her request so as to suggest to the king that if it were only a matter of slavery in a foreign country, she wouldn’t bother him at all. Further, the context for the Esther story includes the books of Ezra and Nehemiah in which the rule of the Persian Empire, even after the residents are allowed to return to Jerusalem is compared to slavery. And the paradigm example for slavery is, of course, the slavery of the Hebrews in Egypt. See especially Ezra 9:9 and Nehemiah 9:36-37. This last text is set in the context of a public prayer which begins with the historical roots of the creation and exodus (Neh 9:6-15).

The last two verses in which מלח is used are related specifically to a regulated observance of Purim. In Esther 9:27 we read that “the observation of these two

Persian king, Esther also looks a bit like Ruth here sleeping at the feet of Boaz and asking for his protection.
days will not be passed over” (יהוה ישבו לחוות צים). A similar use of is found in verse 28 as well.

In addition to the texts of Exodus 12:12 and 23, in which God passes over to create the possibility of salvation, it is important to consider Exodus 15:16 in which the Hebrews pass through the Red Sea. God’s passing over the Egyptians in the night makes it possible for the Israelites to pass through the Red Sea.

The passage through the Red Sea relates to yet another aspect of the setting of Esther, the ubiquity of horses. Horses play a primary role in Haman’s poorly disguised pretensions to the throne in chapter six of Esther. Partly, Haman just wants to go horseback riding - on one of the king’s favorite mounts. So when Haman is asked by the king for advice on what should be done to honor a man in his kingdom, Haman tells the king that along with clothing worn by the king, “a horse which the king has ridden upon and on which is put a crown of royalty on his head” (כְּתוּר מַלְכוּת בָּרָאשִׁיָּה (כִּיסֹס יָישׁוּר עֲלֵי弹ָלִי הַמלָּךְ בַּרְשֵׁי כִּיסֹס נָשֶׁ). should be brought to the person to be honored (Esth 6:8). There has been much discussion about the exact meaning of the author in this verse. Some think that the horse specified was ridden by the king while wearing the royal crown on his head or that a crown is to be placed on the head of the person being honored. Others have pointed to bas relief plaques which depict horses wearing some sort of head piece. I think the best

explanation here is also the funniest. In this kingdom, it is the horse that wears the royal crown. Perhaps the author even intends the reader to infer that this king is being compared to the nether regions of a horse.

And Haman continues in verse nine that a high court official is to lead the horse with the honored individual riding on horseback through the city streets while proclaiming that this is what is done for those the king honors. Once again, the position of the king is equated with the king’s clothing and his royal steeds. Here the king makes Haman’s wish come true...for Mordecai. The manner in which an announcement is made during the procession recalls the manner in which Joseph was honored in Egypt (Gen 41:43). Then in verse ten we read that Haman does as ordered by the king. At the least, these verses suggest that the horse is a potent symbol of power in the Persian Empire.

The author of Esther also tells us that the Persians use horses not just for the brute force of power, but also for the technological superiority they bring to communication across the vast realms of the empire via the “Persian Pony Express.” In Esther 8:10, we learn that the king’s edict, as composed by Mordecai, is dispersed throughout the kingdom by way of mounted courier riding on fast steeds bred from the royal herd.

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13Ibid., lii.
Finally, there is one last oblique reference to horses in Esther. The new edict has been posted by the fastest means available and Mordecai leaves the presence of the king clothed in royal clothing with a large, gold crown on his head and “the city of Susa neighed” (Esth 8:15). Here the entire city is a neighing, jubilant horse. There is the possibility of another pun here, but it works better in a combination of English and Hebrew. Because the English translation of שׁוֹסָה, Susa, is very close to the Hebrew for horse, סָוס. Perhaps this worked best for ancient bilingual speakers of Persian and Hebrew.

Now compare the role that horses played in the Passover narrative. In Exodus 9:3, horses are part of the livestock that is wiped out by the deadly pestilence, along with donkeys, camels, herds and flocks. Given the role that horses played in tilting the balance of power among nations, Pharaoh was put on notice right away that the power at his disposal was insufficient in his battle with Yahweh. Pharaoh’s power is represented in part by the number of horses and chariots which he commands when the Egyptians pursue the Israelites (Ex 14:9). Ultimately, the Egyptians with “all of Pharaoh’s horses” pursue the Israelites through the sea where they drowned (Ex 14:23). The defeat of Pharaoh through the destruction of the horses and chariots is especially highlighted in the “Songs of Moses and Miriam.” God triumphs by “throwing horse and rider into the sea” (Ex 15:1 and 21). The horses and their accompanying riders or drivers perish when God releases the forces of the sea
Other biblical texts reiterate this close tie between God’s triumph over the power of horses in Exodus. In Deuteronomy 11:4, God’s power is exhibited through the defeat of the Egyptian army which consists of horses and chariots. Sometimes God is even depicted as battling Israel in the same manner as Egypt, through pestilence and removal of horses (Amos 4:10). Egypt, as the major regional supplier of horses (1 Kgs 10:29 and 2 Chr 1:17), is frequently described as a false source of power (Deut 17:16 and 20:1). Israel’s reliance on Egypt and its horses is equated with unfaithfulness to God in Isaiah 31:1 and Israel is warned that the Egyptians and their horses are flesh and mortal in Isaiah 31:3. Ezekiel also derides reliance on the Egyptians and their horses as a false source of hope (Ezek 17:15). The link, therefore, between horses, Egyptians and insubstantial power is a long-standing one in biblical texts. The author of Esther could count on his audience to understand that the Persians are just Egyptians in disguise.

