

**Esther, Vashti and Mordecai in the Eunuchs' Den:
Subverting sexism, heterosexism and anti-semitism in the Persian Empire.**

The book of Esther narrates the liberation of the Jews in Exile from a threatened extermination under the emperor Xerxes I (486-465 B.C.; named Ahasuerus in Esther). This liberation resembles the original Exodus and came to be celebrated annually in the feast of Purim ("lots, 3:7; 9:18-32), two days before Passover. This new liberation, however, was achieved by the cunning and the anger of two human instruments (Esther and Mordecai) and a series of remarkable coincidences, yet without the type of miracles common in Exodus. The book never refers explicitly to God, although it mentions the king of Persia 190 times in 167 verses.¹ Like Joseph's story in Genesis 37-50 (see below), the reader can discern in the text the hand of God as the Sovereign of history, guiding human beings in their struggle for liberation, but without the abrupt and explicit divine interventions like the ten plagues in Exodus. Instead of the ten plagues of Exodus, Esther recounts the annihilation threats between the ten feasts.

Modern biblical scholars recognize in Esther, rather than a historical event, a kind of historical novel that reflects a historical context, perhaps containing a historical nucleus, or at least describing accurately many characteristics of the Persian empire, 538- 333 B.C. ("a Jewish novella," NISB Introduction; "a pseudo-historical tale," JSB; see JB Introduction, which points out how Tobit, Judith and Esther deal quite freely with historical and geographical facts).

Adele Berlin adds that Esther is a "comedy" that reflects a carnival atmosphere, where the threat of extermination alternates with scenes of grotesque humor and ferocious irony (2001:XVI-XXII). The carnival atmosphere is evident in the continuous contrasts between extermination threats and the ten banquets/festivals: (1) 1:1-4; (2) 1:5-8, 10-22; (3) 1:9; (4) 2:18; (5) 5:4-8; (6) 5:7-8 + 6:14-7:10; (7) 8:15-17; (8) 9:16-17,19, the rural banquet; (9) 9:18, the urban banquet in Susa; (10) 9:19, 20-32, the later annual festivals of Purim. David Pleins concludes that Esther tries to "deflate the Persian government's pretenses."³ But, in addition to "provincial/ colonial" Jewish humor directed against the Persian Empire, Esther and Vashti mock vain masculine pretenses of superiority, while the eunuchs, along with confirmed bachelor Mordecai, vindicate the honor of the sexual minorities against heterosexism and the "family values" of the anti-Semitic Haman. Esther is thus a highly subversive book:

- 1) Vashti's protest subverts Ahasuerus' sexism;
- 2) Esther's cunning and anger subvert Haman's anti-Semitism.
- 3) Mordecai and the omnipresent cast of eunuchs, subvert patriarchal heterosexism.

Of course, since patristic times, many heterosexual and anti-Jewish males have not appreciated all this subversion so much. Luther, who left a volume of scandalously anti-Semitic writings (see volume 38 in English, translated from the German original only *after* the Nazi holocaust). writes: "I feel so hostile to this book[2 Maccabees] and to Esther that I wished that neither existed, because both are too Judaizing and contain a lot of pagan impropriety."⁴ Many biblical scholars, especially Germans of the Nazi epoch, shared Luther's feelings and would have eliminated Esther from the biblical canon (see Brevard

Childs 1979: 602). However, Wilhelm Vischer, in a courageous essay (in German, Munich 1937!) demonstrated that the significance and the theological value of Esther is precisely in the way the book confronts us with “the Jewish question.” Brevard Childs (1979: 606) accepts Vischer’s conclusion: as a canonical book, Esther manifests the religious sense of the Jewish people in the ethnic sense (confirmed by Paul in → Romans 11: 25-32).

On the other hand, concerning the festivities of Purim (Esther 9: 20-30), Childs points out: “Esther’s canonical form includes a theological critic of all forms of Jewish nationalism and “to be a Jew” is to be divorced from the sacred traditions basic to Israel’s existence under the sovereignty of God.”⁶ This dialectic established by Childs is of great continual significance, since in the holocaust Nazis killed not only Jews but also homosexuals, gypsies, communists, Jehovah’s Witnesses and other minorities—yet many fundamentalists, both Christian and Jewish, employ biblical texts such as Esther in blind support of Israel in the violent conflicts with Palestinians. Surrounded by an enormous hostile Arab world, Israel may seem quite tiny and threatened, but within the State of Israel the Palestinians are a weak minority who often promote violence against the Jews, but who also have suffered great injustice, oppression and violence from Israel’s authorities.

