

**Was Esther a Righteous Woman?  
Feminist, Greek, and Evangelical Evaluations**

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## Introduction

The role of the book of Esther in the religious function of the Jewish faith has been debated for over two millennia. The Qumran community (ca. 150 B.C.–68 A.D.) appears to have left no trace of Esther among the Dead Sea Scrolls,<sup>1</sup> nor was the festival of Purim, at which the book was to be read publicly, celebrated in the liturgical calendar of the Essenes.<sup>2</sup> The book's canonicity was disputed in the Babylonian Talmud, as some rabbis as late as the third or fourth century A.D. did not regard Esther as “defiling the hands” (i.e. canonical).<sup>3</sup> Contrarily, some Jewish commentators found in the events of the Esther narrative a thematic connection to the Pentateuch worthy of introducing the book into the canon.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Absence of an Esther scroll in the DSS means that there is no extant Hebrew manuscript of Esther earlier than the tenth century A.D., a textual problem addressed in the second section of this paper. See Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 298.

<sup>2</sup> Merrill cites Beckwith's recognition that Purim was in conflict with the sacred calendar of the Qumran community. The Dead Sea Scrolls provide only an argument from silence as to the opinion of Esther's canonicity in the Qumran community. The Purim celebration has long been disputed as having pagan origins which led to its more secularized festivities, including inebriation. See Eugene Merrill, “The Book of Esther,” in *World and the Word—an Introduction to the Old Testament*, eds. Eugene H. Merrill, Mark F. Rooker, and Michael A. Grisanti (Nashville: B&H, 2011), 354. See also Carey A. Moore, “Esther, Book Of,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 2, eds. David Noel Freedman, Gary A. Herion, David F. Graf, John David Pleins, and Astrid B. Beck (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:635.

<sup>3</sup> The Mishnah's *Megillah* 7a.49–67 debates the non-canonical stance against Esther with “evidences” of the Holy Spirit's superintendence of the narrative above and beyond what the narrator might come to know in recording the story, especially in Esther 2:15, 22; 6:6; 9:10, 26. See Moore, “Esther, Book Of,” 635. Nevertheless, two Aramaic Targums are devoted to the book of Esther: *Rishon* (lower Galilee, ca. 500–700 A.D.) and *Sheni* (Palestine, ca. 650–750 A.D.), suggesting its importance to Jewish faith. Furthermore, Esther is the only OT book with a full midrashic exposition and prescriptions for liturgical use, suggesting a regular function in Jewish faith, supporting at least “quasi-canonicity” for the book. See Bernard Grossfeld, *The First Targum to Esther—According to the MS Paris Hebrew 110 of the Bibliothèque Nationale* (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1983), iii–x. See also Karen H. Jobes, “Esther 1: Book of,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament—Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman III, Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 161. See also Merrill, *World and the Word*, 355.

<sup>4</sup> A connection between Esther and the Pentateuch is suggested due to similarities between the name אֶסְתֵּר (Esther) and אֶסְתֵּיר, the first-person *wayyiqtol* of סָתַר (he has hidden) in Deuteronomy 31:18. Similarities in the terms may establish a direct intertextual link between Esther and the Torah, where the verb references the period of the Diaspora when the Esther narrative is set, a time when Yahweh was understood as having hidden His face from His people. However, some reasons against an intertextual link include the absence of the Person and Name of Yahweh, and the fact that the deliverance motif for Israel was not permanent (as exhibited by the later destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70), proving that the prophecy of divine deliverance was not ultimately fulfilled in the book of Esther, lessening the pentateuchal connection and leaving the book's canonicity in question. Jobes, *Dictionary*, 160.

Christian scholars have also been equally divided as to the sacred worth of the book of Esther. Church Fathers in the West and East disputed its canonicity, often along geopolitical lines, as generally only the Western Fathers upheld it as inspired by the Holy Spirit.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, not much attention was devoted to Esther even in the West, as only some casual references to the book circulated in the writings of only a few influential voices.<sup>6</sup> The Christian dispute over Esther did not prove easy to settle throughout the history of the church. John Calvin chose never to preach from the book of Esther, and did not include it in his commentaries, and Martin Luther flatly rejected the book of Esther as apocryphal.<sup>7</sup> It is clear that this contentious historical debate has stirred strong convictions for and against its inclusion as a divinely inspired text.

Several elements of concern about the book of Esther seem to be shared among Jewish and Christian readers. First, the work does not seem commensurate with Old Testament writings in that it does not read like a religious text—the Hebrew text does not mention God, does not use the Name Yahweh, nor does it include prayers or mention of praying, and it contains no apocalyptic visions, nor miracles. Neither does the book mention theological concepts dear to the Jews, such as covenant, Yahweh’s ברית (covenant loyalty), or religious regulations such as diet and laws on intermarriage.<sup>8</sup> It has been noted that the only clear contextual link between Esther’s

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<sup>5</sup> Moore, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2:635.

<sup>6</sup> Most notably by Clement of Rome, *1 Clem* 55, 18–20; and Athanasius, *Festal Letters IV* sec. 2. See Moore, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 2:635.

<sup>7</sup> Jobs, *Dictionary*, 161.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon H. Johnston, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Gallows!—Irony, Humor, and Other Literary Features of the Book of Esther,” in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts*, eds. Howard, David M. Jr., and Michael A. Grisanti, 380-406 (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 395.

story and the Old Testament canon is that it involves the Jewish people in the Diaspora of the Persian Empire.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, there are no allusions to Esther in the New Testament.

