

The Book of Esther: Opus non gratum in the Christian Canon

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The book of Esther tends to be an unaccepted book in Christendom. Indeed, Martin Luther expressed contempt for Esther, claiming that it is spoiled by too much "pagan impropriety." Such denigration, however, is ultimately based on a serious misreading of this OT book. Esther offers readers an insightful satire of the pagan world and yet at the same time provides a glimpse of the dangers the Jewish people have faced in the diaspora.

Key Words: Esther, Jewish diaspora, Mordecai, Haman, Purim

It is an unfortunate fact that in the Christian world at large the book of Esther has not found acceptance.¹ It is indeed an *opus non gratum*, an unacceptable work. True, when the church took over the Bible of the Jews as part of its canon, it did embrace the book of Esther. But for the most part it has been a cold embrace indeed. Often cited is Luther's statement, "I am so hostile to this book [2 Maccabees] and Esther that I could wish that they did not exist at all, for they judaize too greatly and have much pagan impropriety."² To this Eissfeldt, after voicing the opinion "Christianity ... has neither occasion nor justification for holding on to Esther," adds the comment "for Christianity Luther's remark should be determinative."³ C. H. Cornill could write, "All the worst and most unpleasing features of Judaism are here displayed without disguise; and only in Alexandria was it felt absolutely necessary to cover up the ugliest bare places with a few religious patches."⁴ It is claimed by many that the book espouses an intense nationalistic spirit and virulent hostility to Gentiles. It is

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"inspired by a fierce nationalism and unblushing vindictiveness," "a witness to the fact that Israel, in pride, ... made nationalism a religion";⁵ "the product of a nationalistic spirit, seeking revenge upon those who persecute the Jews, which has lost all understanding of the demands and obligations of Yahwism";⁶ "a memorial to the nationalistic spirit of Judaism which had become fanatical."⁷ Similar sentiments could be quoted from Bewer, Driver, Pfeiffer, and others.⁸ And as

¹ This article is adapted from the introduction to the Esther portion of my commentary, *Ruth, Esther* (WBC 9; Dallas: Word, 1996).

² For the remark, see "Table Talk" in *Weimar Ausgabe* 22, p. 2080.

³ O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (trans. P. Ackroyd; New York: Harper and Row, 1965) 511-12.

⁴ C. H. Cornill, *Introduction to the Canonical Books of the Old Testament* (trans. G. Box; New York: Williams and Norgate, 1907) 257.

⁵ B. W. Anderson, "The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible," *JR* 30 (1950) 32, 40.

⁶ G. Fohrer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (trans. D. Green; Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) 253.

⁷ A. Weiser, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (trans. D. Barton; London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961) 312.

Clines observes,⁹ Hermann's 1986 "catalogue of anti-Semitic sentiments that have been voiced under the guise of interpretation of Esther makes depressing reading" indeed.¹⁰ Nor are the characters spared. B. W. Anderson writes, "The story unveils the dark passions of the human heart: envy, hatred, fear, anger, vindictiveness, pride" and even ventures the opinion that, "if a Christian minister is faithful to the context, he will not take his text from Esther."¹¹ And Paton opines, "There is not one noble character in the book" and avers that the author "gloats over the wealth and triumph of his heroes and is oblivious to their moral shortcomings."¹² Nor is the festival of Purim spared. Ironside dismisses it with scorn on the grounds that it "has degenerated into a season of godless merrymaking, and is more patriotic than devotional in character."¹³ And though many in the Christian community might not voice such opinions or use such language about the Word of God, their utter lack of use of the book in teaching and preaching emasculates it as effectively as the overt rejection noted above.

But this reducing of Esther to an *opus non gratum* is based upon a serious misreading of the text, which can be shown by a close reading of the story. To begin with, Esther is controlled by the "problem-

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based plot" structure that regularly characterizes OT narratives.¹⁴ Thus, chaps. 1 and 2 comprise the setting or exposition in which the characters are introduced and the events necessary to set the scene are related. The problem, Haman's edict to annihilate all the Jews in the Persian Empire, is set forth in chap. 3. Chapters 4 through 7 comprise a series of complicating and resolving incidents, related with masterful narrative skill. And the problem is resolved in the dual resolutions of 8:1 through 9:5. The denouement of the story follows in the account of the prescriptions for the institution of Purim set forth in 9:6-32. Finally, the encomium for Mordecai in 10:1-3 comprises the conclusion/coda of the narrative.¹⁵

On the basis of this discourse structure and a close reading of the narrative, the theme (and hence the purposes and theology) of the book is twofold. This determination, which cannot be set forth in any detail here,¹⁶ is based upon the fact that there is a marked incongruity between, on the one

⁸ J. A. Bewer, *The Literature of the Old Testament* (rev. ed.; New York: Columbia University Press, 1933) 306-7; S. R. Driver, *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (9th ed.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1913) 486-87; R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1948) 743-44.