Another prejudice against Esther arises not only from anti-Jewishness but from a Platonism that ignores the fundamental place of the Exodus paradigm for the whole Bible, including Jesus’ Good News. For example, Spanish readers are warned: “We should not look for evangelical teachings in this book, born out of other circumstances and other interests” (DHHBE, Ester, Introducción). On the contrary, however, Jesus’ Gospel is “Good News for the poor” precisely because it speaks to us about a historical project—even a cosmic one—for the liberation of all the oppressed (Luke 4:18-19; Isa 61:1-2; Ps 103:6-7; Rom 8).⁷

As Joyce Baldwin indicates,⁸ the entire structure of Esther revolves around the truth that God acts continually in history to humiliate oppressors and exalt the oppressed (Joseph in Gen 37-50; Daniel), with the result that “the first (the oppressors) will be last and the last (the oppressed) will become first” (Mark 10:31 and //s), a fundamental truth in Jesus’ teaching (Mark 9:35-36; Matt 20:16; 23:12; Luke 1:52-54; 13:30; 14:11; 18:4; see Allen Verhey’s important study *The Great Reversal: Ethics in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984). Matthew’s Gospel concludes Jesus’ teachings with the famous parable of the separation of goats and sheep (25:31-46), where the *only* criterion for the separation, the day of the judgment, is solidarity with the poor, the weak and the oppressed—that same kind of solidarity Esther showed when she risked her life for her people.

When certain Christians insist that the Scriptures attest to Jesus Christ (John 5:39) but deny that Esther contains evangelical teachings, logically they should advocate for the elimination of Esther from the canon. Many are concerned that the book never explicitly refers to God and also includes strange fasts (with no mention of prayer; see 4:1-3, 16). Such abstinence, however, would be useless without the existence of God and in the Hebrew Bible they work to assuage the wrath of God.¹⁰ Moreover, when the oppressed cry out (*za’aq*; Esther 4:1; 9:31), in the Hebrew Bible this is considered to be efficacious prayer to God (Exodus 3:7, 9). David Pleins shows how Esther is committed, not simply to a cause, but ‘to a cult,’ to a faithful ritual practice that unites the Jewish community in solidarity with the poor.¹¹

The Story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50) and Seven Parallels (//) with Esther (Sandra Berg 1979:123-165; Klara Butting 1999:170-171)

1. Joseph is handsome (“good-looking,” Gen. 39:6 // Esther 2:7), and because of their great sexual attraction, the lives of both Joseph and Esther are endangered (three of the same Hebrew words are repeated in the description of beauty). Hebrew in Gen. 39:6 about Joseph: *yephe-to 'ar wipheh mar'eh*
Est. 2:7 about Esther: *yephat-to 'ar wetobath mar'eh*
Esther repeats three of the four words from Genesis, but substitutes *tob* (good/beautiful) for the repeated *yephe* of Genesis.
2. Joseph is oppressed by the wife of the eunuch Potifar and ends up in the royal prison, while Esther is taken by the young slaves and ends up in the king's harem.
3. Joseph in prison (Gen. 39:4, 21) as well as Esther in the harem (Est. 2:9, 15, 17) experience compassion.
4. Joseph is openly honored (Gen. 41:42b, 43) // Mordecai (Est. 6:11)
5. Joseph receives the ring from his lord (Gen. 41:42) // Mordecai (Est. 8:2).
6. Joseph becomes the second in power (Gen. 41:43) // Esther (as queen, Est. 2:17) and Mordecai (Est. 10:3).
7. Joseph, like Esther and Mordecai, use their new power to save their people from death.

Conclusion: these seven similarities make us perceive that the story of Joseph served as a model for Esther.¹² Moreover, Joseph functions as a kind of androgynous figure that, in the book of Esther, divides into woman (Esther) and man (Mordecai).

