

Entertaining Esther: Vamp, Victim, And Virtuous Woman

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Précis

Although the biblical book of Esther seems to be an historical account, its factual basis is unlikely: rather it may serve as a parody of Persian court life. On its surface level, Esther is amusing, yet there are serious undertones to the narrative. In this book, Esther appears as vamp, victim, and virtuous woman.

Introduction

This article begins with a look at the book of Esther itself. Note is taken of Esther as the central text of the festive celebration of the holiday of Purim. While Esther appears as an historical work, in fact it may be a preposterous parody. This is followed by the central thesis, which analyzes Esther's three roles in the book, Esther as Vamp, Victim, and Virtuous Woman.

The title to this article utilizes the word "Entertaining" in three different ways. To "entertain" can mean to "invite guests or visitors." Esther clearly entertains/invites King Ahasuerus and Haman as her guests to the banquets in her quarters in chapters 5 and 7. To "entertain" can mean to "consider" something. Esther herself entertains/considers various strategies; she does this to achieve her desired ends. Finally, the word "entertain" can mean to "amuse." Although on some levels a very serious work, as a book Esther entertains/amuses; it is a fanciful story.

In the past twenty-five years, there has been a resurgence of scholarly interest in the book of Esther.¹ That said, it is also true that the book of Esther is one of the strangest works in the biblical corpus.² It has a cast of characters unmatched in any other of the Bible's library. There are heroes, female heroes, villains, fools, fops, knaves, plodders, plotters, and schemers. There are vivid descriptions of events, written in a style virtually unknown in other biblical narratives, perhaps with the possible exception of the post-exilic book of Daniel.

The setting of the book of Esther is ancient Persia, not the land of Israel. Nor are the majority of those people named part of the Jewish world, quite the contrary. Esther is unique among biblical books for it does not contain God's name, or even a clear, unambiguous direct reference to God. As Sidnie Ann White has written, the "book's indifference to religious practices, its dubious sexual ethics, and its female heroine"³ have led many to question its place in Scripture. Esther is the only biblical book outside of the Torah that calls for the establishment of a festival/holy day (Purim). The reading of the megillah of Esther has become the centerpiece for the celebration of Purim. Its raucous noisemaking obliteration of the name of Haman is unique among Jewish celebrations. Esther also is exceptional in that the "success" of the plot unambiguously depends on exogamy.

A Purposeful Preposterous Parody

On the surface, Esther purports to be an historical work. Although in the Masoretic Text Esther forms part of the five *megillot* located in the third section of the *Tanakh*, *Ketuvim*/Writings, in Christian Bibles it is set as part of the historical books, following Ezra and Nehemiah, and preceding Job. Most scholars challenge Esther's historicity. Jon Levenson observes that "the historical problems with Esther are . . . massive . . . no evidence whatsoever for any of the key events of the book of Esther has ever turned up."⁴ In the felicitous description of Carey A. Moore, "Esther occupies various locations in the Hebrew, Greek, and English texts, depending upon whether the particular compiler or copyist arranged [the] canon along chronological, logical, or theological lines."⁵

The book of Esther "is an imaginative story . . . it is a comedy, a book meant to be funny, to provoke laughter."⁶ (That said, as noted there also are deadly serious sides to Esther, which shall be explored later in this article.)⁷ Adele Berlin characterizes Esther as farce, burlesque (exaggerated caricature types, preposterous situations, broad verbal humor), and satire. On the surface, it vulgarizes Persian court life. There are "ludicrous edicts . . . foppish royal court . . . officials, and a wooden adherence to nonsensical laws." As low comedy, there are examples of

“exaggeration, caricature . . . coincidences, improbabilities, and verbal humor . . . Most of these features are prominent in [the book of] Esther.”⁸