⁹ Review of W. Hermann, *Esther im Streit der Meinungen*, in *Society for Old Testament Study Book List* (1988) 78.

¹⁰ W. Hermann, *Esther im Streit der Meinungen* (Beiträge zur Erforschung des AT und des antiken Judentums; Frankfurt am Main, 1986).

¹¹ B. W. Anderson, "The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible," *JR* 30 (1950) 39, 42.

¹² L. B. Paton, *The Book of Esther* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908) 96.

¹³ H. A. Ironside, *Joshua, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Neptune, N.J.: Loiseaux, 1983) 115.

¹⁴ For an excellent discussion, see J. Beekman, J. Callow, and M. Kopesec, *The Semantic Structure of Written Communication* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1981). Also helpful is T. Longman, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 83-100.

¹⁵ See my *Ruth, Esther*, 301-4, where this discourse structure is outlined in detail. The close reading that supports it is set forth in the following "Form / Structure / Setting" and "Explanation" sections of each pericope.

¹⁶ For a detailed argument, see the discussion in the section on "Genre" in my *Ruth, Esther*, 297-309.

hand, the discourse roles of "setting" through "resolution," narrated in 1:1-9:5 and, on the other hand, that of the "denouement," narrated in 9:6-32. The denouement of a problem-based plot is normally the response to the "problem-resolution" pair. It should express the consequences of the resolution—the difference it makes for the principal characters. But this is not the function of the denouement in Esther, as my close reading of this pericope in *Ruth, Esther* reveals.¹⁷ The denouement, 9:6-32, certainly does not simply set forth the consequences of the resolution for Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews. It neither fills in the details of the Jewish victory nor simply relates how the celebration of Purim came to be. As Fox notes, it "is analytical rather than narrational, more interested in explaining events than reporting them."¹⁸ Indeed, one would not overstate the case if one was to say that the pericope was legislative rather than narrational. Its purpose is to obligate the Jewish community to the perpetual celebration of Purim and to set forth its dates, purpose, and character. So there is a marked incongruity in the discourse roles

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and hence the genre of 1:1-9:5 and 9:6-32. This marked division in the genre of the two parts of the book on the grounds of discourse roles is confirmed by two other criteria. First, there is an equally marked incongruity between the literary style and characteristics of these two portions of the book. Though such evidence is almost always subtle and necessarily speculative, it is especially strong for the ending of Esther, and it has been argued since the beginning of critical study of the book that the ending of the book, usually more or less all of chaps. 9 and 10, is a later addition. And second, recent investigations by David Clines and Michael Fox¹⁹ have made it highly probable that the present form of the book of Esther is the result of a two-step redaction, a redaction that fully confirms the two strikingly different sections of the text.²⁰ This provides a solidly based redactional explanation of the sharp differences in both the discourse roles and the literary style and characteristics of the narrative which a close reading of the text perceives to exist between 1:1 through 9:5 and 9:6 through 9:32. Indeed, it is striking that this presents us with three independent lines of evidence for the composite character of the book, for the subtle but unmistakable incompatibility between the two parts of the book in both their literary style and their discourse roles dovetails almost perfectly with its redactional structure, corroborating that an original story has been adapted to the purposes of instituting the festival of Purim.

Since this is the case, it seems apparent that the genre and hence the theme of Esther will be at least twofold, determined by the marked incongruity between, on the one hand, the discourse roles and literary content of the exposition through resolution elements of the "story" (1:1-9:5, 10:1-3) and, on the other hand, the denouement, the "account" of the prescriptions for the institution of Purim (9:6-32). Let us turn first to the genre and theme of the exposition through

¹⁷ See the discussion of the denouement in *ibid.*, in particular in the section on "Genre" (pp. 300-306), and esp. in the "Explanation" section to 9:6-32 (pp. 487-92).

¹⁸ M. Fox, *The Redaction of the Books of Esther* (SBLMS 40; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) 115.

¹⁹ Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (JSOTSup 30; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984); Fox, *The Redaction of the Books of Esther*.