Esther y → Daniel 1-6: Parallels. The books Esther and Daniel 1-6 have even more in common than Esther and the tale of Joseph in Genesis 37-50¹³. Daniel and his three friends, like Mordecai, are exiled bachelors who live in the imperial court (Babylon and Persia) but insist on living as openly faithful to the laws of Israel. Daniel, like Esther, is very sexually attractive, both live in luxury, and both books refer to the king's ring which seals official documents written in various languages. Like Mordecai, Daniel disobeys the royal order to prostrate himself. Both suffer slander from a pagan who tries to kill them. In the entire Bible only Esther and Daniel refer to immutable imperial edicts. In both cases, the king spends the night unable to sleep, and the pagan enemy is killed in the same way in which he had plotted to kill the Jew. Daniel, however, emphasizes God and his miraculous interventions.

Textual Note Esther presents a novelty: different texts of the same work exist, since the Greek texts don't translate the Hebrew, but include six major additions and many minor variants. Protestant versions translate only the Hebrew text (NRSV, NIV; ESV); Catholic versions include the Greek additions at the end (following the Saint Jerome Vulgate) or intercalated (JB); ecumenical versions sometimes includes Esther twice: once without the additions and again with the deuterocanonical additions of the LXX intermixed. The six LXX additions:

- add specifically religious elements: God is mentioned 50 times; explicit prayers, the temple, the cult and the dietary laws (which Esther claimed to have followed);
- emphasize the importance of Mordecai, while Esther becomes a stereotype of the weak woman (she faints twice when she approaches the king).

Outline: Esther (Hebrew) + Six Additions (Greek, LXX)

Esther MT

(Masoretic Text – Hebrew)

+ Six devout additions (LXX): A-F

(The Septuagint, LXX – Greek)

	A: Mordecai's Dream	1:11a-11
	Conspires against King Ahasuerus 1:1m-1r	
I. King Ahasuerus and Queen Vashti		
1:1-8 Ahasuerus' Banquet		
1:9-22 The subordination of Vashti		
II. Mordecai and Esther		
2:1-18 Esther chosen as queen		
2:19-23 Mordecai and the two eunuchs		
3:1-6 Haman and Mordecai		
III. The Jews threatened		
3:7-13 Haman: Extermination decree	B: The text of the decree	3:13a-13g
3:1-14-15 Announcement of the decree		
4:1-17 Mordecai and Esther attempt to stave off the decree	C: Mordecai's prayer Esther's prayer	4:17k-17z
	D: Esther presented to the king	5:1a – 1c
5:1 Esther is presented to the king		
5:2 The king receives Esther	D: Esther faints	5:1d – 1f
5:2-14 Esther is invited to a banquet	D: Esther faints again	5:2b
IV. The Jews' Recompense		
6:1-13 Haman's disgrace		
6:14-7:10 Haman at Esther's banquet		
8:1-12 Royal favor passes to the Jews	E: Text: decree of rehabilitation	8:12a-12t
8:13-17 Announcement of the decree		
9:1-19 The fourteenth day of Purim	F: The fifteenth day of Purim	9:19a
V. The feast of the Purim ("lots", v.3:7)		
9:20-32 Official institution of the feast		
10:1-3 Mordecai's eulogy	F: Mordecai's dream deciphered	10:3a-3j
	F: Note about the Greek translation	10:3k

1. The poor and the oppressed. After recounting the miraculous liberation of the annihilation of the Jewish people, the book ends with the celebration of Purim and the provision of “sending presents to the poor” (*ebyonim*, 9:22; cf. the feast of Passover in Ex 12). This is the only explicit reference to the poor in the Hebrew version of Esther and is especially appropriate for a book that concerns deals with a “second Exodus”. Although the previous context speaks of an exchange of gifts of food between the Jews, the reference to the poor is not just limited to the Jews and could include the Gentiles (see the reference in Ps 103 to the Exodus and to “*all* the oppressed”, verses 6-7). The LXX of Esther includes another reference to the poor when it says that the wives must honor their husbands “high and low alike” (1:20), but it appears to be a rhetorical touch-up – to stress patriarchal authority – and not a real concern for the poor themselves (see also the reference to the “humble (*tapeinos*)” that rise up, LXX 1:11).