Another shared link between Esther and the Passover narratives involves the consultation with wise men. The king consults with the wise men of the land to ascertain what law he should make concerning Vashti (Esth 1:13). Here the wise men suggest a law which in essence gives Vashti what she wants. Later, in his distress over the honor done to Mordecai, Haman will consult with Zeresh, his wife, and with wise men over the results of his contest with Mordecai (Esth 6:13). What Haman learns is disheartening. He is told that Mordecai will rise while Haman falls in
Wise men and magicians also play a role in the Passover saga. In Exodus 1:10, we learn that Pharaoh advises his people to deal wisely or shrewdly with the Israelites. Given the outcome of the story, one has to wonder why Pharaoh didn’t take his own advice. Later, in the contest with Moses, Pharaoh summons his wise men and magicians who duplicate Moses’ signs (Exod 7:11). Much later, the prophet Isaiah will call the wise men of Pharaoh fools who will not prevail against God (Isa 19:11-12). The record of wise men is mixed. Pharaoh’s wise men are skilled magicians who make Moses’ signs appear to be mere parlor tricks. The wise men consulted by Haman tell him the truth, but to no avail. The power to be reckoned with is God, a lesson which neither Pharaoh nor Haman understand.

A last possible tie between Esther and the Passover narrative relates to the previously considered phrase, “stretching out a hand.” The occurrences in Esther have already been discussed in chapter one. In the Passover narrative, Moses stretches out a hand to retrieve the serpent/staff at God’s command (Exod 4:4). And during the wandering in the wilderness, God “does not stretch out his hand” while the leaders of the Israelites feast before him (Exod 24:11). The general sense that “stretching out a hand” leads to death and destruction is preserved in the second text, but not in the first. However, it should be pointed out that in “stretching out his hand,” Moses is following God’s instructions.
Susa is the capital of a kingdom in which the rule of laws and not of men is taken to extremes. The word for law in Esther is a Persian loan word, ῥῆν, which is found only in Esther with two exceptions. The first is a corrupt text in Deuteronomy 33:2 that literally reads “fire was law to them.” The second use of ῥῆν is in Ezra 8:36 where it specifically refers to Persian edicts, a usage entirely consonant with that of Esther. ῥῆν appears frequently in Esther, being used a total of nineteen times, and most heavily in chapters one and four.

So we know that law is important to the Persians from the perspective of the author of Esther. But what kind of law is followed in Persia? Our first introduction to Persian law in Esther is the royal banquet celebrating the king’s solidification of his rule. By law, each banquet reveler is to drink as much as he desires (Esth 1:8). Surely this is absurd. What kind of government is needed to strictly enforce the indulgence of the desires of its citizens? At the same banquet, we learn that the king of the empire expects to find a law which will deal with a queen who is reluctant to display her beauty alongside the marble
and lavish tapestries which the king owns (Esth 1:15). Having found no law on this issue, the king makes a law, or rather, his advisors propose a law, that the disobedient Vashti is never to appear again before him (Esth 1:19). In the making of this law, Vashti is dethroned and we learn that Persian law is irreversible. The contrast between the gravity of unchangeable law and the spontaneous, ill-considered way that King Ahasuerus makes law is stunning. And it adds to the hilarity of the book of Esther.

The next law of which we are told is similar to the earlier examples of Persian law in Esther. By law, the beautiful virgins gathered from all regions of the empire must undergo twelve months of beauty treatments before being brought to the king for his approval (Esth 2:12). The king has gathered the most beautiful women in an empire stretching from India to Cush, but their beauty isn’t enough for this king.

Now the law of Persia takes a more vicious turn. The law of Haman which is countenanced by the king with the giving of his signet ring is a law which calls upon all the citizens of Persia to kill an entire ethnic group wherever they are found throughout the Persian Empire (Esth 3:14). Haman writes a law which is good in his eyes per the king’s instructions; it is a command to kill the neighbor. Acting together to save their people, Esther and Mordecai make another

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law, again at the discretion of the king and with the giving of the signet ring to Mordecai. Once again, the king instructs the second in command to write what is good in their (Esther and Mordecai’s) eyes (Esth 8:8). While this law is written in terms of self-defense, it nonetheless results in massive loss of life. Bloodshed which is redoubled when the king makes another law at Esther’s behest to extend the fighting for another day (Esth 9:13-14).

