

Fate and Word: The Book of Esther as Guidance to a Canonical Reading of Scripture*

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As Protestants, we are familiar with the equation of Scripture and God's Word. Such identification was first introduced in 1536 by the Swiss reformer Heinrich Bullinger at the very beginning of the *First Helvetic Confession*: "We believe and confess the canonical Scriptures of the holy prophets and apostles of both Testaments to be the true and genuine Word of God, and to have sufficient authority of themselves, not of men. For God himself spoke to the fathers, prophets, apostles, and still speaks to us through the Holy Scriptures." If Scripture is identical with God's written Word, how about the book of Esther in its Hebrew version, which is unanimously regarded by Protestant churches as part of the Old Testament canon? Does God speak to us through the book of Esther as part of the Holy Scriptures? After all, God and his word are never mentioned in the ten chapters of that book, not even by epithet or circumlocution. Likewise, there is no human religiosity depicted that is particularly related to God. Literally speaking, the book of Esther is a God-less book.

In one of his table talks, Martin Luther said bluntly: "I am so hostile to Second Maccabees and to Esther that I would wish they did not exist at all; for they Judaize too

greatly and have much pagan rubbish."¹ Luther was certainly not the only one who had serious reservations about the canonicity of the book of Esther. It was contested in the church for centuries, even in the Greek version with its several theological additions.

These six supplements in the Greek Septuagint locate the plight of the Persian Jews squarely in the context of God's story of Israel as his elect people and place the life of the Jews completely in God's hands. In particular, Esther's prayer in Additions to Esther 14:1-19 more than compensates for the lack of religiosity in the Masoretic Text. Such supplementary passages in the book of Esther might be reassuring to the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox Churches, who receive those additions as part of their canon. Jews and Protestants, however, have to come to terms with the literal absence of God in the Masoretic text of Esther.²

*I thank Luke DeKoster and James A. Rimbach for their stylistic and textual amendments.

1. *Weimar Edition*, "Tischreden," vol. 3 (Weimar: Hermann Boehlaus Nachfolger, 1914), No. 3391b, p. 302 (author's translation).

2. For an excellent Jewish interpretation which takes God's absence seriously, compare Michael Fox, "The Religion of the Book of Esther,"

Various attempts have been made to discover God in the Hebrew book of Esther, at least in indirect ways that can vindicate it as part of God's word.³ The only problem with such posthumous "discoveries" is that they are not convincing as activities of the God of Israel.

Mordecai's refusal to prostrate himself before the vizier Haman, which triggered Haman's plan to slaughter all the Jews in the Persian kingdom (Esth 3:5-6), for example, was not an act of obedience to God. After all, falling down before a superior was common in Israel as an act of showing proper respect, even if the superiors were gentiles (e.g., Abraham in Gen 23:7, 12). Never was such posture considered to be an act of adoration, as this would have violated the first commandment. One may try to explain Mordecai's refusal historically, on the grounds that Mordecai, from the tribe of Benjamin, could not bow to Haman because Haman's ancestor, King Agag of the Amalekites, had once been defeated by King Saul (cf. 1 Samuel 15). But such animosity between a Benjaminite and an Amalekite certainly would not have justified the violation of a royal order (Esth 3:2).

When Haman tried to convince the Persian king Ahasuerus of his genocide plan, he depicted the laws of the Jews as being different from those of every other people (Esth 3:8). One might assume that this portrayal gives honor to God's Torah. However, the relevant Hebrew term *dāt*, which means "law" or, better, "decree" is—apart from Deut 33:2 and Ezra 8:36—used only in the book of Esther, where it commonly refers to the decrees of the *Persian*

king. Such Jewish decrees are thus to be considered as self-enacted laws, not those received from God on Mount Sinai.

When Haman wanted to fix the day for the genocide of the Persian Jews, he came to a decision by having lots cast (Esth 3:7). Certainly we find in Scripture various examples of lotteries: Josh 7:10-26, 1 Sam 14:41-42; 1 Chronicles 24-26. Though the throwing of lots was a human action, the result was regarded to be a direct message from God (cf. Prov 16:33). However, in the book of Esther, it is the lot of a foreigner—cast before a pagan deity!—which determined the date of the Jewish festival of Purim, totally different from all the other festivals commanded by God himself in the Torah.

When Mordecai was pressing Queen Esther to entreat Ahasuerus for her people, he passed on the following words to her: "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." (Esth 4:14) Such a message does not predict God's intervention or his punishment if Esther fails to go to the king and make supplication to him. The "other quarter" is not a code name for God,⁴ but simply envisions another human being as a source of deliverance. In addition, Mordecai perceived the royal dignity Esther possessed as something like good fortune.

Fate seems to rule the course of events, and God remains absent. Therefore Esther's heroic promise to approach the king is without any divine reference: "I will go to the king, though it is against the law (*dāt*);

Judaism 39 (Issue 2, Spring 1990), 135-147.