Although the first banquet of six months that the king gave was only for the elite, the second lasted only one week but was for all the inhabitants of Susa, “both great and small” (1:5; cf. the reference to the wealth of the kingdom in 1:4). The book thus begins and ends with feasts that manifested solidarity with the poor. Esther herself, more than just being a woman, was a Jew, exiled and an orphan (2:7), four classes commonly oppressed and poor, but Mordecai, the first that adopted her, occupied a post in the government. Haman, the violent enemy oppressor, who attempted tot annihilate all the Jews in the empire, was incredibly rich, since he offered the king 10,000 talents of silver as a bribe (3:9) – perhaps the equivalent of a third of the empire’s yearly income¹⁴!

In light of the solidarity with the poor expressed in Ahasuerus’ second feast at the beginning of the book (1:5), the gifts for the poor at the end of the celebration of Purim (9:22) and the contrast with the rich Haman who, with his fabulous bribe of the king, attempts a Jewish holocaust, we can see that the fundamental conflict of the book is similar to that in Exodus: the powerful oppressors, rich and violent, against the exiled Jews, weak and oppressed¹⁵. In fact, the vocabulary for oppressors in Esther is much more abundant than the vocabulary for the poor and almost always refers to Haman:

- 3:10 Haman, *tzarar II*, adversary, oppressor
- 7:6 Haman, *tzar II*, adversary, oppressor + *oyeb*, enemy
→ the evil ones (*reshaim*) in the Psalms¹⁶
- 8:1 Haman, *tzarar II*, adversary, oppressor
- 9:10, 24 Haman, , *tzarar II*, adversary, oppressor
- 7:4 *tzar I*, oppression, affliction
- 9:5 enemies (*oyeb*) of the Jews

See NRSV, Esther With Additions, 16:20, “oppression” (LXX: *thlipseos*; “oppression”)¹⁷.

Also, we must consider the vocabulary for violence as the maximum expression of oppression, abuse of power, injustice¹⁸. Although the basic word for violence (*hamas*) does not occur in Esther, other terms abound, especially with reference to Haman and the king’s first decree against the Jews:

3:6	“lay hands on” + “destroy”, <i>shamad</i> ;	3:9
	“destroy”, ‘ <i>abad</i> ;	3:13
	“destroy, kill and annihilate” (<i>shamad, harag</i>) + “plunder” (‘ <i>abad</i>)	
	their goods” (<i>shalal boz</i>);	
4:7-8; 7:4; 8:11; 9:24	(“destroy, kill annihilate...attack”);	7:8,
	“assault/do violence, <i>cabash</i> , to the queen” ¹⁹ .	

Cf. the Jews in 9:5-16 killing and destroying their enemies. Concerning *naqam*, “avenge/do justice” (8:13), see below and → Nahum.

However, in spite of so much vocabulary and the unanimity of mistaken commentators, the book of Esther does not give us even one example of violence” *in the Biblical sense*. Rather, it tells of repeated *threats* of violence (unjust) on the part of Haman (3:13; 7:4) – all frustrated – and examples of the death penalty and just wars (defensive) – *all authorized by the king*—on the part of the Jews (8:11). However, for many, the descriptions in Esther of the thousands killed by Jewish armed patriots, although they were “defensive and just” wars, are unacceptable in a book supposedly inspired by the “God of peace”, and therefore would exclude Esther from the canon. Even the LXX felt so scandalized by the quantity of deaths in the Hebrew text (9:16) that it reduced the number from 75,000 TM to 15,000 (note JB). Others think that the LXX preserves the original number, and that a scribe augmented the number in the TM, thus exaggerating the miraculous element “for the greater glory of God” – a common phenomenon in the transmission of the ancient manuscripts.

Furthermore, there are some who insist that, for not being an historical book, the slaughter in Esther constitutes part of the grotesque carnival scene and, of course, never happened: “Carnival permits the release of one’s urge for violence and revenge in a way that channels the violence so that it is not actually destructive.”²⁰ But such a defense of a story with so much spilled blood sounds like current popular attempts to defend Hollywood or TV: “Better to see or read than do.” However, modern studies show that the mere fact of seeing violence or reading about it motivates some to practice what they have read and seen.