What are the results of the law of Persia? Initially, the kingdom is left without a queen, a loss which even the king seems to feel some remorse for in Esther 2:1. Young women from all over the empire are gathered into the king’s collection of beautiful women (Esth 2:8). Perhaps Ahasuerus intends to bring them out at the next banquet. Confusion and anarchy are the result of the joint law-making activities of the king and Haman, for we learn that the entire city of Susa is perplexed (Esth 3:15). If the good people of Susa are confused, the Jews who reside in the Persian Empire can only resort to mourning, fasting, weeping, and lamenting (Esth 4:3). The behavior of the citizens of Susa, both Jews and non-Jews, contrasts sharply with that of Haman and the king, who indulge in a drinking party.

Most often, death is the consequence of Persian law. In Haman’s edict, the death of all Jews is commanded (Esth 4:8). Esther recites to Mordecai the law which requires death for those who enter the presence of the king unbidden (Esth 4:11). Fortunately for Esther, this law at least, has an escape clause. Finally, the very law which offers hope for the
survival of the Jews means death for the enemies of the Jews (Esth 8:13). The inflexibility of Persian law figures prominently in this death trap of law. Only in the law of Esther 4:11 is there an exception which allows life. In the other laws, the saving of some lives necessitates the taking of other lives.

The notion that Esther and Mordecai are responsible for the violent means by which some lives are saved, is complicated by a close examination of Esther’s approach to the king in Esther 8:5. Here Esther specifically requests that the king write to revoke or reverse the edict of Haman’s scheme ($\text{ךָנָּשׁ יְשִּׁיבָה אֲחָרָם מַסְפַּר יִשְׂרָאֵל}$). The king’s response implies that Esther should be happy just to write her own edict which cannot be reversed (Esth 8:8). This dialogue makes transparent how powerless King Ahasuerus truly is, bound in the straitjacket of all the laws which were pleasing in the eyes of someone. By refusing to seize the opportunity which Esther presents and to create law tailored to the present needs of the kingdom, the king ensures that thousands of his citizens are slain and that violence penetrates even the city of Susa.

As Haman would say, “their law is different from all of the people and the law of the king” ($\text{ךָנָּשׁ יְשִּׁיבָה אֲחָרָם מַסְפַּר יִשְׂרָאֵל}$).

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In this very serious comedy, the author allows the villain to make his point. Indeed, Jewish ḥiner (Esth 3:8) or instruction is different from the Persian דֶּרֶךְ. What kind of people would want this kind of law? The citizens of Susa demonstrate their better judgement by their dismay over Haman’s edict and their rejoicing over the rise to power of Mordecai. Of course, the citizens of Susa are baffled over Haman’s law which commands each of them, including the Jews, to slaughter, kill and annihilate the Jews in the Persian Empire.

The massive bloodshed in chapter nine is one reason that Esther has received a lot of criticism, much levelled specifically at the character of Esther. In a society as violent as our own, it is important to consider this issue carefully. I think the author of Esther used this story to grapple with the issues of his own time, including the role of law, power issues and violence. Many suggestions have been proposed to resolve the tension between the violence in Esther and its place in the canon. These include reminders to consider the exaggeration and comic elements of Esther, to accept the premise of the story that the law was unchangeable, to remember the difference between the violence of a non-historical tale and the very real violence of the Holocaust, and an

16 Fox, Character, 226.

17 Jackowski, Biblical Theology Bulletin, 413.

18 Roger E. Herst, “The Purim Connection,” Union Seminary
interesting theory by Goldman that the excessive violence of chapter nine is a self-critical move by the author of Esther.\textsuperscript{19} While these are all valid points, Esther’s original plea to the king to simply reverse the law is the crucial one in my opinion. The slaughter which takes place is the result of a king who cannot see a new way to govern even when it is presented to him. Instead, he seems curiously unruffled by all the death and mayhem taking place throughout his kingdom, and even in Susa itself (Esth 9:12).

Closely related to the issue of law is the issue of power. The use of horses in Esther and its correspondence to the power of Pharaoh has already been discussed in chapter two. A few additional points on the meaning of horses in issues of power need to be made. The Egyptians were not the only people who employed horses to maintain power. The Canaanites, King Ben-hadad of Aram, Syria, and Tyre all depended on horses for defensive and expansive purposes (Josh 11:4; Judg 5:22; 1 Kgs 20:20, 21, and 25; 2 Kgs 5:9, and Ezek 27:14). Horses, especially in combination with chariots, were the armored tank of their day. They represented technological military superiority over those nations who could not afford them. Horses were used in both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel (2 Sam 15:1 and 1 Kgs 18:5). Alliances between nations were sometimes

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sealed with the words, “my horses are your horses” (1 Kgs 22:4 and 2 Kgs 3:7, 18:23). Power, wealth and horses were closely associated in the ancient near east (2 Kgs 5:9, 10:2 and Isa 2:7, 5:28). Just as in Persia, horses formed the backbone of a king’s communication system (2 Kgs 9:18-19). In short, the horse was the ancient near eastern equivalent to the computer chip of today.