The “facts” suggested in Esther are fantastic. They are hard to take seriously. Berlin points out that there are no records of a Persian queen named Esther; queens are chosen from noble Persian families, not ethnic minorities; Ahasuerus treats his (first) queen Vashti like a concubine; no king could act as Ahasuerus did; and the suggested annihilation of the Jews in ancient Persia, a country relatively benevolent to its ethnic groups, is absurd. That the Persian ruler, Cyrus the Great, permitted the Jews to return to Judah goes unmentioned in the book. Further, it is incredulous that Esther hides her Jewish ethnicity until the crucial moment.⁹

Yet on another level, Esther is a very serious book. Naomi R. Klein points out that there are political aspects to this book, which highlight power and powerlessness. “As exiles, the Jews are in a ‘dependent’ position, one associated with females, whereas autonomy and power are associated with males. These male and female ‘roles’ – representing, respectively, honor and shame – not only permeate the book of Esther, but also are used to ‘shame’ the culture in which the Israelites are exiled and, by comparison, to ‘honor’ the Israelites.”¹⁰

In a recent study, Jonathan Grossman has challenged the idea that Esther is a preposterous parody. Rather he makes a strong case that there are numerous “concealed messages” throughout the book, messages that “contradict its revealed themes” and in particular its “lighthearted whimsy.” He goes on to suggest that the book’s author consciously chose to “conceal his messages” employing “satire, often peppered with irony and cynicism.”¹¹ Grossman offers many examples where events in the book, or language in the book connect to other parts of the Bible. That there may be many additional ways of understanding the purposes and messages (concealed or not) that readers can derive from the book of Esther is indisputable. It is not a matter of either/or, but rather of both/and. At the very least, however, on its surface level, as she is presented to the reader, Esther appears in three guises, as vamp, victim, and virtuous woman.

The Three Faces of Esther: Vamp, Victim, and Virtuous Woman

Long before the 1957 movie, *The Three Faces of Eve*,¹² a psychological portrait of a woman who presented with three different personalities, there were the three faces of Esther. Broadly speaking, the character of Esther presents in three ways: Esther as vamp, Esther as victim, and Esther as virtuous woman. Esther appears as a seductress, who is able to entice King Ahasuerus with her sexual charms. Esther's life is endangered because she is Jewish. Through her bold plans, she is able to avert the evil fomented against her people and counter its effects.

The text describes her as "shapely and beautiful" (Est. 2:7). According to rabbinic tradition, "Esther was neither too tall nor too short, but of medium size . . . and endowed with great charm" (Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 13a). Further, according to the rabbis, along with Sarah, Rahab, and Abigail, Esther was one of the most beautiful women in the world (Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 15a). These are very interesting companions and comparisons for Esther. Each has her own somewhat colorful sexual history. Abraham uses Sarah as sexual bait for the king of Gerar (Gen. 20) and earlier he did the same thing in terms of the Pharaoh in Egypt. It is unclear whether or not Sarah slept with the Egyptian monarch (Gen. 12). Rahab unambiguously is a prostitute (Josh. 2). Abigail is a married woman; yet, she all but offers herself to David during his years as an outlaw (1 Sam. 25).¹³

Esther As Vamp

During her competition for the crown, Esther spends a night alone with King Ahasuerus. She clearly had to be appealing to the king to earn his special favor. She becomes his queen and immediately he holds a banquet in her honor. Later in the book, Esther visits the king uninvited, a matter not normally done, indeed worthy of death (Est. 4:11). In the event, she wins his favor again and, not only that, he accedes to her request to attend first one, and then a second banquet (Est. 5:4, 7-8).