²⁰ See the detailed discussion in the section on "Redaction" in *Ruth, Esther*, 281-94. For a different understanding of the redaction of the books of Esther than the view espoused by Clines and Fox, see K. Jobes, *The Alpha-Text of Esther. Its Character and Relationship to the Masoretic Text* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).

resolution elements of the narrative (which for ease of reference I shall call the "story") and then to the elements of the denouement. In regard to the story I argue that the genre of the narrative part of Esther is that of a "short story" which intends to reveal the quality of a situation (rather than the quality of its characters, as does the book of Ruth).²¹ And the quality of the situation portrayed is the dangerous and uncertain character of life for Jews in the diaspora. This can be

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seen by the way that the narrator characterizes both the world of his story and its protagonists. Though this can be observed at every level of the narrative, the limitations of space permit the presentation of only the most significant evidence.²²

To begin, let us note that the "world" of the story is the Jewish diaspora. Two elements of the narrative establish this with clarity: (1) the significance of the regular epithet by which Mordecai is identified, and (2) the story's diaspora agenda.

1. *Mordecai's Epithet.* When Mordecai is first introduced in the setting of the story in 2:5, he is identified by the epithet **יְהוּדִי אִישׁ** "a Jewish man," and his primary identity throughout the rest of the book is "Mordecai the Jew." Now epithets in scripture are seldom incidental identifiers. Meir Sternberg observes, "A biblical epithet serves at least two functions, one bearing directly on the character it qualifies and the other bearing directly on the plot where he figures as agent or patient."²³ The epithet, then, characterizes Mordecai's role in the story in a most important way. Here we need to be aware how unusual an identification this is for a member of the OT community of Israel. In the OT an Israelite is regularly identified by a patronymic (i.e., the male line of descent). Only foreigners who are domiciled in Israel as resident aliens are regularly identified by their country or region of origin. Thus, contrast the well-known foreigner "Uriah the Hittite" (1 Samuel 11) with "Uriah Son of Shemaiah from Kiriathjearim" (Jer 26:20-23), or the Philistine "Ittai the Gittite" (2 Sam 15:19-22; 18:2-12) with "Ittai Son of Ribai from Gibeah of Benjamin" (2 Sam 23:29); and note the use of "Ruth the Moabitess" as Ruth's full name in the book of Ruth.²⁴ Mordecai is "Mordecai the Jew" and never "Mordecai Son of Jair" or even "Mordecai the Benjaminite" because he and all his fellow "Jews" are living as foreigners, "resident aliens," in a foreign land. Thus, the use of the gentilic **יְהוּדִי** "the Jew" as the only identification of Mordecai throughout the book signals a conscious identification of the foreign—the diaspora—status of both Mordecai and the Jewish community. "The ideal typified by Mordecai ... is of the representative Jew, a man identified first and foremost by his Jewishness,"²⁵ as long as one understands that in the book of Esther "Jew" identifies him as a member of the diaspora, a

²¹ See the discussion in my *Ruth, Esther*, 306-9.

²² For full details, see *ibid.*, 311-26.

²³ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 337-38.

²⁴ See the discussion in the "Comment" section on Ruth 2:21, in my *Ruth, Esther*, 138.

²⁵ M. V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991) 186.

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foreigner in a foreign land, and that "Jewishness" is synonymous with "diaspora existence."

2. *The Story's Diaspora Agenda.* Second, it is significant for understanding the purpose and theme of the book that this diaspora setting, which the narrative simply accepts as normative, is the only such story world in the whole OT. As Levenson has insightfully observed,²⁶ all the rest of Israel's exilic and postexilic literature, such as Second and Third Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Obadiah, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Daniel, have one, single-minded agenda. They are narrowly and specifically concerned with the return of the exiled leaders of the Judean community to the ancient land of Judah and with the reestablishment of the city of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple. From the perspective of this agenda, the theological estimate of the exile in these works is "overwhelmingly negative,... a barren interlude valuable only as propaedeutic to the return."²⁷ Indeed, outside of the books of Esther and Daniel there is very little about those who remained in exile. The operative word here is remained. Those who remained in exile-and did not return-are hardly ever taken into consideration in the rest of the postexilic literature.

This can be corroborated by noting the agenda of the few Judeans mentioned in the postexilic literature who did remain in exile. Levenson notes three relevant examples, ranging from Persian to Hellenistic times.²⁸ (1) Nehemiah, like Mordecai, is a high official in the Persian court in the capital of Susa. His attention, concern, and actions, however, center wholly on the restoration of Jerusalem (chaps. 1-2), to which he returns (2:5). When he is introduced in Susa, the scene of the book of Esther, he is not identified as "Nehemiah the Jew" but as "Nehemiah Son of Hacaliah," signaling that the narrator thinks of him as a member of the postexilic Palestinian community, not as a resident alien in the diaspora; and elsewhere his identifying epithet is "Nehemiah the Governor" (8:9, 10:1, 12:26). His example, then, can hardly be used, as Humphreys does,²⁹ as evidence for a concern to construct a life-style for the diaspora. Not only is Nehemiah's heart still in Zion,³⁰ so is that of the narrator of the book of Nehemiah! (2) Daniel also serves in the Persian court, but his concern and the