In the Psalms, horses represent a vain source of power and pride. God’s power is superior to the technological fix on which most nations rely (Psa 20:7, 33:17, 76:6, 147:10-11). As an important element of ancient society, horses inspired such sayings as:

The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD. (Prov 21:31)

A whip for the horse, a bridle for the donkey, and a rod for the back of fools. (Prov 26:3)

Ecclesiastes 10:7 uses horses to paint its own picture of reversal in which slaves ride on horses while kings are reduced to more pedestrian means of travel. In Habakuk, God is the victorious chariot driver (Hab 3:8) and God tramples the sea with his horses to save his people (Hab 3:15).

The horse, then, was associated throughout the ancient near east with claims of power and its enforcement as well as with the wealth required to accumulate and maintain these animals. In addition, the horse provided transportation and communication. Despite all these advantages, the
horse required training, bridle and bits to be useful. The author of Esther probably intended to communicate these aspects of power, wealth and ease of communication much as a contemporary author who describes a character travelling by means of his personal jet. In addition, Esther’s author reminded his audience through biblical links that this power, wealth and ease of communication was ephemeral.

The phrase of “stretching out the hand” is enlightening in the area of law and power as well as creation. In Exodus 22:8 and 22:11, “stretching out the hand” is used to describe the act of theft. In a less perjorative sense, it is employed as a means of describing all the efforts of the Israelites in their new land (Deut 12:7, 18; 15:10; 23:20; and 28:8,20). This same phrase is used repeatedly in narratives which detail the power struggle between David and Saul over the kingdom of Israel. David refused to slay (or “stretch out his hand against”) Saul in the cave (1 Sam 24:6 and 10). When skulking about Saul’s camp, David restrains Abishai from “stretching out his hand against” Saul in the night (1 Sam 26:9, 11, and 23). When an Amalekite “stretches out his hand” and kills Saul after his defeat in battle, David has the Amalekite killed (2 Sam 1:14). The repeated use of this phrase in the narrative of David’s acquisition of the kingdom surely found some resonance in the reader of Esther upon hearing of the eunach’s plot against the king and Haman’s plot against Mordecai.

The close connection between the gallows tree of Esther and the act of “stretching out a hand” in the context of monarchical rule is remniscient of the
parable of the trees in Judges 9:8-15. In this parable, each of the statelier, more productive trees refuse the title of king of the trees, claiming previous commitments. Finally, the lowly bramble becomes the king of the trees. It’s just possible that the reader of Esther might have thought of this parable in connection with the kingdom of Ahasuerus.

Ahasuerus may have the trappings of kingship, but he seems incapable of making decisions for himself and the advice which he seeks turns out to be folly. The results of his laws often made in anger continually erupt to destroy his subjects.
CHAPTER 5
RELIGIOUS THEMES IN ESTHER

One of the puzzles long noted with respect to the book of Esther is the lack of reference to God in a canonical text. Another item frequently commented on is the similarity of the names Mordecai and Esther to the Babylonian deities, Marduk and Ishtar. Curiously, little has been made of the author’s purpose in choosing these names for the hero and heroine of the book. Here we have a book written originally in Hebrew, at least in the basic form in which it exists in the Hebrew Bible. The author, presumably Jewish, omits any references to Yahweh or Elohim or any of the usual names for God while two pagan deities are the primary characters of the book. What was the author saying with these names? If the author wished the reader to understand that exiles in Babylon were so assimilated that Hebrew names were no longer used, surely any Babylonian

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21 For a detailed analysis of the development of the Esther text in both its Hebrew and LXX forms, see J. A. Clines, The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story, (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984) 69-70.
names would have sufficed. In addition, in Esther’s case we are told that Esther does indeed have a Hebrew name, Hadassah. In this wonderfully satirical work, were these names intended to add to the humor? Perhaps the author was saying something like, “The Babylonian gods are really Jewish.” Or suppose that Esther and Mordecai are a kind of stand-in for an apparently absent God. Then the author may intend that the reader understand that it takes two Babylonian gods to even approximate the activity of Yahweh.

