

Lizzie Strauss

Steve Hahn

Greeks and Hebrews

14 January, 2018

Word Count: 2236

### Another Feminist Interpretation of Esther

The story of Esther is one of the most exciting in the Biblical canon- its resplendent feasts, lavish court setting, and political intrigue make it a fantastical and entertaining story. In it, the Persian King Ahasuerus chooses the protagonist, Esther, to be his queen based on her beauty and sexual skills. He does not know, however, that Esther is Jewish, and when his advisor Haman decides to kill all the Jews in Persia, King Ahasuerus agrees. Esther's adopted father Mordecai learns of the plan and convinces Esther to save the Persian Jews. She throws a series of banquets for the king and Haman, and at the last one, she dramatically reveals her identity. King Ahasuerus, shocked, allows Esther and Mordecai to write an edict that the Jews may fight back against their Persian attackers when the day of the genocide comes. In doing so, Esther saves the Jews and creates a new holiday, Purim. All of Esther's power, however, must be actualized through men. King Ahasuerus must give her his signet ring (Esth 8:8) in order for the edict saving the Jews to have any meaning. Even Mordecai's actions anger Haman more than Esther's ever do (Esth 3:5). Esther, therefore, must convince these men to use their power in her favor.

Some interpreters read Esther's character as a pawn for the men in her life, and at first glance, this theory has some validity. Mordecai tells Esther that she has to save her people, and she has to beg King Ahasuerus to let her do so, not to mention the shallow, blatantly sexual

beauty contest that she participates in. However, these caveats do not mean that Esther lacks agency- in fact, they are a testament to her strength in that she successfully works around them.

### **Feminine Agency in the Book of Esther**

Esther, as a woman, has very little official power- the only official actions we see a queen take in the Book of Esther are throwing banquets. While admittedly these some of banquets do end up saving all of the Jews in Persia, Esther has no legal power to create or change laws and edicts. The king has a habit of voluntarily ceding his power, though. He throws a tremendous, decadent banquet at the beginning of the book, and as Lillian Klein says in her book *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*,

They {the banquet guests} . . . are legally *decreed* to drink as much as they want, even to become drunk: ‘And the drinking was by law without restraint, for the king had ordered his palace officials to do as each [man] wished’ (Esth 1:8). King Ahasuerus legally relinquishes his autonomy over his guests in this sphere and invites all of them--great and small--to do the same: relinquish autonomy over themselves. (99)

King Ahasuerus again relinquishes his autonomy later in the book when he gives Esther his signet ring so she can seal her edict: “You may write as you please with regards to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king’s ring” (Esther 8:8). Esther, then, uses the royal authority as her own.

King Ahasuerus’ royal authority does not come easily to Esther. Even once she has taken control of the house of Haman (Esth 8:1), she must grovel before the king to make her request regarding the revocation of the original edict that condemned the Jews. Before making her request, Esther “fell at his feet, weeping and pleading with him” (Esth 8:3) and she says “If it pleases the king, and if I have won his favor, and if the thing seems right before the king, and if I

have his approval” (Esth 8:5). This motif of Esther repeatedly acknowledging the king’s superiority recurs throughout the book (Esth 5:4, 5:8, 7:3, 9:13) and reflects the deeply unequal balance of power. Esther even bows to the authority of the king’s eunuchs- castrated men in charge of the harem. During the beauty contest, the women are allowed to take anything they ask for into the king’s bedroom with them. When Esther is summoned, “she asked for nothing except what Hegai, the king’s eunuch, who was in charge of the women, advised” (Esth 2:15). King Ahasuerus could easily have Esther’s head cut off or have her exiled, or do anything else he wants to her, and Esther must acknowledge that the king can do this and she can do nothing of import before making requests.

Esther does not simply bow to the power of men, though. She acknowledges that they have it and she does not, but she tells them what to do with it. Mordecai, as a “Jew in the citadel of Susa” (Esther 2:5), has more power (according to the New Oxford Annotated Bible footnotes to Esther 2, “Mordecai’s presence *in the citadel* probably means he was a minor court official” (NOAB 710)), but his influence in the court is close to negligible. Even so, Esther uses Mordecai’s position in her favor by giving him instructions after he has convinced her to try to save the Jews. Surprisingly, Mordecai “then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him” (Esth 4:17). King Ahasuerus, too, takes Esther’s request and suggestion. After she asks him to “let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman . . . which he wrote giving orders to destroy the Jews” (Esth 8:5), the king responds by allowing Esther to take his ring, a practical symbol of his power, and use it as her own to write a letter revoking the previous one. Esther even remotely tells all the men of the Persian Jewish community what to do. The letter she sends out “allowed the Jews who were in every city to assemble and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force . . . that might attack them” (Esth

8:11). Because fighting is a decidedly masculine task, the letter that Esther writes (or has written) in essence gives all the Jewish men in the country instructions from the queen.