Beyond these religious and contextual problems, there is significant concern over the narrative's portrayal of the character and actions of the female protagonist herself. Neither Esther nor her parent-figure Mordecai seem to reflect the depth of pious character that is manifest in the lives of those biblical heroes which God used to advance the deliverance and salvation of His people.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, elements of sensuality, the concealing of the protagonist's Jewish ethnicity, and brutal vengeance bring a deeper level of problems to the fore.<sup>11</sup> This paper attempts to approach an answer to a question which has plagued scholars perennially regarding the character of Esther: Was Esther a righteous woman? The solution to this problem will bear implications in the larger debate of the canonicity of the book, as the determination of righteousness is an inherently spiritual quest which cannot be divorced from the Old Testament understanding of faith-based adherence to covenant with Yahweh. Rather than promote a study of the canonicity of Esther, the scope of the present work is limited to the nature of the protagonist Esther's character as presented in the book and interpreted by its audience.

### **A Feminist Evaluation of the Character of Esther**

As the modern lens of feminist scholarship hovers over the book of Esther, it casts different shades on the character of the female protagonist. Feminist commentators are divided in

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<sup>9</sup> Jobes, *Dictionary*, 160.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 161. See also Wilma McClarty, "Esther," in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 216.

their evaluation as to whether Esther functions in the story as a good or bad example of a Diaspora Jew. Those who read the book of Esther in a negative light appeal to the very characteristics which those who read it positively affirm. It is wagered that Esther's womanly form, beautiful appearance, charm and feminine mystique are used for the purpose of political maneuvering in the Persian Court, which is in itself conniving and surreptitious. By comparison to Esther, Vashti is the morally-strong female character of the story. The former Persian Queen refused to be luridly degraded in front of a gawking audience (1:10–12), and in so doing exhibited a rare strength of will which uniquely positioned her as an Empire-side threat, who, by refusing to be dominated and controlled by her husband, risked upsetting the patriarchal status quo (1:12–22). Her force of will shook the political structure of the citadel as well as the farthest reaches of the provinces.<sup>12</sup> Beyond the fault of moral anemia,<sup>13</sup> Esther's aspect and manner are negative assets in that they present a false feminine ideal which is fictitious and idealized according to the cultural eyes of a male writer. This quiet, unassuming beauty represents an image of femininity both undesirable and unattainable by the modern female reader.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, feminist scholars do view Esther positively, as they do the three female characters of the story, Vashti (1:9–2:1), Esther, and Haman's wife, Zeresh (5:10–6:13). These scholars recognize in the book a gender bias which drives the interpretation of plot events toward a generally positive reading. The character development of the three women, according to

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<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion, see McClarty, "Esther," 219–22.

<sup>13</sup> Elaine A. Phillips, "Esther 1: Book of," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 190.

<sup>14</sup> Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer, "Feminist Interpretation," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament—Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman III, Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 215.

feminist commentators, manifests commendable control in their challenging situations, respectively. Their subtle perception of foreboding consequences and their crafty responses in the decisive moment is contrasted by their character foils, the main men of the story, who seem to awkwardly and ineptly react to their circumstances in a way which accentuates a gender difference with regard to control in the book of Esther.<sup>15</sup>

A positive feminist interpretation finds in the protagonist a great biblical heroine and a prized example of powerful femininity. She is the consummate success story when viewed as a Diaspora Jew, not just as the wise and calculating Queen of Persia. Her vulnerability and subordination both as a Jew and as a woman are her greatest obstacles to triumph for her people and for her gender in the time of the violent and male-dominated Persian Empire. Esther however gains the upper hand politically, achieving victory both in her marriage and in her new kingdom. Thus Esther is a remarkable example within the feminist paradigm for key socio-

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<sup>15</sup> King Ahasuerus, for example, serves as Vashti's character foil, falling victim to the circumstances created by his commanding wife. As a result of Vashti's act of will he needed to pass new edicts as to the Empire-wide honor deserved by all husbands (1:20–22) and, furthermore, he needed a new queen (2:1–4). He later functions as Queen Esther's character foil, in that at Esther's request he must find a way to repeal his irrevocable edict to annihilate the Jews, amending it with another decree of equal violence toward the Jews' enemies (8:7–14), something Esther concocts begging and pleading with the king (8:3–5). McClarty sees a feminine bias in the presentation of Mordecai. He may be viewed as Esther's principal character foil because his civil disobedience toward Haman nearly resulted in the genocide of his own people. Were it not for Esther's intervention to thwart Haman's evil, wagers McClarty, Mordecai would have been ultimately culpable. Additionally, his flagrant violation of the king's command of obeisance was flaunted before a pagan audience as justified by his national identity (3:3–4), yet in the innermost Court he forbade Esther from the same bold association with "her people or kindred" (2:10, 20). Such inconsistency in Mordecai's convictions and deeds is contrasted by Esther's willingness to obey her cousin and father-figure and play the part of a pagan while concealing her identity. See McClarty, "Esther," 221–22. See also Tiemeyer, "Feminist Interpretation," 215. Haman likewise, according to McClarty, represents the kind of dull-headedness and brash emotionalism which is contrasted by his wife Zeresh, who keeps a logical control of the situation as it unfolds before her husband. While Haman displays his pride at being offered to dine twice with the king (5:11–12), his sharp deflation into anger and grief over Mordecai whom he hates (5:13) is met with Zeresh's plan for quick resolution to her husband's troubles—build high gallows, have the king order the hanging of his enemy, and dine in peace (5:14). Feminists find female logic to yet again reign supreme when after a shocking turn of events, Haman returns home in mourning over the triumph of his enemy who he paraded through the streets with great fanfare, only to hear his own wife pronounce his doom (6:12–13). See McClarty, "Esther," 221.

political reasons.<sup>16</sup> First, she demonstrates submission to the men who have custody of her—Mordecai, her cousin and father-figure (2:6–7), and Hegai, the royal overseer and advisor of the Court women (2:8, 15). She respects the male authority in her life, and through their guidance ascends to the throne. Second, as queen of the Empire, Esther still remembers her parentage at a time of his distress (4:4), though she could have disassociated herself from both her cousin and her nationality in order to preserve her status as queen (4:11). Third, her unwillingness to put herself immediately at risk in approaching the king is not due to lack of concern, but rather because she prefers to exert caution in exercising the privileges of her royal role. She wisely asks her supporters to aid her in her endeavor by fasting, and she graciously dresses the part in order to gain favor before the king; and her goals are rewarded according to plan (4:16–5:2).