In what ways do Mordecai and Esther resemble the pagan deities of Marduk and Ishtar? What role did Marduk play in the pantheon of the Babylonian deities? Marduk is best known for his role in creation of the world and humans. His creative activity springs out of a battle with Tiamat, the name given to the sea, and therefore to chaos. So Marduk battles the forces of chaos. What does Mordecai do in the book of Esther other than battle the chaos of genocide? Mordecai’s foe is Haman, who, even before the development of his wicked plan, is placed in an adversarial position with respect to Mordecai. When Mordecai fails to bow to Haman in Esther 3:2, the essential outline of Haman’s scheme has already begun to be formed in Haman’s mind as we learn in Esther 3:6. It is even possible that Haman’s name

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should have tipped us off as the verb מָרַע, used only in Ezekiel 5:7, means to rage or be turbulent. As it turns out, this suits the character of Haman precisely. Haman is full of rage at Mordecai, and his edict not only causes widespread grief throughout the Jewish community of Susa, but bewilderment among the entire city of Susa (Esth 3:15).

Not only are there parallels between Tiamat, the chaos monster, and Haman, but also between Tiamat and the irrevocable decrees of Persia. It has long been known that there is no historical basis for the unchangeable laws of the Medes and Persians, except as an element in the books of Esther and Daniel. In the *Enuma Elish*, we learn of Tiamat’s commands: “Powerful are her decrees, irresistible are they.”23 To her spouse, Kingu, Tiamat also gives this power when she says, “As for thee, thy command shall not be changed, the word of thy mouth shall be dependable!”24 However, we also learn that there is a contest here between Marduk and Tiamat. At a banquet held to determine whether Marduk will become chief of the gods, he says to Tiamat, “The command of my lips shall not return void, it shall not be changed.”25 Not only does this confirm the adversarial relationship, but it sounds remarkably like

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23Ibid., 26.

24Ibid., 27.

25Ibid., 33.
the words ascribed to Yahweh:

   So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. Isaiah 55:11

   In another part of the Enuma Elish, it is said of Marduk, “Reliable is his word, unalterable is his command.”26 Surely, the author of Esther was aware of the similarities between the word of the LORD in Isaiah 55:11, the unchangeable commands of Marduk, and the manner in which the threat of the irreversible law of the Medes and Persians replicated for the Jews living in the Persian Empire the old animosity between Marduk and Tiamat.

   This ancient battle between Marduk and Chaos was exploited by other biblical authors, especially with respect to creation narratives and the exodus from Egypt. In the song of Moses in Exodus 15:5, McCurley points out that the Egyptians perish in the tehomot (Tiamat).27 And just as Marduk uses wind to slay the monster Tiamat, so Yahweh uses the wind to make a path through the sea.28 Just as Marduk splits Tiamat,

26Ibid., 60.


28Ibid., 37.
so Yahweh splits the sea in Exodus 14:16. McCurley has noted that the passover narrative makes full use of a variety of pagan mythologies in order to enrich the meaning of the event:

Such amalgamation of originally separate stories out of the ancient Near East further enhances the impact of the combined tetrateuchal sources. For example, it is at the Lake of Rushes where the Egyptians longed to bathe with the sun god and to accompany him on a journey through the netherworld’s darkness to the place of rebirth (sunrise); yet here in Exodus 14-15 the Sea of Reeds is the spot where the power of Egypt is vanquished by the Divine Warrior named Yahweh. Moreover, to include the Priest’s itinerary in the complex of these traditions is to make the polemics even broader. According to that writer, the battle at the sea took place in the vicinity of Baal-zephon (Exod. 14:2). Baal-zephon was a place of worship in the Egyptian delta for the Canaanite deity who vanquished the chaos force of Yamm and who erected his palace on Mount Zaphon. While this Egyptian site is not the Canaanite’s mountain of Zaphon, nevertheless the place was a locale for the worship of Baal. According to the priest, then, right under

29Ibid., 44.
Baal’s regal nose Yahweh used Yamm to vanquish his chaos opponent, the Pharaoh and god of Egypt.”

Given the large number of similarities between the story of Esther and the Passover narrative already discussed in chapter two, it appears that Esther’s author is adding yet another layer to a multi-layered tale. If previous biblical authors showed Yahweh acting like pagan deities to save the people of God and defeat those gods, the author of Esther says that pagan deities are now doing God’s dirty work. No longer is Yahweh responsible for the demise of the entire Egyptian army, but it is Marduk whose edict slays 75,000 citizens of the Persian Empire who are presumably loyal worshippers of Marduk. Perhaps the ancient author of Esther was already sensitive to the charge of violence that later critics would level against Esther.

There are additional aspects of the mythology of Marduk which shed light on the story of Esther. Marduk is the god who controls the fates in Babylon. Ancient audiences must have howled when Haman cast the pur in order to determine the best possible date for the defeat of Mordecai and his people.

At the beginning of each year in Babylon, Marduk was honored with a processional through the streets which culminated in some sort of boat ride down the

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30Ibid., 45-46.