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concern of the book is the future of the Judean community in Palestine: Daniel faces Jerusalem when he prays (6:10-11); receives a prophecy of its future (chap. 9); and the whole book is primarily concerned with the future of the Judean community in "the land of splendor" (11:16, 41). (3) In the story of the return from exile and the restoration of Jerusalem and the Temple as told in the book of 1 Esdras, when Zerubbabel is deemed to be the wisest of Darius's three personal attendants and is promised whatever he wishes, he requests nothing but the rebuilding of

²⁶ See J. D. Levenson, "The Scroll of Esther in Ecumenical Perspective," *JES* 13 (1976) 440-51.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 446.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 447.

²⁹ W L. Humphreys, "A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel," *JBL* 92 (1973) 212.

³⁰ Levenson, "The Scroll of Esther in Ecumenical Perspective," 447.

Jerusalem and the Temple, and the restoration of the Temple vessels (1 Esdr 4:42-46). The agenda of the book of Esther contrasts sharply with this. Esther and Mordecai not only do not voice any concerns about Jerusalem or the Temple and its cultus, they do not address even a single word to the Palestinian community. And in the encomium for "Mordecai the Jew," it is among "the Jews," that is, the diaspora, that he is held in high esteem, and it is their welfare and that of their descendants that he is said to be constantly seeking (10:3). The world of our story, then, is exclusively the world of the Jewish diaspora.

Furthermore, our narrator characterizes this diaspora world as a dangerous and uncertain place indeed for the Jews who must live there. This can be seen in the way that the narrator characterizes both this world and the protagonists of his story. Because of the limitations of space, however, only two references can be cited here to establish the case.³¹ First we will look at the characterization of the king and the world he rules and then at his characterization of Haman.

a. *The Characterization of the King and the World He Rules.* This characterization is primarily set in the opening two chapters, the story's setting or exposition. In most OT narration the exposition consists of "a few brief statements" and is "pretemporal, statically enumerating data that are not bound to a specific moment in time: they are facts that stand before the time of the story proper."³² From this the exposition of the book of Esther diverges dramatically. It does, of course, introduce to us three of the four principal characters of the story (Ahasuerus, Esther, and Mordecai), and the events it relates do stand before the problem that sets the story itself in motion. But it is not brief, nor does it statically enumerate data.

This is particularly the case in the opening scene, 1:1-22. Here we see depicted an ordered world, ruled inexorably by law, but not by a law that can bring much assurance of stability or justice to those who must stand under its mandates. It is, on the one hand, irrevocable

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(v. 19). On the other hand, its source is the will and whim of an all-powerful monarch (1:1), who is portrayed in the first episode, vv. 19, as spending his time throwing lavish banquets. The first of these is described with mocking hyperbole as lasting for six months and has the purpose of "displaying the riches and glory of his empire and the pomp and splendor of his majesty" (v. 4). The remarkable and detailed description of the lavishly luxurious scenery of the second banquet, vv. 5-8, a depiction virtually unique in OT narrative, and the stress on the abundance of the king's wine which was imbibed without restraint continue the portrayal of the opulence and extravagance of the king and his court.³³

In the second episode, vv. 10-22, the king is described with delicious and biting humor as losing a contest of wills with his wife, Vashti, when he orders her to appear before him so as to parade her

³¹ For a full discussion, see the section on "Theme and Purpose" in my *Ruth, Esther*, 314-26.

³² Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 80.

³³ For greater detail, see the description in the "Explanation" section to 1:1-9, in my *Ruth, Esther*, 353-54.

beauty before the tipsy common crowd. Vashti evidences the only element of decorum in this world of opulence and excess and refuses. Not knowing how to remedy the situation, the king turns helplessly to his privy council, who are laughingly called "the sages who understand the times..., who know law and legal process." These pompous worthies prove that they are anything but sages by promulgating a ridiculous but irrevocable (!) law mandating that "all women, high and low alike, will give honor to their husbands" (v. 20) and that "every man should be ruler in his own household" (v. 22). By the contrast between this puerile male world and the sense of decorum and self-respect that Vashti reveals by refusing to be shown off like a common courtesan before the drunken crowd, the narrator heaps scorn and derision upon the world in which his story will be set.