Esther therefore achieves through respectful submission and diplomacy the fulfilling life which makes her a heroine among Diaspora Jews, at a time in which women neither had the possibility of choice or power, nor the opportunity to gain socio-political success through their actions. Thus Esther's character is largely understood in the feminist paradigm as morally and ethically noble. It is noted however that sorting the data according to this matrix does not allow for stipulations as to Esther's righteousness before Yahweh. Answering the question of Esther's righteousness before Yahweh may therefore be impossible in the feminist interpretive grid. As Yahweh does not figure into the record of events, neither must there be an attempt to judge Esther's religious standing, since the narrative does not require such investigation when viewed through the lens of feminism.

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<sup>16</sup> The following discussion is largely based on S. A. White, "Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora?" in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. P. L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 161–77, as summarized in Tiemeyer, "Feminist Interpretation," 215. For a discussion of female Jewish emigration, see Susan Zaeske, "Unveiling Esther as a Pragmatic Radical Rhetoric," in *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 33 (2003): 156–157.

## A Greek Evaluation of the Character of Esther

Septuagint (LXX) scholars attest that in a broad sense, the Greek biblical story is a rewritten Hebrew biblical story.<sup>17</sup> Such is certainly true of the Greek translation of Esther, which not only revised and reframed the Hebrew text, but itself may have undergone revisions in a later Greek version known as the Alpha-Text (AT) of Esther.<sup>18</sup> Both extant Greek translations of the book of Esther, the LXX and the AT, mark a substantial change in the text itself, drastically enhancing the information supplied in the Hebrew text. Six extensive passages in the LXX,

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<sup>17</sup> Kristin De Troyer, *Rewriting the Sacred Text—What the Old Greek Texts Tell Us About the Literary Growth of the Bible*, SBL Text-Critical Studies, Vol. 4 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 1.

<sup>18</sup> The AT is much rarer than the LXX, only being found in four medieval manuscripts, whereas the LXX is preserved in thirty-six manuscripts. De Troyer and Clines argue for a lengthy process of literary growth for the book of Esther, attesting that it has undergone centuries of modification from hypothetical, simple stories (sources) of Esther and Mordecai, into pre- and proto-MT forms, then to an MT form which gave rise to at least two major Greek additions (LXX and AT), which were in turn finally redacted into the LXX Esther text. A brief treatment of the literary growth theory is herein presented:

De Troyer ventures that the non-extant Hebrew sources used in ancient times to produce the Greek translations which eventually formed the LXX (2nd Century B.C.) are not likely to be those preserved in the MT, though in most cases they may be identical. They may be proto-Masoretic" texts (MT minus accents and vocalization), or they may be even older "pre-Masoretic" texts (significantly stripped of words, concepts, phrases or whole verses) which later through redaction came to characterize the final version of the Hebrew MT. Clines finds that pre- and proto-Masoretic text forms gave rise to a substantially different final MT form. He finds that while the proto-Masoretic text of Esther constitutes the "core" of canonical Esther, it nevertheless rejects chapters 9 and 10.

Whether the AT is a recension of a Greek parent text, such as the LXX, is a source of debate. Clines concludes that the AT as it stands today is a later elaboration of the LXX which includes additions to the text, whereas Jobs recognizes original (pre- or proto-MT?) Semitic *Vorlage* as the basis for the AT. The AT, apart from the textual additions, is approximately twenty percent shorter than the LXX, yet more closely matches the MT. The LXX adds 105 verses to the 167 verses of the Hebrew text, an over 60% increase in verses. Clines captures the fluid nature and uncertain source of the LXX when he describes it as "a literary, somewhat free and paraphrastic, somewhat concise version of a Hebrew text very much like the Masoretic." The AT, nevertheless, was likely replaced by the LXX translation of Esther at some later point in history. Further complicating the layers of Greek sources, some Septuagint scholars recognize a lost "Old Greek" (OG) text, perceived as the original translation of a given Hebrew Text, which may differ at many points from the LXX. Even so, Jobs concludes that the AT may have been the first Greek translation of Esther rather than an OG text. See David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll—The Story of the Story*, JSOTSup, Vol. 30 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1984), 69, 93, 114, 139, 140; De Troyer, *Rewriting the Sacred Text*, 6–7; Karen H. Jobs, *The Alpha-Text of Esther: Its Character and Relationship to the Masoretic Text* (Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1996), 7; Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Esther*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), 44.