According to the rabbis, Esther knows how to please the king. Based on the biblical text, "The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more

than all the virgins” (Est. 2:17), the Talmud explains, “If he wanted to find in her the taste of a virgin, he found it; if the taste of a married woman, he found it” (Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 13a end). As a modern commentator explains, “The sense is that the king finds Esther more sexually attractive and more generally charming than anyone else.”¹⁴ On the other hand, the rabbis of the Talmud, from their male perspective (and they probably mean this as a compliment) suggest that Esther was passive when the king slept with her. They write, “Esther was like the ground” (Babylonian Talmud *Sanhedrin* 74b). A medieval text offers the explanation that God personally intervened and sent a female spirit disguised as Esther, and this spirit cohabited with Ahasuerus.¹⁵

The biblical text explains that Mordecai treated Esther, who was his young cousin, like a *daughter* (Est. 2:7, Hebrew: *bat*). A talmudic rabbi (Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 13a) puns on this word, and says, read not daughter (*bat*) but as a wife (lit. house, *bayit*). In short, Mordecai married Esther. In a treatise titled “Kosher Adultery: The Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus Triangle,” scholar Barry D. Walfish writes that the “idea that Mordecai and Esther were a married couple has had a long history in Jewish tradition, originating in the LXX [Septuagint], flourishing in the Talmud and continuing on into the commentaries of the sixteenth century and beyond.”¹⁶ Although at this point not explicitly stated, the Talmud suggests that Mordecai knew Esther intimately. Ahasuerus is said to have gone to Mordecai to ask his advice. Mordecai explains, “the way to rouse a woman is to make her jealous” (lit. a woman is only jealous of the thigh of another), presumably speaking out of his own experience with Esther (Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 13a end).

Another talmudic rabbi even suggests that not only were Mordecai and Esther married, they remained intimate even after she married Ahasuerus, clearly labeling Esther as an adulteress (and Mordecai as a knowing and willing procurer, and adulterer). He bases his thought on the line, “Esther obeyed Mordecai’s bidding, as she had done when she was under his tutelage” (Est.

2:20). The sage explains, “She used to rise from the lap of Ahasuerus and bathe and sit in the lap of Mordecai” (Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 13b).

Esther As Victim

Esther as a victim is clear from the biblical text; her life patently is in danger as part of the threatened Jewish community. Mordecai says to her, “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace” (Est. 4:13). Esther herself claims her victimhood at the fateful final banquet with Ahasuerus and Haman. She says to the king, “Let my life be granted as my wish . . . for we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated” (Est. 7:3-4). Esther also put her life in danger, as explained earlier, when she went to see Ahasuerus unannounced.

Another sense of Esther-as-victim is that as a woman in a very male-dominated, patriarchal world, she has to be very careful about what she does or does not do, much less in for what she seeks to achieve. In the first chapter of Esther, Queen Vashti is banished because she challenged the request of her husband (cf. Est. 1:10-15, 19-20).

Anna Gerrard has written cogently about Esther as a victim of institutional rape. The “patriarchal institution of society, represented [in the book] . . . by the Persian court, is the 'active agent' that creates a reality in which the women are forced to accept the sexual violation of their bodies without protest. Esther is raped. She is raped by an institution that does not give her another choice. She has to be taken by the King's representatives; she has to spend 12 months in the harem; she has to undergo the prescribed beauty procedures; she has to spend a night with the King when her time comes; and, we can assume, she has to do what he desires. Esther and the other women [who are 'contending' for the role of the new queen] are victims of . . . institutional rape.”¹⁷

Esther As Virtuous Woman

Esther earns her place as a virtuous woman because she willingly takes on the role of setting up a situation where she can convince Ahasuerus (in effect) to revoke his order to annihilate the Jews.