The same tone of mockery is continued in the second act, 2:1-18. To replace Vashti the king does not make an alliance through marriage with one of the noble and powerful families of the realm (a Persian practice noted by Herodotus)³⁴ and so increase the stability of his throne. Rather, at the advice of his young body-servants he gathers beautiful young women from throughout his empire in order that the one who pleases him should be queen in place of Vashti. The first criterion for pleasing the king is described with extravagant and derisive hyperbole: their extensive beauty treatment goes on for a full year (v. 12)! The second criterion for pleasing him, though told with exquisite reserve, is also transparently clear: "In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return again to the

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harem, but now to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch in charge of the concubines. She would not go again to the king unless he took pleasure in her and she was summoned by name" (v. 14). After having held up to ridicule the king's gaudy extravagance (1:19) and the buffoonery of king and court scrambling to buttress by law their right to be master in their own households (1:10-22), the narrator now depicts them as shallow and jaded men whose only measure of the woman who is fit to rule as queen is her beauty of face and figure and her performance in his bed!

This type of humor is "tendentious," a "rhetorical means of exposure"³⁵ whose satire, since it mocks the world in which diaspora Jews must live, intends not just to ridicule but to instruct. The satire has a sinister side. It reveals a society fraught with danger. Though it is ruled by law, this does not guarantee either security or justice,³⁶ for it is easily manipulated by buffoons whose tender egos can marshal the state's whole legislative and administrative machinery for the furthering of selfish causes.

³⁴ Herodotus 3.84.

³⁵ A. Brenner, "On the Semantic Field of Humour, Laughter and the Comic in the Old Testament," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Y. T. Radday and A. Brenner; Sheffield: Almond, 1990) 39- 40.

³⁶ Cf. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 249.

The satirical edge to the exposition has portrayed the story's world as a dangerous and uncertain place for the Jews who must live a diaspora existence within it. Such a society is fertile ground for terrifying evils, and the extent and frightfulness of that evil can be seen in the nature of the crisis, the problem of the story, which immediately follows in chap. 3. In the past the Jewish community had known the destruction of capital and Temple and the disintegration of expulsion and exile. But, horrible as such events as the fall of Jerusalem are, they pale in comparison to the chilling terror of the utter annihilation of the whole people envisioned by and enacted into law by Haman's terrible decree. And, however much the narrative indicates in subtle ways that the threat will not be carried out, its extreme nature speaks volumes about the terrible dangers that lurk below the seemingly ordered society of the world of the diaspora.

b. *The Characterization of Haman.* The horror of the event itself is continued by the unrelenting characterization of Haman, its perpetrator. Haman is presented as an ideal figure, the enemy of the Jews par excellence, as his epithet, "the enemy of the Jews," repeated at crucial junctures in the narrative, reveals (see 3:10; 8:1; 9:10, 24).³⁷ Haman, however, is not primarily characterized by this epithet. Alone

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among the protagonists of the story, his character is revealed by the omniscient narrator's direct statements, especially his report of "inward speech."³⁸ In this way the narrator lays bare Haman's feelings and emotions (3:5, 5:9, 6:12, etc.), his thoughts (6:6), his deliberations (3:6), and his perceptions (7:7). Haman is "allowed no mysteries. His motives, drives and attitudes are transparent, his twisted soul laid bare to all."³⁹ And it is clear that his evil is fueled principally by the inordinate pride of a "vast but tender ego."⁴⁰ That this is what drives him is clearly revealed in the first three scenes in which we see him. First, in 3:1-6 his pride, wounded by Mordecai's refusal to bow before him, could not be healed by just the destruction of his enemy. Only the annihilation of the whole Jewish people could assuage an anger rooted in his deep feeling of inferiority.⁴¹ Second, in 5:9-14 he confesses to his wife and friends that all that should give life meaning becomes meaningless in the face of this one man's existence. And third, in 6:1-11, entranced by the phrase "the man whom the king desires to honor," which he rolls around on his tongue three times, his swollen ego leads him to conclude that it can only refer to himself and prompts him thus unwittingly to prescribe the honoring of Mordecai. Haman is thus portrayed as irrational evil personified. The fact that such evil can so easily bend both the source and the machinery of Persian power to its purposes is what makes this diaspora world such a dangerous and uncertain place.

³⁷ See esp. the "Explanation" section to 3:1-6 in my *Ruth, Esther*, 383-84.

³⁸ Cf. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 114-30; and esp. Fox's insightful study, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 178-84.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴¹ See the "Explanation" section to 3:1-6 in my *Ruth, Esther*, 384-86.