In the AT, four of the six textual additions are believed to have existed in an original Semitic source, and two are viewed as being entirely Greek compositions. Of the six LXX additions, Jerome (by 405 A.D.) deleted all but the sixth for his Latin Vulgate, which he appended as 10:4–11:1, after the conclusion of the MT narrative. Emanuel Tov corrects the term "additions", considering A–F "expansions" of an original Semitic text, paraphrastically adding over 50% more words to the LXX than the MT. See Emanuel Tov, "The LXX Translation of Esther: A Paraphrastic Translation of MT or a Free Translation of a Rewritten Version?" in *Empsychoi Logoi: Religious Innovations in Antiquity: Studies in Honour of Pieter Willem van der Horst*, Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity, vol. 73, eds. Alberdina Houtman, Albert de Jong, and Magda Misset-van de Weg (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 507–26. See also the introductory discussion in Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 69.

labeled A–F, are foreign to the Masoretic Text. Five of them insert religious information which is otherwise lacking in the MT. It is in these Greek expansions that the characters of Esther and Mordecai explicitly evolve from secularized Jews to religious Jews.<sup>19</sup>

LXX Addition A prefixes 17 verses to MT 1.1 which establish an explicitly divine element to the book.<sup>20</sup> Addition F bookends Addition A by appending to MT 10:3. It serves to retrospectively force the divine element into the foreground rather than keep it silenced in the background, as in the MT.<sup>21</sup> Addition C substantially develops the MT narrative, adding 30 verses to the after MT 4:17. The passage purports a conscious, volitional spirituality of the protagonists. Humble and intimate biblical prayers are offered by Mordecai and Esther, both of

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<sup>19</sup> Tov expresses that the LXX adds a “religious background” to Esther which is altogether foreign to the MT. Paton recognizes the later Greek expansions on the MT as serving to “supply the religious element that is so conspicuously absent from the Hebrew edition.” See Emanuel Tov, “The Many Forms of Hebrew Scripture: Reflections in the Light of the LXX and 4QReworked Pentateuch,” in *From Qumran to Aleppo: A Discussion with Emanuel Tov About the Textual History of Jewish Scriptures in Honor of His 65th Birthday*, FRLANT 230, eds. A. Lange, M. Weigold, J. Zsengellér (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 19; Paton, *Esther*, 44–45.

<sup>20</sup> Addition A reveals Mordecai’s premonition about the coming Jewish annihilation. This passage establishes Mordecai as a quasi-prophetic figure with a responsibility to participate in divine deliverance. Paton considers the Mordecai of Addition A “an inspired man who seeks to act in accordance with the will of God,” in Paton, *Esther*, 44. God is mentioned twice and prayer becomes the mechanism for seeking national help. In verses 8–11, the Jews are referred to as the “entire righteous nation” (δικαιον παν εθνος, v. 8) who cried out to God (abbreviated του θυ, v. 9) with humility, and were exalted (v. 10). When Mordecai awakens, he understands that the coming battle is God’s plan for His people, and he searches for its meaning (v. 11).

<sup>21</sup> In Addition F, Mordecai interprets his premonition in light of the events now completed in the narrative. In verses 1–2, the religiously-minded Mordecai recalls God’s faithfulness in bringing to pass all that He had revealed to His servant by premonition. He thus validates both the dream and his spiritual status as a visionary used by God in Israel’s salvation. God is liberally mentioned seven times and is also called the Lord, referencing the covenantal Hebrew name *Yahweh* (κύριος, v. 6). Prayer is mentioned (v. 6), and five times Israel is called the “people of God.” Finally, the levitical priesthood is mentioned as authenticating both the book and the practice of celebrating Purim (v. 11).

whom beseech God in the role of grieving, penitent saints.<sup>22</sup> Several difficulties in the conduct of the protagonists which appear across the MT, LXX and AT, such as civil disobedience by Mordecai and sexual promiscuity by Esther, seem to vanish in light of Addition C's explanation of their godly motives. The LXX here appears to excuse compromising conduct by exposing inward attitudes which reflect sincerity before God.<sup>23</sup> In this way Addition C patches up the religious deficiencies in the MT story, offering a kind of justification for outward behavior which would be unbecoming of a dignified Jew. Addition E, inserted between MT 8:12–13, adds King Ahasuerus' praises of Mordecai, Esther, and the Jewish religion.<sup>24</sup>

The rarer Greek version of the book of Esther, the Alpha-text, inserts nine passages into the Masoretic text which overlay theological insights, direct divine actions, and spiritual

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<sup>22</sup> In Addition C, Mordecai reveals his absolute trust in Yahweh, and begs the Lord to help Israel (note the vocative *Κύριε κύριε* in v. 2). He also specifies in his prayer to the sovereign and omnipotent Lord that his heart was not arrogant when he disobeyed the king's command to bow before Haman. Rather, he would "not place the glory of a person above the glory of God," nor would he "worship anything except [his] Lord" (v. 7). Esther's prayer in verses 12–30, which is also wholly absent in the MT, begins with a tone of great supplication to "the God of Israel" (note the vocative, *Κυριέ μου* in v. 14). Esther "fled to the Lord" (v. 12), covering herself with ashes and dung, naked and tangled by her hair (v. 13), suggesting that she acted urgently and under deep conviction according to what she knew to be a penitent practice of Hebrew faith. In prayer, she chooses a faith-based loyalty to God over a loyalty to the Persian Court (v. 14), recognizing that only God can help her in her time of distress (v. 15). This is purportedly because she had been raised with a knowledge of Yahweh as the promise-keeping Deliverer of Israel (v. 16). Even more striking of a difference between the LXX and the MT is that she acknowledges the sin of her people in worshiping foreign gods, and recognizes that the Diaspora is a result of divine judgment against them (vv. 17–18). In her spirit she opposes the rule of her pagan captors, and beseeches God to reverse His judgment and place His wrath upon the Empire who would exalt an earthly king along with his idols (vv. 19–22). Esther decries the "lion" that is King Ahasuerus, and instead considers her only help to be the "King of the gods and Master of all dominion" who can sovereignly change the intentions of Ahasuerus' heart (vv. 23–25a). Like Mordecai, Esther appeals to the omniscience of God to judge her true motives, reminding Him of her hate for "the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien" (v. 26), and her abhorrence of the crown which she wears, but considers like a menstrual rag only fit for public appearances (v. 27). Moreover, Esther swears before the all-knowing God of Israel that she has never eaten as a guest at Haman's table, nor has she honored the feasts of Ahasuerus (in her heart?), nor drunk his wine (v. 28). If she ever had a moment of joy, it came singularly from meditating on Yahweh, the God of Abraham (v. 29). It is He who alone may choose to save Esther from the hands of the Persian evildoers (v. 30).