3. Cf., for example, Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville: John Knox, 2002), 13-14.

4. Cf. Michael Fox, *The Religion of the Book of Esther*, 138 (fn 19).

and if I perish, I perish.” (Esth 4:16) There are no theological implications in her announcement “If I perish, I perish,” no confidence towards the future; not even Sheol, the abode of the dead, is mentioned. The possible negative outcome of that mission reveals the unconnectedness and isolation of human life, since it lacks God’s promise. Esther’s words are nothing less than a confession of the fate of life and death: “If I perish, I perish.”

Since human beings may be able to influence such inner-worldly fate, this reference to fate goes together with the fasting of the Jews, required by Esther in preparation for her mission (Esth 4:16). Such a fast was not aimed at God, but was intended to show solidarity with Esther so that her mission would succeed. How different is such fatalistic fasting to the common purpose of fasting as an act of penance and mourning towards God! Even the king of Nineveh ordered it after he had heard about Jonah’s announcement of Nineveh’s extinction: “No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.” (Jonah 3:6-9; cf. Jonah 4:2) The fateful fasting of the Persian Jews, on the other hand, does not address God’s will at all.

Finally, the warfare of Jews against their potential enemies (Esth 9:1-16) was not a war in the name of God, since it was enacted by a decree of the Persian king in order to deal with a dilemma. It was Ahasuerus himself who could not revoke his previous edict extinguishing the Jews, which had been promulgated in his

name and sealed by his ring (Esth 3:12-13). Since the laws of the Persians and the Medes could not be altered (cf. Esth 1:19; 8:8), all that could be done was to elicit a preemptive strike by the Jews against their foes as an act of self-defense.

Once again, the unchangeable decrees of the Persian king here refer to the guiding question of the book of Esther: how to act, react and counteract within the sphere of fate. Dealing with such a fateful question, the book of Esther is necessarily a God-less story. The absence of God is even recapitulated in the names of both Jewish actors, which are all but theophoric. “Esther” derives from the Persian *stara* (“star”), which resembles “Ishtar,” the name of a goddess in the Akkadian pantheon; “Mordecai,” the name of Esther’s cousin, derives from “Marduk,” the primary deity of Babylon.

Now, then, what to do with the book of Esther? It works very well as the story of how queen Esther preserved the life of the Jewish Diaspora under Persian rule. Its happy end endorses the enjoyable Purim festival with its carnival atmosphere, where children bring noisemakers to the synagogue and the congregation members stamp their feet every time Haman’s name is read from the scroll. Even drunkenness for adult Jews is encouraged, since the Talmud (*Meg.* 7b; cf. Esth 1:8) commands men to drink so much wine on Purim that they are unable to tell the difference between “blessed be Mordecai” and “cursed be Haman.” Purim even has a moment of travesty. Besides the carnival-like masquerades, some Jewish communities appoint a “Purim rabbi” whose frivolous duty it is to manipulate even the most sacred texts. The term *purim*, which is of Akkadian origin, can thus be seen as a motto of life, since *pur* like the English “lot” connotes the meaning of chance. In a way, the festival of Purim can mean the celebration of the “lots of life”

in a very secular way. Such a “lottery” view of life makes it excusable that Esther, the “star” of the story, apparently violated the dietary instructions of the Torah while staying at the court of the Persian king and in addition married a Gentile.

But such a confinement to “Jewishness” remains unsatisfying for Christians as long as they want to read this book in the church. Something has to be added through our own reading. In the language of reader-response theory, the text of Esther contains certain structured “blank spaces,” which prompt the reader to supply the missing information in order to make sense of what is narrated.⁵ Reading the book of Esther in church certainly requires such an input from the reader.

The common way of Christians to fill in the blanks of the book of Esther is the general concept of divine providence. Readers may discover various “coincidences” in the story where divine providence came into play. For example, Mordecai “accidentally” witnessed the conversation between Bigthan and Teresh at the king’s gate (Esth 2:19-22) and uncovered a plot to kill the king, which had to be rewarded by Ahasuerus. Likewise the Persian king’s insomnia can be linked to such providence, since it led to the recollection of the unrewarded deed of Mordecai (Esth 6:1-2). Finally, Esther’s being chosen by Ahasuerus as his wife and queen of Persia can be imagined under God’s providence, since it provided her with the position and ability to stand up for her people.

Still, whatever traces of divine providence can be detected by the reader, they all fail, for they are based on our own, all-too-human imaginations of God’s providence. God, in this way of reading, is merely the

hidden actor behind the scene (*deus ex machina*), responsible for the peripatetic moments so that things apparently slipping towards a catastrophe finally arrive at a happy ending. This comes dangerously close to a pagan belief in deified fate, whereby the lottery of life is simply named “God.”