However, this is not the theme of our story. It is not simply a story of human courage and fortitude in the face of such danger. The theme must take into account the resolution of the story effected by Mordecai and Esther. The major point of the story is not just the complete reversal of Haman's edict but how this is achieved. Our purposes here, however, do not require a detailed discussion of the narrator's characterization of either Mordecai or Esther.⁴² Suffice it to say that Mordecai is a "flat" character or "type."⁴³ He is one-dimensional, built around a single quality or trait, his absolute loyalty to the Jewish people. He stereotypically represents what the ideal diaspora Jew should be. Esther, on the other hand, is a "round" character, the focus

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of the "interest" point of view in the story.⁴⁴ She begins as a non-entity, valued in that courtly world only for her good looks and her body. She resolutely accepts Mordecai's challenge to use her position as queen to act for the salvation of her people, and in one decisive moment becomes a force to be reckoned with (4:15). The main agent in effecting the Jews' deliverance is not only Mordecai's loyalty to the Jewish people; it is the cunning, courage, and diplomacy of Esther, a woman in a world that was not only ruled by men but that devalued women.

Finally, since it has often loomed so large in the negative evaluation of the book, a few words must be said about the role of God in the story. Since God is never once mentioned, it is not possible to talk about a characterization of him. But the book nonetheless predicates the providence of God, as does the rest of the OT, for the deliverance of the Jews is effected not only by the loyalty of Mordecai and the cunning and courage of Esther but also by the series of truly remarkable and dramatic coincidences with which the story abounds.⁴⁵ As Clines puts it,

whether it is the vacancy for a queen at the Persian court, the accession of a Jewish queen, Mordecai's discovery of the plot, Esther's favorable reception by the king, the king's insomnia, Haman's early arrival at the palace or even his reckless plea for mercy at Esther's feet, the chance occurrences have a cumulative effect. Each of these incidents regarded by itself might well appear to be the result of chance, and to have no bearing whatsoever upon the success of the great plot. But, taken together, the element of chance disappears; they all converge upon one point; one supplements the other. The whole course of events is shaped by the guiding hand of the Great Unnamed.⁴⁶

Second, a central motif of the story is that of peripety, a dramatic series of reversals—that is, actions or events expected to produce a certain result but that actually produce its direct opposite. And it is not just the number of these reversals. The careful reader cannot help but note that the

⁴² See *ibid.*, 318-21.

⁴³ For a discussion of "flat" and "round" characters, see A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983; repr. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1994) 23-32.

⁴⁴ For the concept of "point of view" (including "interest" point of view) of a narrative, see *ibid.*, 43-82, and esp. 47-48, 84.

⁴⁵ See esp. the "Explanation" section to 6:1-11 in my *Ruth, Esther*, 418-20.

⁴⁶ Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 155.

narrator consciously draws attention to this series of reversals by using identical or nearly identical phraseology in both the event and its opposite.⁴⁷

However, remarkable coincidences and dramatic reversals do not in themselves demonstrate that God is behind them.⁴⁸ Rather, just

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like the meanings of its words, the meaning of a discourse at all levels, up to and including genre, depends upon context. The context of this book decidedly favors reading all of these elements as a statement about divine providence. First, the author himself hints in two places that his context is indeed the OT's world of faith. In 4:3 the Jews fast at the news of Haman's edict, and in 4:15-17 Esther orders, and Mordecai carries out, a three-day fast in preparation for her entry to the king. Even though the name of God is not mentioned, what purpose do these acts serve if not to affect God's will? Further, Mordecai's hope in 4:14 that perhaps Esther has come to the queenship for just such a time as this is surely a statement that is intended to affirm divine providence, not one that denies it. Finally, the theme of peripety, in which God acts to effect reversals on behalf of his people, is a dominant one in the OT.⁴⁹ In this context the function of peripety has more than esthetic value. It "points to divine direction of human events" and so "mirrors the author's world view and at the same time communicates that view to the reader."⁵⁰

Indeed, in such a context, as Clines put it so well, "the storyteller is no theological sophisticate promoting a 'religionless Judaism, but an Old Believer whose ultimate act of faith is to take the protective providence of God for granted.... [T]here is nothing hidden or veiled about the causality of the events of the Esther story: it is indeed unexpressed but it is unmistakable, given the context within which the story is set."⁵¹

On the grounds of this study of the characterization of the world of the story and its characters, the theme of the story can be stated as follows: In the dangerous world of the diaspora, with its opulence, uncertainty, and evil, the loyalty of Mordecai to the Jewish people and the king, the courage and shrewdness of Esther, and the reliable providence of God delivered the diaspora Jewish community from the terrible threat of annihilation, demonstrating that a viable life for the Jews of the diaspora is possible even in the face of such propensity for evil.