<sup>23</sup> Paton, *Esther*, 45.

<sup>24</sup> King Ahasuerus recognizes in his Jewish subjects a source of joy which is palpable across the Persian Empire—a spirit of joy which he says Haman unjustly tried to quell. Moreover, the pagan king publicly and repeatedly extols the Sovereign God of Israel, recognizing God as the Ruler of every empire, and especially of His "elect" nation Israel (vv. 15–16, 18, 21). This insertion seems to provide the subtext that the Jewish faith was not only vibrant during the Diaspora but celebrated by the surrounding pagan society.

practices which otherwise do not pertain to the MT narrative.<sup>25</sup> The additions and expansions of the MT by the LXX and the AT link religious qualities to Mordecai and Esther which are not addressed in the Hebrew text. Greek translators appear to have desired to clarify the personal qualities of faith in the protagonists and also validate the otherwise religiously-ambiguous book within a thoroughly religious Canon.<sup>26</sup> The problematic Hebrew text has evolved from a socio-political narrative in which God may be said to operate in ironic silence through compromised, secularized Jews, into a story of devout Jewish faith guided and empowered by God by means of prayer, biblical counsel, and pious religion. Whereas in the MT God plays an implicit role and the protagonists appear to act unaware of His guiding hand, in the LXX and AT, God is the reigning Hero, whose divine intervention is linked to the righteous faith of Esther, Mordecai, and the Diaspora Jews.

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<sup>25</sup> The more salient additions will herein be treated. At AT 5.5 (also 7.1, 22), Mordecai establishes a godly order for intercession: Esther is urged to call first upon God, then enter in and beseech the king, though MT 4:8 neither records direct speech between the protagonists nor calls for divine supplication. At AT 5.9, Mordecai replies to Esther, “If you neglect your people so that you do not help them, God will be their helper and salvation.” This departs from MT 4:14 which may mean either the statement, “Relief and deliverance will arise from another place,” or as a rhetorical question which demands a negative response, “Will relief and deliverance arise from another place?” While the MT may in the former case allow for divine intervention, the AT expects it, with Mordecai voicing this theological conviction. At AT 5.11, Esther calls an assembly for the purpose of earnest prayer to God, but a concerted effort in prayer is a departure from MT 4:16 which seems to shy away from any religious association with the fast. At AT 7.1, grammatical restructuring makes “The Almighty” responsible for the king’s restless night, having taken away his sleep (similarly stated in the LXX), rather than MT 6:1’s “sleep fled *from* the king” (נִדְרָהּ שָׁנַת הַמֶּלֶךְ), which, at best, signals implicit divine intervention. At AT 7:15–17, Mordecai believes he has witnessed a miracle as he is being paraded through the streets by Haman, and silently rejoices, but MT 6:11 records no such episode during the parade. Both AT 7.22 and LXX 6.13 record Zeresh as recognizing that God is among the Jews, and that He dwells in Mordecai. See analysis in Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 107–112.

<sup>26</sup> Clines compares the additions of Esther to the MT of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel which, without additions, provide both Persian histories as well as religious dimensions, such as prayers of supplication (Ezra 9:6–15; Neh 1:5–11; 9:6–37; Dan 9:4–19), fasts (Ezra 8:21, 23; Neh 1:4), and dietary restrictions (Dan 1:8). The Greek versions of Esther may be attempts to integrate and collate the book of Esther within the scriptural framework of Canonical histories by inserting similar-appearing material. *Ibid.*, 169–174.

## **An Evangelical Evaluation of the Character of Esther**

Evangelical readers attempt to approach Old Testament Scripture with as few biases as possible, though this is admittedly impossible, especially since they interpret the OT Canon by means of the revelation of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Nevertheless, it may be attested that the evangelical will at least push away from the obvious biases of the feminist reading or the Greek rendering of the book of Esther, in favor of exclusive interaction with the Masoretic Text. It is in the plain reading of the MT that problems abound regarding the character of Esther, challenging anyone who dares answer the question, Is Esther Righteous?

Evaluations of Esther's righteous status before Yahweh must do battle with the questions which arise from the following texts, of which fourteen are herein presented. (1) In 2:1–4, do the royal prescriptions for finding a new Persian Queen require Esther to engage in sexual promiscuity? (2) In 2:8, why did Esther not seem to resist being added to the pagan harem? (3) In 2:17, did Esther find favor and change in status by pleasing the king sexually? (4) In 2:10 and 20, why did Esther conceal her Jewish identity, and was it correct to obey Mordecai in this matter? (5) In 2:15–16, does Esther “come to go in to the king” according to the custom of all harem women in 2:12–14? (6) In 4:4, why did Esther “writhe in great anguish,” and why did she attempt to halt Mordecai's mourning? (7) In 4:5, why did Esther not know the reason for Mordecai's mourning, when in “each and every province” the Jews were doing the same (4:3), and “the city of Susa was in confusion” (3:15)? (8) In 4:11, why does Esther resist rushing to aid in the inner court of the king? (9) In 4:16, what is the nature of Esther's fast, and how will assembling the Jews and the maidens for fasting aid in going into the king? (10) In 4:16, what is meant by Esther's statement: “If I perish, I perish”? (11) In 5:1–2, for what reasons did Esther

obtain favor before the King? (12) In 9:13, why did Esther request a second day of retaliation in Susa? (13) In 9:13, did Esther demand the retaliatory deaths of women and children as in the previous day (8:11)? (14) In 9:13, why did Esther request the bodies of the ten sons of Haman to be hung on the gallows?