She commands Mordecai to tell the Jews of Shushan to join her in a supplicatory fast, and then explains, that she “shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I will perish” (Est. 4:16). The rabbis praise Esther’s acts. Quoting Isaiah 10:17, “the light of Israel shall be for a fire” the midrash says, “the light of Israel refers to Esther who shone like the light of the morning for Israel.” Then, a bit later, the Midrash explains that she was named Esther, because Esther means “the hidden one” (based on the Hebrew word *satar* – *samekh taf resh*, i.e. “hidden”) for “she remained hidden fast in her chambers, but she came forth into the world when there was need of her to give light to Israel.”¹⁸

Although there are neither clear and direct prayers to God, nor does the word God appear in the book, according to the rabbis, Esther does pray and ask for God’s intervention.¹⁹ “Mordecai and Esther, hungry for the word of God . . . took Haman’s power away not with weapons nor with a shield, but with prayer and supplications to God, as is proved by the text, ‘And many lay in sackcloth and ashes (Esther 4:3).’”²⁰ In another Midrash, Esther claims to follow three essential domestic, women-oriented Jewish laws: putting away a piece of dough before baking, recognizing the priests’ due; kindling Sabbath lights; and observing laws concerning menstruation.²¹ This latter point is amplified in the Talmud. A passage suggests, “she used to show the blood of her impurity to the Sages” (Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 13b).

Elsewhere in the Midrash, Esther compares herself to biblical Sarah. “Our mother Sarah was taken for only a single night unto Pharaoh, and he and all the people of his house were smitten with great plagues. As it is said, God ‘plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife’ (Gen. 12:17).” She then pleads to God, and with a bit of criticism as well, she says, “But I who have been forced all these years to endure the embrace of such a wicked person – for me, you have not worked miracles.”²²

When and Where Vamp, Victim, and Virtue Overlap

As noted earlier, the book of Esther may be a purposeful preposterous parody, an imaginative story, a work that seeks to provoke laughter. At one point in the book, Esther as vamp, victim,

and virtuous woman overlap. The action centers on the climatic moment of the book, when Esther is at maximum danger, just before the tables are overturned.

In this section of the narrative, as one of the Jewish people, Esther's life is at risk, she is a target for murder (Esther as victim). She acts with alacrity and wisdom, devising a plan to combat the danger. Then she dresses up in her finery and bravely visits the king, inviting both him (and Haman!) – not once, but twice – to a banquet at her quarters. (Esther as vamp). The second banquet serves as the occasion to spring the trap to save her people and herself (Esther as virtuous woman).

Conclusions

The book of Esther, although portrayed as an historical court drama, actually may be a parody of court life in Persia. Yet, it is also a book that functions on many levels. As noted earlier, the 1957 movie, *The Three Faces of Eve*, focused on a protagonist who was under psychiatric care. She presented three personalities, and she went from one state to another, involuntarily. Biblical Esther, by contrast, made serious conscious choices to live out her life as best as she could. She lived in a patriarchal androcentric world, one which regarded women as not only inferior, but also as a threat to male dominance and authority. Esther therefore, in order to thrive, needed to react to three roles in which she was cast: vamp, victim, and virtuous woman.

Esther entertains. She entertains/invites the King and Haman to two banquets. Esther also entertains/considers various options to achieve her desired ends. The narrative of Esther also entertains/amuses, it serves as an exciting but fanciful tale of palace intrigue.

Esther is a strong, powerful, intelligent, and brave woman. To succeed in her world, she assumes different roles, and still she finds herself in danger. The book presents a very complex character, and ultimately as a virtuous woman. She is a hero.

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Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal Fall 2012 Volume 9 Number 2
ISSN 1209-9392

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Endnotes:

Special thanks to my friend and colleague, Rabbi Dr Moshe Reiss whose scholarly interest and research into the book of Esther inspired this article.

¹ Sidnie White Crawford, "Introduction," *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon, Eds. (London, New York: T & T International, Continuum, 2003), p. 1. For a representative sampling of scholarship on the book of Esther, see the Bibliography here and the annotated Bibliography section in Linda M. Day, *Esther* – Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), pp. 176-177.

² Elias Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* [Jonah, Daniel, Koheleth, Esther] (New York: Schocken, 1967), pp. 169-240.

³ Sidnie Ann White, "Esther," Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, Editors, *The Woman's Bible Commentary* (London: SPCK, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), p. 126.