When the theme of the denouement in 9:6-32, the account of the prescriptions for the festival of Purim,⁵² is added to the theme of the story in 1:1-9:5; 10:1-3, the theme of the whole book can be stated in brief form as follows:

⁴⁷ For a more extended discussion, see my *Ruth, Esther*, 323-26.

⁴⁸ Cf. the comments of Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 155.

⁴⁹ See the examples cited by M. V. Fox, "The Structure of the Book of Esther," in *Isac Leo Seligman Volume: Essays on the Bible and the Ancient World* (ed. A. Rofe and Y Zakovitch; Jerusalem: Rubinstein, 1983) 299-303.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 296, 299.

⁵¹ Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 155-56.

⁵² For greater detail, see my *Ruth, Esther*, 326-27.

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The festival of Purim, established by the joint leadership and action of Mordecai, Esther, and the Jewish community itself, is to consist of joyful days of feasting and the sending of gifts to one another and the poor as a perpetual annual commemoration of the transformation from sadness to joy and from mourning to a holiday that marked the days following the Jews' deliverance from the terrible edict with which Haman sought to annihilate them. This deliverance from the threat of annihilation in the dangerous world of the diaspora with its propensity for evil was effected by the loyalty of Mordecai, the courage and sagacity of Esther, and the reliable providence of God, demonstrating that a viable life for the Jews of the diaspora is possible even in the face of such propensity for evil.

From this theme of the book, the major theological emphases of the story flow, however subtly they are expressed in such a literary vehicle. Since the primary theme is the institution of the festival of Purim, it is this theme that sets the book's primary theological agenda. The most important feature of the celebration of Purim for the theology set thereby is the fact that the festival is to commemorate the days of rest and joyful festivities that followed the battles. The character of the celebration, then, is transformed from what it was originally in a most significant and important way.⁵³ What is being celebrated is not victory in battle, and the joy prescribed is not malicious glee over the slaughter of enemies. The festival commemorates, rather, the fact that they "gained relief from their enemies" and that life was "transformed for them from sadness to joy and from mourning to a holiday" (9:22). It is, then, a celebration of relief from persecution, a commemoration of the joy of deliverance from the terrible threat to their existence. This is especially to be seen in both the brief retrospective of the story in 9:24-25, which instigated the Jews' decision to observe the festival, and the very name of the festival itself, Purim, which is a reference to pur, the lot cast by Haman for their annihilation. The story and the name of the festival bring to mind neither military victory nor the slaughter of enemies but Haman's plot and hence deliverance from evil and disaster.

From this analysis of the character of Purim, it is clear that the festival called the Jews of the diaspora to a celebration of the joy of deliverance in the face of unmitigated and unthinkable evil. For all the disturbing and troubling character of such a call for Jews, the Jewish community has responded to it with alacrity and enthusiasm.

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Purim is one of the most important and popular festivals of the Jewish liturgical year. Its esteem in the Jewish community is often estimated by quoting the well-known saying of Maimonides that, when the Prophets and the Writings pass away when the Messiah comes, only Esther and the Torah will remain.

⁵³ Cf. B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 603-4; and Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 160-62.

The element of the joy of deliverance that the book's prescriptions for Purim set as the primary character of the festival has been well caught by the Jews' observance of Purim, for it is a boisterous celebration, full of merriment and high spirits.⁵⁴ A festival meal is eaten on the 14th of Adar, gifts of food are sent to friends, and money is donated to the poor. Children often rattle hand-held noisemakers or hiss and boo whenever the name of Haman occurs during the reading of the scroll. Mummers and masquerades involving role reversals, often quite extreme, mark the festival.⁵⁵ Children dress up in garish costumes and solicit gifts from neighbors.⁵⁶ From the Middle Ages until the Holocaust put an end to them, there developed in European Jewish communities the practice of presenting satirical and comic monologues or group performances called Purim-shpils (plays) at the festive family meal.⁵⁷ In the talmudic academies of Eastern Europe, until the Holocaust wiped them out, a "Purim Rabbi" would often be elected from among the students with the license to parody his teachers and even frivolously to manipulate sacred texts.⁵⁸ In all of this, ordinary conventions of decorum and deportment are held in abeyance, and a spirit of satire and fun is given full sway, fully in keeping with the satirical spirit of the book of Esther itself.