In order to avoid any fortune-reading of Scripture, the plain (and unbiblical) equation of Scripture and the written Word of God has to be abandoned. We can then state plainly and clearly: there is no word of God in the book of Esther. Such an acknowledgment by no means questions the canonicity (or even the divine inspiration) of the book of Esther, for this book contains a unique lesson for us, one given by God himself: The book of Esther drives us to a proper canonical reading of Scripture, which is nothing but the self-interpretative reading of Scripture, as described by Martin Luther in his *Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book of Goat Emser* (1521): “When they [the Church fathers] interpret a passage in Scripture they do not do so with their own sense or words (for whenever they do that, as often happens, they generally err). Instead, they add another passage which is clearer and thus illumine and interpret Scripture with Scripture.”⁶

Interpreting Scripture by Scripture implies that the “blank spaces” of a biblical text—instead of being filled up with our religious imaginations—are to be related to other parts of Scripture in such a way that God’s Word addresses the reader. The Word of God is not simply Scripture but has to be found in Scripture when Scripture is read in a coherent way. Whenever God’s Word is simply identified with Scripture, it leads

5. Cp. Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978).

6. *Luther’s Works*, ed. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, vol. 39 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 164.

to an isolated reading of Bible texts. The reader, with her own imaginations, is then responsible for the creation of the Scripture text as meaningful communication. However, such imaginative readings of Scripture have no promise for our life; nothing can be expected from our own religious imaginations. In contrast, the canonical reading of Scripture relates the blank spaces of texts to Scripture as a whole. Only within a self-referential reading of Scripture can the reader enter into a communicative relationship with God's Word, which already has addressed him prior to his own reading. Such a coherent reading is what Martin Buber advises us to do, in a wonderful passage from *On Translating the Praisings*:

The Bible seeks to be read as One Book, so that no one of its parts remains self-contained; rather every part is held open to every other. The Bible seeks to be present as One Book for its readers so intensely that in reading or reciting an important passage they recall all the passages connected to it, and in particular those connected to it by linguistic identity, resemblance, or affinity; so intensely that all these passages illuminate and explain one another, that they cohere into a unity of meaning, into a theological doctrine not taught explicitly but immanent in the text and emerging from its connections and correspondences.⁷

Now let us apply this to the book of Esther. As long as we read this book in an isolated way, we interpret its content according to our own imaginations of divine providence. However, divine providence (Greek *pronoia*) is not a biblical concept but a pagan one, used as a technical expression of Stoic and Neo-Platonic philosophy to designate the rule of divine reason or *logos* over all events. Such a philosophical *logos* is

essentially silent, totally different to the utterance of God's Word. Philosophical providence in its metaphysical generalization remains unbound to human life—there is no personal promise to believe in. With regard to such a “logical” providence human beings have either to manipulate the course of events or to adapt to them “stoically.”

It is, then, a canonical reading of the book of Esther which relates the Jews as descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to God's election of Israel. As God said to Moses from the bush: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.... I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.” (Exod 3:6-8) What can be read in the book of Esther as divine preservation from the threat of genocide is bound not to abstract ideas of providence but to God's election of Israel. God preserved the Persian Jews for the sake of his particular relationship with Israel, which had become manifest in God's covenant with them. “In every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” (Esth 4:3; Ex. 2:24) Allowing one scriptural story to illustrate another also allows us to experience a strikingly new hearing of God's Word.

Apart from God's verbal election and his covenant, there can be nothing said

7. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. L. Rosenwald with E. Fox (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 91.

about God's involvement in the occurrences narrated in the book of Esther. For us as Christian readers, this means that we have to refer to our election in Jesus Christ (cf. Eph 1:3-6) in combination with the new covenant established in Christ's blood: "He is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant." (Heb 9:15; cf. 1 Cor. 11:25) Only in Christ are we related to God's faithful acts (not just decrees or gifts) of preserving his sanctified people.

To read Scripture faithfully, it is crucial to abandon the notion of providential cause-effect mechanisms behind the events narrated, because such speculations give rise to a pseudo-evangelical "engineering theology" embracing "open-view theism" and "omniscience theism." Instead of all-too-human causal-mechanical imaginations it is God's efficacious Word that needs to be heard as it addresses people and situations. As God asserts: "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" (Isa 55:11) Apart from his Word, God does not relate himself to human beings. Therefore occurrences in our "lived world" are not to be explored in terms of divine causation but they are to be related to God's Word. Nothing is more perilous than to read God in a non-verbal way into our life because, in the very end, such misreading evokes the fatal equation:

God is fate. Dealing actively with this equation can only prompt pagan practices: divination as the art of determining the future (for example by casting of lots), attempts to influence fate by self-referential supplications, high-handed sacrifices and offerings to please the insatiability of fate, and, finally, making vows as unconditional pledges of special submission to an assumed agent of fate. As we already have demonstrated, several of those practices can be found in the book of Esther.

Nevertheless, the book of Esther is a most important *book* of the Bible, at least for Christians. Its importance is certainly not because of its narrated content but because of its lack of any reference to God. Such a crucial blank resembles our own situation as readers, for none of us has been addressed by God's Word in an exclusive way. As the actors in the book of Esther are not addressed by God's Word, we likewise as readers have not received a personal Word of God. Therefore, no matter whether we are reading the book of Esther or living our own lives, God's Word witnessed in Scripture has to be related to the various incidents and occurrences in a way that they become salutary events, even when they are to be judged by God's Word. Our life with its blanks can be mirrored in the Scripture so that it becomes addressed by God's Word. By that we can confess with the prophet Jeremiah: "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O Lord, God of hosts." (Jer 15:16)