### **Esther's Disobedience**

Esther is objectified, oppressed, and put down. She is of an ethnic minority, a woman, and one who lives in a harem at that, she is an orphan, she is forced into sex and marriage at a young age (the text frequently refers to her as a girl and "young" in chapter 2). She is even stripped of her identity by having her Hebrew name, Hadassah, taken away and replaced with the Persian name Esther (Esth 2:7), and by being unable to tell anyone at court that she is Jewish (Esth 2:10). In the words of Randall C Bailey in his chapter "That's Why They Didn't Call the Book 'Hadassah!': The Interse(Ct)/(x)lonality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in the Book of Esther, " "Esther wins the contest by sexing the king better than anyone else. In this way she becomes commodified" (239). Despite all her restrictions, Esther succeeds by pushing the boundaries and breaks rules when she needs to. According to *Encyclopedia of the Jewish Diaspora*, Jews have been living and worshipping in hiding for millennia (Mound 156-159). Esther is part of this longstanding tradition that was born of persecution, but she is able to use it to her advantage. She hides her identity long enough to gain the trust of both King Ahasuerus and Haman, and once she has secured a promise that she will get whatever she asks for, she finally condemns Haman by outing herself, saying "Let my life be given to me . . . and the lives of my people-- that is my request. . . . A foe and enemy [has done this], this wicked Haman!" (Esth 7:3, 6). In the necessary act of hiding her Jewishness, she gives herself the ability to lull the king and Haman into enough security for the fact of her identity to have import.

Esther also uses her own objectification to her advantage. As soon as she is entered in the beauty contest, she becomes little more than a disposable object in the eyes of the king,

useful only for her beauty and sexual skills. When she reveals her identity, she uses the prostration previously mentioned in this paper to convince King Ahasuerus to willingly give her whatever she asks for. As Timothy K Beal says in *The Book of Hiding*, “Her revelation begins in typical fashion by piling up stock request phrases, aimed to please: ‘if I have found favor in your eyes’ (cf. 2:15, 17; 5:2, 8; and 8:5), and ‘if it pleases the king’ (cf. 1:19; 3:9; 5:4, 8; 7:3; 8:5; and 9:13). Of course, Esther has been ‘pleasing’ and has ‘found favor in the eyes of the king’ from the beginning. Here, then, she maintains and confirms the king’s fixation on her as object, while at the same time beginning to take him in an entirely unexpected direction” (97). The king is likely expecting a request of little import from a woman of little import- pretty clothes, jewels, or some other expensive luxury that he does not care to part with. Once he has confirmed his willingness to give her whatever she wants, only then does she ask for her people to be saved.

In addition circumventing rules and customs, Esther also breaks rules, even ones that could have serious consequences. Esther tells Mordecai “All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces knows that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law-- all alike are to be put to death” (Esth 4:11). Five verses later, Esther “put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king’s palace, opposite the king’s hall” (Esth 5:1). Luckily for her and the rest of the Jews, the king doesn’t object, and even offers to give her half of his kingdom. Despite her limited agency and the threat of death, Esther breaks the rules that need to be broken.

### **Counter Arguments and Refutations**

The argument that Esther is a shallow, pretty toy for the men in the story to play with is pervasive. The following quote from “Daniel at the Beauty Pageant and Esther in the Lion’s Den” by Matthew Michael sums up the argument neatly: “Esther was involved in a sexual contest,

married a pagan king, defiled herself with the excessive luxuries of the Persian court, and there is not recorded complaint about abstaining herself from the royal meals or banquet” (Matthew 127-128). However, there is little evidence that these actions were taken willingly or consensually. Esther does not volunteer for the beauty contest, she is “taken into the king’s palace” (Esth 2:8). We are not given details about what happened in the king’s bedroom, but it seems likely that her marriage to the king is not a result of her seduction, but of the king’s pleasure. (Source- oh come on, really?) Esther could not feasibly abstain from the royal meals or banquet because she has to hide her Judaism. Instead, takes the most of a bad situation and uses her own ingenuity to save her people.

The IVP Women’s Bible Commentary takes a similar line of thinking to Michael, saying “Esther initially appears pliant and passive . . . Adopted by Mordecai, she obeys him as a father even after she ascends to her position as queen (Esther 2:7, 10, 20)” (Clark and Evans 266). The complaint that Esther obeys Mordecai is nonsensical- she has no one else in the court who she can trust, and given her perilous situation, she needs advice from someone. In addition, as Angeline Song states in her essay “Not Just a Bimbo: A Reading of Esther by a Singaporean Immigrant in Aotearoa New Zealand,” “As a child, Esther would have obeyed Mordecai many times, and her obedience would have brought good outcomes. Obeying Mordecai as an adult would therefore have come naturally to her” (137). Another argument against the commentators who takes issue with the fact that Esther obeys Mordecai is that ultimately, Mordecai would get nothing done without Esther’s help. In chapter 4, verse 8, Mordecai gives the eunuch Hathach “a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people.” Mordecai cannot save the people with Esther- their relationship is on relatively equal ground. Esther is a woman with as much agency as she can muster. Song’s essay states

it best: “As a vulnerable Other negotiating two worlds . . . Esther demonstrates the necessity of cultivating allies and consolidating her own position. As the narrative progresses, Esther’s character evolves and grows so that she eventually saves her Jewish people from within the boundaries imposed on her” (134).