31Heidel, Genesis, 30.
river. Once at the temple, the Babylonian tale of creation, the *Enuma Elish* was recited.\(^{32}\) Not only was Haman’s edict issued on the day before Passover, but Haman cast the *pur* in the first month of the year. If the New Year’s festivities were over, they were at least fresh in everyone’s mind. And who, but Mordecai, is led on a procession through the streets of Susa in a manner that is fit for a king, or a god. The author of Esther must have depended on the familiarity of his readers with both tales of creation, the *Enuma Elish* from the land of their exile and the Genesis account in their own tradition. What better way for an author writing for a relatively powerless group to poke fun at the authorities while saying that something new is happening here on behalf of God’s people?

There is another myth that relates to Marduk with some parallels in Esther, the tale of Zu:

> His (Zu’s) eyes behold what Enlil does as sovereign. The crown of his sovereignty, the robe of his divinity, the tablet of destinies (belonging to) his divinity Zu beholds again and again. And as he beholds again and again the father of the gods, the god of Duranki, He conceives in his heart a desire for Enlil’s position...After his heart has planned the attack, He waits for the beginning of the day at the entrance of (Enlil’s) chamber, which he had beheld repeatedly. As Enlil was

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\(^{32}\)McCurley, *Ancient Myths*, 17.
washing in clear water, after his tiara had been taken off and placed on the throne, he seized the tablet of destinies with his hand and usurped sovereignty, the power to issue decrees.\textsuperscript{33}

It is interesting to see how similar Zu’s actions are to those of Haman. Haman, too, covets the power of the king. The means of honor which Haman suggests to the king reveal that he desires the king’s crown and his clothing. And Haman’s advice in these matters is consulted precisely because he has come to the palace early in the morning in order to receive permission to hang Mordecai. At this point in the Esther story, the power to issue decrees has already been given to him by the king when he hands over his signet ring for the issuance of the edict commanding the death of the Jews.

Furthermore, in Babylonian mythology, alternative explanations are given for dealing with Zu. One hymn speaks of Marduk as the god “who crushed the skull of Zu.” In other versions of the myth, it is Shara, the eldest child of Ishtar who recovers the possessions of Enlil.\textsuperscript{34}

What are the similarities between the activities of Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess, and Esther, the savior of her people? The goddess Ishtar was also known in various regions as Inanna, Anath, and Astarte. She

\textsuperscript{33}Heidel, \textit{Genesis}, 144-145.

\textsuperscript{34}Ibid., 146-147.
was associated both with fertility and with war. Despite her cruel aspects, she was said to be especially concerned with the suffering of humanity.\(^{35}\) Ishtar was the goddess of whores as well as of the evening and morning stars.\(^{36}\) This association with stars is implied in a poem of Inanna called “The Ecstasy of Love” in which Ishtar/Inanna speaks of herself:

Last night, as I, the queen, was shining bright,
Last night, as I, the queen of heaven was shining bright,
As I was shining bright, as I was dancing about,
As I was uttering a song at the brightening of the oncoming night.\(^{37}\)

These multiple associations of Ishtar with love, fertility, war, and stars suggest that even if Esther is derived from the Persian for star, the name Esther may still be associated with the goddess Ishtar.\(^{38}\)


\(^{36}\)McCurley, *Ancient Myths*, 78.


\(^{38}\)Contra Ran Zadok, “Notes on Esther (Etymologies of Personal Names),” *Zeitschrift fur die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 98 (1) 107.
In what ways is Ishtar like Esther? First, Ishtar’s association with the stars fits nicely with her role as the one who controls fate. This is one of the roles ascribed to Ishtar in a hymn:

The goddess - with her there is counsel.
The fate of everything she holds in her hand.\(^{39}\)

Poor Haman, when he throws the *pur*, he is defying not just one, but two gods of fate. And in the story of Esther, she appears to have the upper hand. For Esther has the eyes and the ears of the king. Even on her unsummoned appearance and before hearing her request, the king is prepared to grant her half the kingdom.

Second, she is described as beautiful in this hymn to Ishtar:

In lips she is sweet; life is in her mouth.
At her appearance rejoicing becomes full.
She is glorious; veils are thrown over her head.
Her figure is beautiful; her eyes are brilliant.\(^{40}\)

This description is very close to the description of Esther as “beautiful of form” (חַיָּה מְדָבָּאָה) .


\(^{40}\)Ibid., 232.
The joy at the appearance of Ishtar recalls the reception which Esther receives from the king although she has not been summoned (Esth 5:2-3). While Esther’s eyes are not praised, she is said to be pleasing in the eyes of the eunach Hegai, who sees on behalf of the king (Esth 2:9).

As a Babylonian fertility goddess, one of Ishtar’s roles was to participate in a sacred marriage to the king. In a poem about Inanna/Ishtar and the king on their wedding night are these lines:

She craves the bed of kingship, she craves the bed,
She craves the bed of queenship, she craves the bed.