A summary evangelical response to these interpretive questions from the MT is multifaceted, as not all evangelical scholars read the text of Esther from the same interpretive grid. There are at least three major evangelical responses to the question of Esther's righteousness before Yahweh. First is the positive position that Esther was righteous.<sup>27</sup> It is likely that Christian writers used Esther as a model of piety and virtue primarily to instruct believers that God "responds to and delights in the faithful, therefore Christians should follow the example of Esther."<sup>28</sup> The second evangelical response is mixed, allowing for Esther to be devout but defective. Esther demonstrated the weakness of the flesh which is common to all people, but the presence of sin does not invalidate her spiritual status before God such that she must be

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<sup>27</sup> Early Christian writers Clement of Rome and Athanasius wrote of Esther as a virtuous woman of faith. Clement, in *1 Clem* 55, 18–20, comments that Yahweh delivered His people in direct response to her righteous virtue: "Esther also, *being perfect in faith*, exposed herself to no less danger, in order to deliver the twelve tribes of Israel from impending destruction. For *with fasting and humiliation she entreated the everlasting God*, who seeth all things; and He, *perceiving the humility of her spirit*, delivered the people for whose sake she had encountered peril" (italics mine). However, Clement's discernment on this point is called into question as he also considered Judith to be an example of female godly virtue, being "strengthened by God" and "blessed" (also in *1 Clem* 55). The text of *Judith* 8 records her as of good repute and religious (v. 8), though she uses her beauty and cleverness to seduce her enemy (chap. 10), deceive him by the name of Yahweh (chap. 11; cf. 13:16), and murder him (chap. 13). Somewhat ironically, Judith does present a more consistent morality and piety than Esther, in that she is well-regarded as a religious woman in her society, and considers her actions to be noble in the eyes of God, to whom she addresses her hope for the sake of her people. Furthermore, she never disassociates from her people nor from their practices of a Jewish diet and prayer customs in the face of pagan invitation. Athanasius, in his *Festal Letters IV*, section 2 exhorts readers to live "silencing their fleshly desires" in the manner of pious prayer and fasting which marked Esther's lifestyle of faith.

<sup>28</sup> Justin Dumbrowski, "Esther 3: History of Interpretation," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament—Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 176.

considered “unrighteous.”<sup>29</sup> The third position is wholly negative: Esther was a secularized Diaspora Jew who was not righteous. The absence of spiritual or religious content associated with Esther, along with questionable morals and ethics, leads many scholars to disregard all attempts to paint the protagonist in the light of piety.<sup>30</sup> Responding to the fifteen problems regarding Esther’s spiritual state is thus a challenge worthy of its own volume. What follows, then, is a brief treatment of each question in the hopes of reaching objective conclusions regarding the MT text as much as is possible, recognizing that inherent biases may not all be eliminated.

(1) 2:1–4 chronicles king Ahasuerus’ beginning process to the selection of a new queen, and as such, sexual promiscuity would have been at the forefront of the contest,<sup>31</sup> given that by Josephus’ estimate, approximately four hundred beautiful virgins needed to compete for the

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<sup>29</sup> Lockyer remarks, “Esther, like all of us, had the defect of her qualities.” Regarding the questionable circumstances of 2:1–9, Esther appears to have unwisely followed pagan practices which led to her incorporation and exaltation in the harem. She was at least unwilling to act upon her convictions—if she had any—in the face of the king’s invitation for her display and for a night of pleasure. While Bechtel understands these events as part of an innocent Empire-wide beauty contest, it seems especially clear when pitted against Queen Vashti, who courageously maintained her morals in the face of hedonism, that Esther’s participation is less than innocent, but a willing assent. See Herbert Lockyer, *All the Kings and Queens of the Bible—Tragedies and Triumphs of Royalty in Past Ages* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1961), 244; Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 9 (Columbia: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 315; Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther: Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1959), 31. Jobes also settles on a mixed middle-ground interpretation of the characters in question: “The astute reader sees in Esther and Mordecai a disquieting moral ambiguity at best.” Jobes, *Dictionary*, 161.

<sup>30</sup> Even Lockyer who takes a middle ground on Esther casts a strong indictment on Esther for her role in the revenge play of 13 and 14 Adar, in the desecration of Haman’s dead sons, which are signs of her “blood-thirstiness.” See Lockyer, *All the Kings and Queens of the Bible*, 244. Other disquieting elements which cannot be summarily dismissed are her obvious lack of concern for Jewish dietary laws or the observance of the Sabbath while cohabiting in the pagan Court, and the pleasuring of the king more than all other virgins. See Jobes, *Dictionary*, 160.

<sup>31</sup> Ahasuerus was known for his violent and amorous sexual affairs, some of which factor into the discussions of historicity and chronology of the Esther narrative. See William H. Shea, “Esther and History,” *Concordia Journal* (July 1987): 238–41.

coveted royal title.<sup>32</sup> Esther’s participation in sexually gratifying the king is not only expected, but must have occurred in order for her to have pleased him more than all other harem women.