Joyce Baldwin points out that the word “avenge”, like “vindicate” comes from the Latin *vindicare*. Therefore, instead of “avenge”, we could translate the Hebrew verb *naqam* in Esther 8:13 as “inflict a just punishment” or “to vindicate oneself”²¹. Even though in certain texts *naqam* appears to have the sense of “avenge”, with shades of resentment and hatred, many ancient cultures are characterized by conflicts over honor and thus a just punishment vindicates the honor of the oppressed who has suffered the injustice. Baldwin acknowledges that certain Biblical texts support the right to use defensive physical force (Esther 8:11), but concludes that “The noblest revenge is to forgive.”²² Various texts in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament teach that we must leave the revenge / vindication in the hands of God (Proverbs 25:21-22; → Romans 12:14-21), but the emphasis on a final judgment beyond the grave in the NT is not so frequent in the Hebrew Bible. The book of Esther, which does not mention God, much less a final judgment, limits itself to demonstrating justice (as punishment of the oppressor and liberation of the oppressed) operating in human history.

Esther lacks the explicit vocabulary for a liberating justice (only *dat* and *din* appear, aw and justice/judgment”), which the king’s seven advisors knew (1:13; cf. *naqam*, “avenge, vindicate, do justice”, 8:13). Rather, the story of Haman hung with his nine sons (9:25) gives us a classic example of justice as just punishment: Haman’s wickedness comes down upon his own head (see also 9:1). The Jews succeeded in avenging/vindicating themselves, punishing their violent oppressors, but refusing to plunder (9:10, 15-16), thus obeying the Tenth Commandment against greed.

2. Women. 2.1. Esther—pious heterosexual or militant lesbian? As Sidnie Ann White-Crawford says,²³ Biblicists (male) tend to praise Mordecai as the authentic hero and minimize Esther’s contribution, or even to slander her (for a supposed lack of “sexual ethics”), a prejudice already evident in 2 Maccabees, that called the festival of Purim “the day of Mordecai” (2 Macc. 15:36, JB), showing that ‘Mordecai’s usurpation of Esther’s role is almost complete.’²⁴ According to this tradition, logically the book should have the title “Mordecai” instead of “Esther.” Even in 1971 Carey Moore could write: “Between Mordecai and Esther the greater hero in the Hebrew is Mordecai, who supplied the brains while Esther simply followed his directions.”²⁴ And the introduction to the book in DHHBE says that the book describes “as the Jew Mordecai, who had already saved the king’s life, obtained, *with Esther’s help*... the liberation of his people.”

More than merely diminishing Esther’s contribution and exaggerating that of Mordecai, the sexist tradition of the Greek version and the traditional commentaries openly criticize Esther for a supposed lack of “ethics/morals” on the sexual plane: “Esther, for the chance of winning wealth and power, takes her place in the herd of maidens who became concubines of the king.”²⁶ However, in Esther’s world, she had no other option, and once crowned as queen, risked her life and used her power and rhetorical abilities with great wisdom and subtlety in order to liberate her people – a true paradigm of liberating practice for the Jews in Exile. The Greek version, however, reduces Esther to the stereotype of a weak woman, making her faint twice to stir the king’s compassion. The very dramatic Hebrew text is reduced to a kind of melodramatic soap opera.

Much of the book’s dramatic tension results from a supposed tradition that the laws of the Persians and Medes were “irrevocable” (1:19; 3:12-14; 8:8-14; cf. Dan. 6:9, 13, 16). Adele Berlin places in doubt the translation and the historicity of this tradition²⁷. At any rate, at the end of the book (9:32), after interceding with the king (see Moses and the Pharaoh) and achieving a “second Exodus”, Esther confirms her authority as a second Moses by establishing, by eternal law, “the command of Queen Esther”, the new feast of Purim, a day before the Passover of the Exodus²⁸. Esther and Mordecai succeeded in saving their people from a threat (anti-Semitic) of annihilation even more devastating than the decrees of the Pharaoh in the Exodus (cf. Moses and Miriam), but Esther as well as Mordecai demonstrated a tolerance and sympathy for the eunuchs that greatly surpasses the provision of the Pentateuch (Deut. 23:1-2; see 3. Sexual Minorities in this chapter). According to the LXX, Esther is not the adopted daughter of her older cousin (Hebrew, 2:7, 10-11, 20), but Mordecai’s “wife/woman (*gynaika*)” (LXX 2:7; see JB note). Nothing in the Hebrew text suggests that Esther was heterosexual, and in the LXX Esther even says that she “hates” the matrimonial bed of the uncircumcised king (4:15).