Although in the book of Esther, we learn nothing of the desires or feelings of Esther regarding being gathered with the other beautiful maidens of Persia or about her prospects of becoming queen, we do know that Esther’s night with the king has everything to do with the choice of the next queen. And Esther does indeed become queen to King Ahasuerus.

One of the most widespread tales of Ishtar is of her visit to the underworld in search of her lover, Tammuz. When she encounters the gatekeeper of the


42Pritchard, Volume 2, 200.
nether world, she is stripped first of her crown, followed by other articles of clothing or jewelry at each of the seven gates through which she must pass to meet the queen of the underworld, Allatu. Her passage through the first three gates reads like this:

When the first door he had made her enter, He stripped and took away the great crown on her head. “Why, O gatekeeper, didst thou take the great crown on my head?” “Enter, my lady, thus are the rules of the Mistress of the Nether World.” When the second gate he had made her enter, He stripped and took away the pendants on her ears. “Why, O gatekeeper, didst thou take the pendants on my ears?” “Enter, my lady, thus are the rules of the Mistress of the Nether World.” When the third gate he had made her enter, He stripped and took away the chains round her neck. “Why, O gatekeeper, didst thou take the chains round my neck?” “Enter, my lady, thus are the rules of the Mistress of the Nether World.”

When Ishtar passes through the seventh gate, she is stripped of her last article of clothing and killed by Allatu. While this myth differs from the actions which occur in Esther, there are certain similarities. When Esther goes to the king unsummoned, she does so

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43Pritchard, Ancient Near East, 82.
with a real expectation of death. There is also the emphasis on clothing in Esther’s preparation to see the king as well as on the law regarding such visits. Literally, Esther is said to put on the kingdom or royalty \( \text{מלכות אסתר מלשות} \) before seeing the king (Esth 5:1).

This use of the word for kingdom is unique in the book of Esther. The word for kingdom, \( \text{מלכות} \), is used a total of twenty-one times in Esther. As the simple noun for kingdom it appears 11 times (Esth 1:4, 14, 20; 2:3, 3:6, 8; 4:14; 5:3, 6; 7:2; and 9:30). In eight instances, the word \( \text{מלכות} \) is used adjectivally to convey the meaning royal. These include: “his royal throne” (Esth 1:2), “the royal wine” (Esth 1:7), “the royal house/palace” (Esth 1:9), “the royal crown” (Esth 1:11, 2:17, and 6:8), “the royal word” (Esth 1:19), and “royal clothing” (Esth 6:8 and 8:15). In Esther 2:15, it is used to express the concept of reign. Certainly, the usage in Esther 5:1 of \( \text{מלכות} \) is that of the noun, nonetheless, kingdom is not generally thought of as an article of clothing. This author also demonstrates the more conventional means of expressing the concept “royal clothing.” Therefore, the author must be trying to say something important here, something about the role that clothing plays in this story. What happens to the characters Haman, Mordecai, and Esther with respect to clothing? Haman asks for the clothing of the kingdom; Mordecai wears the clothing of the kingdom; and Esther clothes herself with the kingdom.

The importance placed on Esther’s royal attire
points to the folly of this king who promises Esther half the kingdom when she is already wearing it. The theme of reversal in Esther in combination with Esther’s attire, could be a wry commentary by the author on the well-known myth of Ishtar’s visit to the nether world. Ancient readers would also have been acquainted with Ishtar’s fetish for jewels described in a poem about Inanna in very explicit terms.44

The next question to ask is what use other biblical writers have made of the mythologies of the nations around them. The multiple references made to both Egyptian and Canaanite deities in the passover narratives were discussed earlier in this chapter. Others have seen references to Baal as storm god in Psalms 104:3-4 and Job 26:12-13.45 McCurley sees an allusion to Marduk standing on the back of a defeated Tiamat in Job 9:8.46 The banquet of the elders in Exodus 24 may be another image based on Baal/Marduk mythology.47 The prophet Hosea seems to be alluding to Baal and Asherah in Hosea 14:5-8 when he describes Yahweh’s likeness to the dew which yields crops and a shade-giving tree. In Canaanite mythology, Baal is the bringer of dew and Asherah is

44Pritchard, Volume 2, 195-197.


46McCurley, Ancient Myths, 32.

47Ibid., 142-144.
symbolized by the tree.\(^{48}\)

Are there ties between Esther and other biblical books which might justify taking Mordecai and Esther as the characters who do God’s work? I believe there are at least two such references. The first occurs in Psalm 23:5 in which the LORD is said to “prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.” Esther’s action is like that of God. She prepares a banquet twice in the presence of Haman, “a foe and an enemy.”