(2) 2:8 records no resistance by Esther to entering the harem. The term for “taken” (לקח) is in the passive, and requires a passive response by Esther. Just as she is “taken” for adoption (2:7), so is she taken along with “all” beautiful virgins.<sup>33</sup> The context leaves little room for options, and Esther must play the role assigned her.<sup>34</sup>

(3) 2:17 reflects that sexual pleasure given to the king by Esther resulted in both favor and status change, given that she won the sexual competition for the crown. He not only “liked” (נחפץ, v. 14) Esther after one night with her, but the king “loved” her (וַיֵּאָהֵב הַמֶּלֶךְ), which can also express the arousal of lust.<sup>35</sup>

(4) In 2:10 and 20, Esther concealed her Jewish identity perhaps as a means of decreasing any risk to her life if she is found out both as an exalted member of the harem, and later as the queen potentially embroiled in a palace coup.<sup>36</sup> Obeying Mordecai in remaining silent may have been her safest option, given her new socio-political situation.

(5) 2:15–16 repeats the expression in 2:12–14, “come to go in to the king” (בֹּאוּ לְיָדָיו). This is a Hebrew idiom which frequently refers to sexual intercourse in the OT for a

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<sup>32</sup> John C. Whitcomb, *Esther: Triumph of God’s Sovereignty* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1979), 50; Fox wagers the estimate to climb toward 1,000 women in the Persian Harem. Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1991), 39.

<sup>33</sup> Ludwig Koehler, and Walter Baumgartner, eds, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 5 vols., revised by Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, ed. and transl. M. E. J. Richardson (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 1999), 534–35 (Hereafter referred to as *HALOT*); Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Bechtel considers Esther to be put into a bad situation, where she had little say in the matter, being both a virgin and a Jew. Bechtel, *Esther: Interpretation*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> e.g. Amnon’s lust for Tamar in 2 Sam 13:1; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 37–38.

<sup>36</sup> Bechtel, *Esther: Interpretation*, 31.

man or woman.<sup>37</sup> It is impossible to textually distinguish the approach of Esther from that of the harem women.

(6) In 4:4 Esther felt deep compassion for her father-figure Mordecai as she observed his grief, for reasons yet unbeknownst to her.<sup>38</sup> She may have attempted to halt his mourning because it appeared to her out of place at the palace gate, perhaps further placing her at risk if their relationship were called into question as some form of Jewish subversion inside and outside of the palace, given that her nationality was not yet revealed by her. Were her parentage made evident, so would be her Jewish identity.<sup>39</sup>

(7) In 4:5, Her apparent aloofness toward the coming plight of her people may have been ignorance due to over-sheltering inside the harem and palace, rather than willful disregard of all things Jewish.<sup>40</sup> That “the city of Susa was in confusion” (3:15) may even more strongly suggest that all information coming to the queen was highly protected and spoon-fed.<sup>41</sup>

(8) In 4:11, Esther calculates her steps in approaching the king. This may reflect a maturing in personal decision-making, compared to earlier episodes in which she passively (blithely?) followed Mordecai or Hegai’s lead, especially considering the fate of her headstrong predecessor, Vashti.<sup>42</sup> If Ahasuerus once loved Esther, his love has waned, as it has been one

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. Gen 16:2; 29:21, 23; 2 Sam 16:21–22; Ruth 4:13; 2 Sam 11:4. See Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 365.

<sup>38</sup> Esther must have taken Mordecai’s external portrayal of his grief so seriously that it caused her grief as well. See Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 394.

<sup>39</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 59.

<sup>40</sup> Bechtel, *Esther: Interpretation*, 46.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 45–46; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 394.

<sup>42</sup> Bechtel, *Esther: Interpretation*, 48. It may be unfair of Jobes to consider Mordecai’s statement an undeniable ultimatum to Esther: “When she risks her life for her people, she does so only after Mordecai points out that she herself will not escape harm even if she refuses to act.” Jobes, *Dictionary*, 160.

month without a visit from his queen.<sup>43</sup> The idea here is that before she can intercede for her people, she must be certain that she will be able to approach the throne safely.

(9) In 4:16, Esther's fast is intercessory in nature, being "on [her] behalf."<sup>44</sup> The act reflects a recognition that success will be hers in relation to her community, both of the Jews and of her maidens. This is no single-handed mission,<sup>45</sup> nor is it revealed to be a spiritual mission in which fasting achieves divine condescension. It is interesting to note that 3:12 establishes the date of the fast as beginning the day before Passover, meaning that to do this act, the Jews would have to forfeit their very important feast, which held an explicitly spiritual function.<sup>46</sup>

(10) In 4:16, Esther resolves that it is her turn to face danger, whether she approaches the king or not. There may be an element of hope in the phrase, rather than dire resignation.<sup>47</sup>

(11) In 5:1–2, Esther's choice of clothing is not for the purpose of charming the king but of representing her royal office—she arrays herself in royal robes (מְלִכּוּת).<sup>48</sup> Doing so shows growth of character such that she now embodies her role as queen in look and stature, as she bows no more to Ahasuerus but stands before him as only the most powerful woman in Persia could do.<sup>49</sup> This obtained favor before the King without resorting to sexuality or hedonism in any way.

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<sup>43</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 62.

<sup>44</sup> Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 397–98.

<sup>45</sup> Bechtel, *Esther: Interpretation*, 50.

<sup>46</sup> Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 398.

<sup>47</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 64.

<sup>48</sup> *HALOT*, 592–93.

<sup>49</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 68.