## **Conclusion**

Although Esther is often read as weak, ineffective character, she is in fact just the opposite. She uses her seeming disadvantages to further her own ends, and courageously breaks laws and tricks the king in doing so. She saves an entire ethnic group in one of the largest empires in world history, and does it all within the confines of her marginalization.

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## **Introduction**

Esther story summary

Emphasize ch 8 & interactions w/ men

Interpretations- Esther is read as a pawn

Refute briefly

Thesis: Esther is not a pawn, but gets her power through the actions of men

## **Body Section 1**

Topic sentence: Men have official power to do things, esther tells them what to do/ how to do it

Examples: King cedes his power

“They {the banquet guests}... are legally *decreed* to drink as much as they want, even to become drunk: ‘And the drinking was by law without restraint, for the king had ordered his palace officials to do as each [man] wished’ (Esth 1:8). King Ahasuerus legally relinquishes his autonomy over his guests in this sphere and invites all of them--great and small--to do the same: relinquish autonomy over themselves. Since autonomy is essential to honor, the king’s action undermines himself and his people. Thus, from the outset, the Esther narrative subtly (and repeatedly) proclaims the power and honor of King Ahasuerus and his kingdom-- and immediately, insidiously, undermines it.” (Klein, 99)

King gives permission to write letter

Grovels before king

Mordecai writes letter

Takes eunuch's advice abt what to take to king

Liberation comes in the form of fighting (masculine)

## **Body Section 2**

Topic sentence: Esther’s agency is limited, but she pushes the boundaries

“As a vulnerable Other negotiating two worlds . . . Esther demonstrates the necessity of cultivating allies and consolidating her own position. As the narrative progresses, Esther’s character evolves and grows so that she eventually saves her Jewish people from within the boundaries imposed on her.” (Song, 134)

Examples: She lives in a harem

“That's Why They Didn't Call the Book 'Hadassah!': The Interse(Ct)/(x)lonality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in the Book of Esther.” “Esther wins the contest by sexing the king better than anyone else. In this way she becomes commodified.” (Bailey 239)

Not allowed to see king

Breaks rule

Jewish- can't reveal her identity

Mention “The Widespread Phenomena of Marranism and Hidden Jews”

Reveals at the right time

“Her revelation begins in typical fashion by piling up stock request phrases, aimed to please: ‘if I have found favor in your eyes’ (cf. 2:15, 17; 5:2, 8; and 8:5), and ‘if it pleases the king’ (cf. 1:19; 3:9; 5:4, 8; 7:3; 8:5; and 9:13). Of course, Esther has been ‘pleasing’ and has ‘found favor in the eyes of the king’ from the beginning. Here, then, she maintains and confirms the king’s fixation on her as object, while at the same time beginning to take him in an entirely unexpected direction.” *The Book of Hiding* (Beal 97)

Gains power over house of whatever

### Body Section 3

Topic: Counterarguments and Refutations

Examples: Esther is a pawn/ subservient to men

“Esther was involved in a sexual contest, married a pagan king, defiled herself with the excessive luxuries of the Persian court, and there is not recorded complaint about abstaining herself from the royal meals or banquet” (Michael Matthew, 2016, 127-128)

“From a subject people in fear of their lives, the Jews find gladness and light and honor among the general population, augured by the resplendent rise of *Mordecai*” (IVP Commentary, page 271, emphasis mine)

“Esther initially appears pliant and passive . . . Adopted by Mordecai, she obeys him as a father even after she ascends to her position as queen (Esther 2:7, 10, 20). The narrative makes no mention of her inner state as she is ‘taken’ inter the palace and the king’s bed; she submits to the beauty contest and the regimen required for it without comment” (IVP Commentary, page 266)

Starts true, but she takes power

“As a vulnerable Other negotiating two worlds . . . Esther demonstrates the necessity of cultivating allies and consolidating her own position. As the narrative progresses, Esther’s character evolves and grows so that she eventually saves her Jewish people from within the boundaries imposed on her.” (Song, 134)”

Without her, Mordecai wouldn’t get anything done

Esther herself has power through her femininity

*Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative*: “While Esther is seen as a positive literary character for the traditional Jewish reader, and individual less inclined to read with the official line of thought might look at the descriptions of beauty and banquet preparations as metonymic for a seductive woman, using her beauty as power to achieve her ends. . . . [Esther’s beauty] results in the death of Haman, as well as the reversal of the political enmity toward the Jewish people” (Bach, 179)

Hm, maybe

Beauty only matters as far as it influences men

**Conclusion**

Esther tells men to do stuff

Esther utilizes her limited agency

All of Esther's power is actualized through men, specifically King King Ahasuerus and Mordecai