It is curious that we are also given Esther’s Hebrew name, Hadassah, which means myrtle. Further investigation of the appearance of myrtle in the Bible results in several references in Zechariah 1. In association with the myrtle, we find horses which are standing in a grove of myrtle trees (Zech 1:8). The purpose of these horses is to patrol the earth. Also standing in the grove of myrtle trees is the “angel of the LORD” (Zech 1:10-11). Later, the angel of the LORD sends the horses out to patrol the earth (Zech 6:2-3, and 6). It is true that this is not a direct connection with God, however, given the ambiguity with which the angel of the LORD is used elsewhere, it is very close. It is also true that Zechariah is a late book. However, the author of Zechariah states that the book was written in connection with events which occurred during the reign of the Persian king Darius (Zech 1:1). Since Darius is the father of Xerxes who is the historical king most associated with King

\(^{48}\)Ibid., 92.
Ahasuerus, Zechariah is probably sufficiently early to have been known by the author of Esther.
The author of Esther beguiles the reader into asking some serious theological questions under the guise of play. It may be difficult work, but it can be engaging, the author of Esther would say. Esther’s author must have written in difficult times. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zechariah relate some of the problems of the post-exilic Hebrew community which may have been important to the author of Esther and its intended audience.

Whether they had returned from Babylonian exile or not, the Jews of this time and later must have keenly felt the absence of God. From the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we know that the process of rebuilding the temple was slow and frustrating and that those Jews who returned to Jerusalem felt that in some sense they were slaves of the Persians. In fact, the possibility that the book of Esther was the product of these returned exiles from Babylon, now living in Jerusalem has been proposed by Manfred R.
Lehmann.  It is quite possible that exiles who have returned home, and yet find themselves still in another country would find it necessary to confront a particular type of despair. An analogous situation in our own country might be the circumstances of Hispanic Americans who may reside in the home of their ancestors, yet find that they are citizens of a different country in which a different language is spoken.

Taking the concept of God’s absence to an extreme by not even mentioning God’s name, Esther’s author demonstrated through humor and keen wit just how ridiculous such an idea was. Yet, by treating the fear of his community that God was absent as a serious one, the author was able not only able to minister to their despair, but also to remind the people to Whom they belonged. The author of Esther gained the trust of his community by taking their fear seriously, and then led them to confront new questions which grew out of past biblical traditions and their present problems.

I believe the author of Esther reminded his audience of a wide variety of biblical literature which goes beyond the scope of this thesis. Through a series of loose allusions which individually may seem meaningless, but which together weave a web of

While I think that some of Lehmann’s points stretch things a bit, his proposal does fit the tone of biting satire found in Esther. For a complete description of his theory, see Manfred R. Lehmann, “A Reconstruction of the Purim Story,” Tradition 12 (Winter-Spring, 1972) 90-98.
recognition, so that the reader suddenly realizes that there is a new creation taking place, that God has once again “passed over,” that the people have once again “passed through” the sea only to find themselves in a wilderness which resembles the formerly promised land.

Other themes which might have been considered or expanded upon include: “the merry heart,” the horse as a representation of unbridled passions, wisdom, winning favor, and that which is despised. The theme of the merry heart has connections with numerous narratives, including: the Levite and his concubine (Judges 19), Abigail and her first husband Nabal (1 Sam 25), the revenge of Absalom on Amnon for the rape of Tamar (2 Sam 13), and the story of Ruth and Boaz (Ruth). The problem of the unbridled passion complements the theme of the merry heart.

Wisdom and hesed both play a role in recalling the Joseph saga. There are additional similarities between the stories of Esther and Joseph to which others have alluded. 50 Both tell the story of the rise of a foreigner to a high level in a royal court. This position enables both Esther and Joseph to save their people. Both rose to their positions due to favor and hesed.

Hesed plays a critical role in other biblical narratives as well. These include the search of Abraham’s servant for Rebekah, Ruth’s story, Daniel’s

story, and the prophetic books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

There also seem to be some links between Esther and the book of Job through the themes of wisdom and “stretching out a hand.” The theme of that which is despised recalls additional biblical narratives. Esau is said to have despised his birthright (Gen 25:34). The Philistine Goliath despised David (1 Sam 17:42), as did Michal when she saw David dancing before the ark (2 Sam 6:16). After his adultery with Bathsheba and having Uriah killed, Nathan says that David despised the word of the LORD (2 Sam 12:9-10). In Nehemiah 2:19 and 4:4, it is the people of Judah who are despised. The suffering servant of Isaiah is also despised (Isa 49:7 and 53:3).

The book of Esther invited not only the ancient reader to play with biblical texts, but now invites a contemporary reader to laugh. And while we laugh, we may ponder what it is that God is up to even when God appears to be absent. What new possibilities is God creating today? Through what seas of chaos are we passing? What are the false deities of our time? How are we to navigate through a “secular” society which continues to pay homage to the gods of power, anger, and self-centeredness? In reading Esther we can laugh at the foibles of humanity and play with the biblical texts to which they point with a renewed appreciation of the Source of our hope.


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