(12–13) In 9:13, requesting a second day of retaliation in Susa makes Esther appear blood-thirsty.<sup>50</sup> She may rather have been exercising caution by requesting the ability to defend Jews of Susa from those enemies who might have waited to attack her people after the one-day edict had passed. This was in fact was the case, as another three hundred enemies were killed in Susa on the second day of the edict (v. 15).<sup>51</sup>

(14) In 9:13, Esther’s further desecration of the bodies of the ten sons of Haman was not outside the scope of practices in the ANE, and therefore is not to be readily associated with a vindictiveness or perversion of power by a Jew who should have more respect for human material.<sup>52</sup>

In summary of these brief passage analyses, the evangelical interaction with the MT promotes a character progression in the person of Esther. In the narrative, the reader’s first exposure to the protagonist is of the passive victimization of Esther-the-virgin. Soon there is a sense of her complicit promiscuity as Esther-the-concubine. This leads to the perplexing reality of the sheltered ignorance of Esther-the-palace-queen, only to ultimately transform the protagonist into Esther-the-Jewish-heroine. Nevertheless, the absence of clear biblical, moral conviction and choices in the face of paganism, and the lack of overt spiritual, religious or divine

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<sup>50</sup> It appears that Esther vies for a vindictive second-round of violence in the Capitol city even though the Jews seem no longer to be in danger. The Jews at this time had Empire-wide favor and mastery over their enemies, making it unnecessary for an ulterior butchering. Lockyer surmises, “With her knowledge of divine justice she should have rested her cause with Him who said: ‘Vengeance is mine.’” For discussion, see Lockyer, *All the Kings and Queens of the Bible*, 244–45. Jobes finds this to be “a surprising attitude of brutality.” See Jobes, *Dictionary*, 160–61.

<sup>51</sup> Bechtel, *Esther: Interpretation*, 80.

<sup>52</sup> Rather, Saul and his sons were equally displayed in a disrespectful manner by their enemies in 1 Sam 31:8–10. This served as a warning to all who would retaliate the defeat. Esther therefore may be publicly suggesting that both Haman’s plot and his line have no future against the Jews. For discussion, see Bechtel, Bechtel, *Esther: Interpretation*, 80. From this perspective, her actions are not simply “gratuitous outrage on the dead.” See Lockyer, *All the Kings and Queens of the Bible*, 244.

references, is palpable throughout the narrative. Surely an evangelical reading of Esther cannot support the position that Esther is in and of herself righteous before Yahweh, for political savvy and ethical maturity do not equate with biblical faithfulness, especially when no clear link to faith-based intentions or practices has been established by the author. Nobility does not equal righteousness. Furthermore, it would seem the author has intentionally disconnected life and faith in the book of Esther. The only conclusion which can thus be drawn from the Hebrew text is that Esther was a secularized Diaspora Jew who was mightily and ironically used by Yahweh to accomplish the deliverance once again of His exiled people Israel.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper has been to answer the question, “Was Esther a righteous woman?” As righteousness is a spiritual concept which cannot be disassociated from the Old Testament Canon, the burden of proof in approaching the text of Esther is to relate the character-relat narrative to canonical faith. Debate over the book’s canonicity was thus brought to the forefront of the discussion, especially since one of the main reasons for the historical dispute involves the relationship between the person of Esther and the canonical faith. Three interpretive lenses hovered over the Esther narrative in order to reveal the significant and diverse ways in which Esther’s character has been evaluated in modern and ancient scholarship, with the goal of approaching an answer to the question of her righteous standing before God.

First, the feminist paradigm was evaluated, revealing that while aspects of Esther’s character development reveal maturity worthy to label the queen as morally and ethically noble,

there are no criteria by which to judge the state of her soul. This would be foreign not only to the feminist interpretive grid, but also foreign to the Hebrew text evaluated in feminist scholarship.

The second interpretive evaluation of Esther's state of righteousness came by way of the Greeks, evaluating the Septuagint and the Alpha-text of Esther. Both translations of the Hebrew Text interject several religious elements into the narrative at several locations, inserting textual additions and expansions which not only transform the religiously-neutral socio-political narrative into a thoroughly spiritual work which rivals other canonical historical works of the Old Testament. The personal nature of faith which emerges for Esther dominates the reading of the LXX and AT such that she is indisputably pious and unwaveringly penitent in the face of perceived moral compromises that cannot be erased from the MT.

The third interpretive lens by which the reader was encouraged to evaluate the book of Esther is considered "evangelical," reflecting a worldview which evaluates righteousness in terms of the heart's response to God through the person and work of Jesus Christ. The evangelical attempts to look directly at the OT Canon with as few filters as possible, and for the purposes of this assessment observations came directly from the questionable texts of the MT. What emerged from the study of Esther's character throughout the Hebrew narrative was both her her considerable limitations as a female Diaspora Jew in the inner Persian Court, as well as her considerable maturity as a political leader and participant in the deliverance of her Jewish kindred, which could only have been miraculously accomplished by the good hand of God. However, isolating texts and drawing conclusions about Esther's spiritual state proved impossible. Given the opportunities for spiritual clarification at key moments of the narrative, it may be concluded that the author intentionally left a disparity between life and faith. As it stands,

the Hebrew book of Esther presents the protagonist as a secularized Jew who cannot be considered righteous outright. While she responded wisely to the opportunities presented her in her exilic condition, her moral compromises and faulty perceptions regarding Jewish customs and practices demonstrate a level of disconnect with Old Testament faith which is not commensurate with what the Bible would consider righteousness. Esther unfortunately is not a role model for Christian women, but may be a role model for the Diaspora Jews of her time who were likewise secularized. This good Jewish girl made a fine queen and was an instrument for the Savior of Israel, though she, like her exiled people, did not retain the biblical worldview of their forefathers and did not hold righteousness as the key virtue of a good Jew.

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