2.2 Vashti (dismissed/divorced): against sexism. For many modern women, the true heroine of the book is not Esther, but Vashti, since it is she that had the courage to say “no” to the insulting and sexist demand of the king to display her beauty in front of his guests, all drunk (1:10-12). The mere refusal of this woman threatens to subvert the “good order” (patriarchal) of the entire empire (1:17-18)²⁹. The seven “wise” advisors of the inept king proposed as a punishment precisely that which Vashti desired – a “divorce” – to not have to again be in the king’s presence (1:19). Gary Comstock qualifies the king’s counselors’ reaction to Vashti’s denial “a striking and poignant illustration of patriarchal panic.”³⁰ Comstock indicates that he found a Biblical model for his life only by reading the story of Vashti in Esther. He then summarizes some modern “re-readings” of Vashti’s denial:

The story of Vashti was rewritten when an underground railroad, and not complacency, was the response for a people’s ignored cry for freedom; the story of Vashti was rewritten when armed resistance, and not accommodation, was the response to Hitler’s program in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising; the story of Vashti was rewritten when a boycott, and not continued obedience, was the response to the arrest of a tired woman who dared to sit down on a bus where she was not supposed to; the story of Vashti was rewritten when a few lesbians and gay men finally did not go gently into that ever-waiting paddy wagon outside the barroom door and stated the Stonewall Rebellion, the founding event of the modern lesbian/gay movement.³¹

In effect, Vashti, like a John the Baptist, “prepares the way” for Esther, since Vashti’s refusal to appear before the king paves the way for Esther’s courage, who risked her life by appearing uninvited before the king. In Persia women could eat with men. So, more than being merely a “literary technique”³² both the banquet Vashti prepared for the women and her insubordination suggest that she preferred the company of the harem rather than further relations with Ahasuerus. Traditionally, lesbians have been considered a threat to the entire patriarchal order (1:17-18)³³.

2.3. Zeresh and Haman, the only “respectable” marriage (not polygamy, but “fascist” and pro-holocaust; see Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5). Zeresh has little character and responds to each bit of news with the obvious and expected reactions (5:10-14; 6:13). But even she, at the end of the book, joins the grand company of sexual minorities, since she is a widow and without sons (9:13-14). Haman is proud to be the father of ten sons, but according to LXX is also “loved” by the king (and anyway, how do we explain the rise of such a brute? just for being so rich³⁴?). His death by being hung at the height of 22 meters (72 feet) (5:14) makes it a caricature of Moses’ serpent (Numbers 21:4-9; John 3:14) and of Jesus “elevated!” on the cross (John 8:28; 12:32-34) – a sacrifice, not for his nation but for his own sins. Perhaps it was he that inspired the failed assassination of the king by the eunuchs (were they also bribed? 2:21-3:1; see the LXX).

3. Sexual minorities and sexual sins. The Greeks considered the Persians – and especially the Persian court – to be decadent and effeminate, an inferior power in the process of collapse; a bureaucracy filled with eunuchs and slaves, who always prostrated themselves in the presence of their lords³⁵. The book of Esther seems to share with the Greeks this same contempt for the Persian court. After the triumph of Alexander the Great (333 B.C.),

the Jews also ridiculed the Greeks for being effeminate³⁶. Does the book of Esther, then, serve as a source of “sexual ethics” and “family values”?