To ask why the book of Esther and Purim have so entered and marked the Jewish soul is perhaps to belabor the obvious. But in a post-Holocaust world it bears repeating. First, as we noted, Esther is the only book in the OT canon that is exclusively concerned with a Jewish, that is diaspora, agenda, and ever since the destruction of Judea by the Romans in the first century the Jews have known only a diaspora existence—at least until the establishment of the State of Israel. Second, one of the major themes of the book is to show how Mordecai, Esther, and the providence of God delivered Jews of the diaspora from the threat of annihilation. Throughout their existence,

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but especially in the last 150 years in the Western world, the Jews have known and experienced the propensity for evil resident in their diaspora world, extending from discrimination, subtle and blatant, through persecutions of various kinds, to pogroms involving the extensive loss of life and property. For all the joy, satire, and carnival atmosphere of regular Purim observance, Jewish custom reveals a significant awareness of Purim as the celebration of deliverance in the practice of establishing "Special Purims." These are Purim-like celebrations of escape from persecution or destruction involving rituals similar to those of Purim, often including a reading in the synagogue of a scroll containing an account of the specific deliverance, accompanied by special prayers of thanksgiving. These "Special Purims" were inaugurated by an individual community (or family) and hence are known as "the Purim of..." (followed by the name of the community or family). See *Encyclopedia Judaica* 13.1396-98, where a long list of some of those known is given, dating

⁵⁴ See L. Jacob, "Purim," *EncJud* 13.1390-95; and esp. M. Harris, "Purim: The Celebration of Dis-Order," *Judaism* 26 (1977) 161-70.

⁵⁵ See esp. *ibid.*, 163-66.

⁵⁶ See esp. T. H. Gaster, *Purim and Hanukkah in Custom and Tradition* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950) 59.

⁵⁷ See C. Shmeruk, "Purim-Shpil," *EncJud* 13.1396-1404.

⁵⁸ R. Gordis, *Megillat Esther. The Masoretic Hebrew Text with Introduction, New Translation, and Commentary* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1972) 16.

from the 12th to the 20th century. The list of deliverances it celebrates is sober and chilling reading. For Jews, the book of Esther is true. As a community they have lived it.

One who stands outside the Jewish community can only imagine what a disturbing and troubling summons the call of Purim to a perpetual commemoration of the joy of deliverance from evil and disaster must be for the Jewish community, for their experience has all too often been the opposite of that of the book of Esther. For far too many Jewish families and communities over the centuries, their experience has been the mirror image of the story. The pogroms have all too often been successful, culminating in the unthinkable horror of Haman's spiritual descendants, Hitler and his Nazi minions, who, unlike Haman, succeeded in annihilating six million of the seven million Jews of Europe and virtually exterminating European Jewish culture. For them, there was no Mordecai; for them, there was no Esther; for them, there was no deliverance. In such circumstances faith hardly knows how to hang onto the providence of God—but it must. Perhaps at the risk of making easy judgments, one who has not lived through such horror, either personally or through community identity, might venture the judgment and the hope that the book of Esther and Purim should continue to live in a post-Holocaust world—and indeed loom even larger, since it summons the community to exercise its faith and to hold onto its hope in the very face of that diabolical element in the character of the world whose horror the story of Esther has captured so well in Haman and his evil plot. Indeed, Purim celebrates the fact that, for all of its tragedy and horror, the Holocaust has meant neither the end of Judaism nor the end of the Jews!

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Finally, rather than producing negative and unsympathetic readings of Esther, examples of which I cited at the beginning of this article, Esther should prick the Christian conscience, especially in a post-Holocaust world. "Esther says to the Christian that anti-Jewish hostility is not God's will, and he cannot tolerate it."⁵⁹ Indeed, given the fact that the vast majority of the evils that Jews of the Western world have experienced over the centuries, culminating in the Holocaust, has been at the hands of nominally Christian nations and communities and that this has all too often been met by silence and passivity on the part of the Church, the book of Esther above all else should drive us in the Christian community to our knees in repentance and contrition, with the resolve (in keeping with the synergism of Esther) that the future will be different from the past.

But the character of the festival of Purim has a word to speak to the Christian, as well as to the Jewish, community. Christians at times have also lived in a dangerous and unfriendly "diaspora world," marked by hatred and persecution, as examples of which the Roman world of the early church, the Communist regimes of the present century, or communities of the present day that are ruled by leaders of fundamentalist Islam come to mind. In the modern Western world, the Church now lives in an increasingly secular and technologically-driven world that is more and more unfriendly to the issues of faith. The story of Esther also holds out to the Church the hope that "relief and deliverance" may indeed be effected by the combination of the providence of God and

⁵⁹ W LaSor, D. Hubbard, and E Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996) 629.

Frederic W. Bush, "The Book of Esther: Opus non gratum in the Christian Canon," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 8 (1998): 39-54.

human effort. Esther and Purim call the Church to celebrate the joy of deliverance in the face of unmitigated and unthinkable evil.

If my reading of the book of Esther is correct—and I passionately believe that it is—the book ought not to be an *opus non gratum* in the Christian canon.

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