⁴ Jon D. Levenson, *Esther*, OTL (Louisville, London,: Westminster John Knox, 1997), p. 23. See also Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, second edition (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1991, 2001), pp. 131-139; Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, AB 7B (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), pp. xxxiv-xlvi; Jerry A. Gladson, *The Five Exotic Scrolls of the Hebrew Bible* (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2009), pp. 326-333.

⁵ Moore, p. xxx.

⁶ Adele Berlin, *Esther: the JPS Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society 2001), p. xvii.

⁷ Fox points out the relevance and timelessness of Esther, and how it has echoes in the 20th century, referring to modern pogroms in Kishinev and Odessa, and then the Haman of Hamans with the Shoah, p.11.

⁸ Berlin, p. xix. See also her references, pp. xvii-xviii.

⁹ Berlin, p. xvii.

¹⁰ Naomi R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), p. 95. Klein adds: "Esther has been championed as an enterprising woman. Nevertheless, the text demonstrates how she acts behind the mask of 'feminine shame.' Thus Esther epitomizes the book's message and manipulation of the honor/shame theme," p. 117. Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading* Siphrut 6 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), pp. 240-241.

¹¹ According to Grossman, the book also consciously echoes or connects to many earlier events in the Bible. Grossman, pp. 4, 11.

¹² *The Three Faces of Eve* is a 1957 American film adaptation of a case study by Corbett H. Thigpen and Hervey M. Cleckley. It was based on the true story of Chris Costner Sizemore, also known as Eve White, a woman who suffered from Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) formerly known as multiple personality disorder.

¹³ The Talmud also labels Esther a prophet, along with Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, and Hulda – Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 14a. Interestingly, all of these women have powerful personalities, and men take notice of and listen to their words (although in Numbers 12, Miriam is punished for her observations.)

¹⁴ Berlin, p. 29, comment on 2:17.

¹⁵ Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Trans. Henrietta Szold (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1925) "Esther," Vol. 5, note 80. According to Berlin, "The Zohar (*Ra'ya mehemma. Ki Tetze* 3:276a) says that God sent down a female spirit disguised as Esther to take her place with the king." Berlin, p. 26.

¹⁶ Barry D. Walfish, "Kosher Adultery: The Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus Triangle in Talmudic, Medieval, and Sixteenth Century Exegesis," *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon, Eds. (London, New York: T & T Clark International, Continuum, 2003), pp. 135. An alternative view is that Mordecai was married, and since Esther's mother died in childbirth, Mordecai's own wife suckled Esther. *The Midrash on Psalms*, 2 vols., translated by William G. Braude. (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1959), Psalm 22.23.

¹⁷ Anna Gerrard, "Re-Framing Esther. A Jewish Feminist Study of Beauty and Sexuality in the Second Chapter of the Book of Esther and its Interpretations." Rabbinic Thesis, London: Leo Baeck College, 2011, pp. 68-69. Firth acknowledges that Esther is "taken" to the harem, but he also downplays the fact that she is coerced into this situation. He writes, "There is perhaps a hint of force in her case." David G. Firth, *The Message of Esther: God present but unseen*, (Downers Green, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), p. 52. Linda M. Day likewise acknowledges that Esther is "taken" but she also uses harsher verbs: "herded up" and "rounded up." Day, pp. 43, 44, 47. Day however, does not dwell on the involuntary nature of Esther's role.

¹⁸ *Midrash Psalms*, Psalm 22.3.

¹⁹ *Midrash Psalms* 22.6. The rabbis credit her with quoting Psalm 22:2, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” One author suggests that the omission of God’s name is another example of “deliberate concealment,” Grossman, p. 11.

²⁰ *Pesikta Rabbati* (Discourses for Feasts, Fasts and Special Sabbaths) translated by William G. Braude. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), *Piska* 18.3.

²¹ *Midrash Psalms*, Psalm 22.16.

²² *Midrash Psalms*, Psalm 22.16.