3.1. The twelve eunuchs (*sarisim*). According to Esther, nothing happened in the great empire without the advice of a large number of eunuchs, appearing at propitious moments and running in all directions – an ‘omnipresence’ that substituted for the apparent absence of God. Almost all are “trustworthy” (10 of the 12), very good men and no one seems to have prejudices or discriminate against them:

- 1:10, 12, 15 seven eunuchs named: Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zetar and Carkas. “Trustworthy men: lit. *eunucos*. They were men, ordinarily castrated, at the service of the king and his wives.” (1:10, note g, DHHBE). See Jeremiah 29:1-2, note b; Gen. 37:36, note p and 39:1, which names Potifar a “functionary” of the Pharaoh.
- 2:3. 8, 15, Hegai, “guardian of the women”. He had a beauty salon (see Ecl.1:9, “nothing new under the sun”) where the women stayed for a year, receiving two treatments of six months (2:9, 12); in the LXX, which at time seems to give evidence of its own prophetic inspiration (Isa. 7:14), Hegai is simply called “Gay” (*Gai*)!
- 2:14, Shaashgaz, “in charge of the concubines” already used and filed away.
- 4:4-5, Esther and “the men that formed her personal guard...Hathach, one of the king’s eunuchs”.
- 6:14, the king’s seven eunuchs take Haman to the banquet.
- 7:9, Harbona (one of the seven eunuchs named in 1:10) informs the king of the hanging which Haman had prepared for Mordecai. As Jon Levenson notes, this Harbona is a relatively humble figure, not one of the king’s official advisors, who suggests to him what he should do with Haman – another example of comic inversion, where a person of low standing shows a man of nobility what he should do³⁷.
- 2:21-23; 6:2, Bigthan and Teresh, “two of the king’s eunuchs, who guarded the threshold”, conspired to assassinate the king, Mordecai informs Ahasuerus of the plot and the two eunuchs are hanged; afterward, the king remembers the conspiracy and Mordecai’s service to him (6:2). The failure of the two eunuchs’ conspiracy and success of Vashti, Esther and Mordecai suggests that the effective praxis for the Jews in exile involves the rejection of armed revolution and endeavoring to achieve favorable changes within the system,(→ Daniel 11:34 and the criticism of the Maccabean revolution, of “little help”).

Total: Ten good eunuchs and two bad ones (all named). *However*, there exists an important Greek manuscript (the Alpha Text, AT) where the story of the two bad eunuchs’ treason is not included, and some think this Alpha Text represents the original version of Esther³⁸.

3.2. Mordecai (confirmed bachelor, intimate companion of the eunuchs). The contrast between Mordecai, unmarried and openly Jewish, with neither wife nor children, and his great enemy, Haman, with his spouse Zeresh and ten sons, is notable. If Mordecai had been deported in the time of Nebuchadnezzar (Esther 2:6; 598/97 B.C.), but still during the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes I, 485-465 B.C.) he would have been 115-150 years old³⁹. The translators of the LXX, apparently nervous about the lack of “family values” (no wife, no children), changed the text to have Mordecai married (incestuously?) with Esther, his wife/woman (*gynaika*, LXX 2:7; see JB note). In the Hebrew text, however, Mordecai appears to foreshadow the way of Jesus and Pablo (not to marry), and adopts not only Esther as his daughter, but all the Jewish population as his spiritual children, since the last word in the book in Hebrew (10:3) refers to his concern for peace (*shalom*) for “all his people” and “his seed” (*zar’o*), better “kindred” (JSB); “all the Jews” (NIV; cf. Jesus, John 15; Paul; 1 John, etc).

As an unmarried man, Mordecai shares the status of “sexual minority” with the palace eunuchs, with whom he maintained intimate and trusting relations (2:19-32) and as such could find out about the two eunuchs’ plot against the king (2:19-23), have daily access to the harem and converse with Esther without arousing suspicion (2:11). Mordecai occupied an administrative post in the empire, where he was known as a Jew, but he advised Esther to maintain her Jewish identity a secret (2:19-20).

Mordecai’s refusal to prostrate himself before Haman, which is left unexplained in the text (3:1-6), seems to be extremely foolish, since it put not only his own life in danger, but also the lives of all of the Jews in the Empire⁴⁰. See the prostration of Jacob to Esau (Gen. 33:3) and David to Jonathan (1Sam. 20:41; also 1 Kings 1:23; 2 Kings 4:37; see JB note, Esther 3:2)⁴¹. Marti Nissinen introduces the concept of sexual passivity as a role construction, not as sexual orientation, which takes us to the conclusion that the “dog” (*keleb*) was a male who accepted the passive sexual role, that is, anal penetration⁴². John Burns elaborates:

The image behind...canine passivity can be illustrated from the positions adopted by the inferior before the superior. In these instances the suppliant kneels head between hands and rump raised, just the position of a male dog, fawning but uncertain as to its reception, head between the front paws, the elevated rear exposing the anus and testicles. The line between the perception of the ‘dog’ as a faithful or groveling servant or as a male about to submit to anal penetration, whether for prostitution or pure pleasure, must have been a fine one, epithet and image were easily transferred. It was inconceivable that a freeborn, mature male would want to take a woman’s role for whatever reason. He was no better than a dog.^{42a}

Not that the act of prostration was always an explicit sign of offering oneself for anal sex, but the gesture was one of total submission of the male or female slave which the sovereignty of the lord or lady assumed over the body – and such sovereignty included the right to penetrate and to demand sexual services. Hence, we should not interpret Mordecai’s defiance as a rejection of “homosexuality” but an insistence in his freedom

^{42a}

with the refusal to prostrate himself like a slave before Haman. Implicit in this declaration of freedom and independence is a rejection of the abusive type of homoerotic relations where one is superior (he that penetrates) and the other person (male or female) is inferior and penetrated. Haman prostrates himself on Esther's couch and the king thinks that he is trying to have sexual relations with the queen (7:8).

3.3. Ahasuerus the King (polygamist, divorcee, surrounded by eunuchs...).

Obviously he is a type of "sexual minority", but with his great harem, Ahasuerus would appear to be unquestionably heterosexual. Herodotus (480-420), Greek historian, informs us that Xerxes (his name in Greek) was a womanizer, committed adultery with his brother's wife and also had sexual relations with his daughter. However, in Esther king Ahasuerus lives surrounded by other men, eunuchs and young male slaves (2:2; a study of enslavement in Esther is needed: 1:3, 10; 2:2-3, 9, 14, 21; 3:2, 5, 7-8, 13; 4:5, 9-11; 6:3, 5, 9, 14; 7:4, 8-9; 8:3, 9-10, 14). Ahasuerus has a very "gay" life style, and Saint Paul would call him a *malakos* (soft, effeminate; 1 Cor. 6:9), for instead of going out to conquer his enemies and enlarge his empire, he prefers a six month party with other men and lets queen Vashti spend six months apart in a party with other women. He wants to sleep with a different person each night. After divorcing Vashti, he loves Esther "more than any of the other *women*" (2:17), but concerning possible relations with slaves and eunuchs, the text is discreetly silent. According to LXX, the king say to Esther, "I am your brother" (5:1f, BJ), and such a sentiment could explain why he goes for 30 days without seeing her (4:11). Furthermore, according to LXX (6:9), Haman says: "Thus shall be treated the man whom the king wishes to honor" (*agapa*; Hebrew: "wants to honor"). In general the LXX is zealous in promoting traditional devotion and Jewish family values, but perhaps in the case of the villain Haman and the pagan king, it prefers to point out the faults of such values.

Conclusion. The three women in the book are also examples of sexual minorities: Vashti, divorced; Esther, active member of the harem of a polygamist pagan king; Zeresh, widow after the death of Haman. In addition to the solidarity with the poor and the oppressed, also illuminating in Esther is the alliance between women and sexual minorities, and between Mordecai (a known Jew) and Esther (a secretive Jew, but with great influence in the workings of the empire). The two eunuchs' conspiracy fails, but with Vashti's courage, followed by the collaboration of Mordecai (wise strategy) and Esther (rhetoric and brilliant tactics), counseled by the eunuchs, they are highly successful: they manage to subvert an empire characterized by sexism, heterosexism and anti-Judaism. Mordecai and Esther maintain good communication in spite of their difficult and very different situations ("networking"). Today there are many who insist that only "decent" married couples are worthy of adopting children (Haman and Zeresh?); but what would have happened to Esther had she not been adopted by her bachelor cousin, Mordecai?

Esther's "theological meaning"

Traditional Biblicists are left perplexed that the book of Esther refers 190 times to the pagan king in 167 verses and not even once to God (→ Song of Songs 8:6). How dare such a book enter into the sacred canon? And how can the theologians "do theology"

while lacking all the ingredients? Being “learned men”, like Ahasuerus’ seven advisors, the Biblicists and theologians have concluded that Esther (who hid her Jewish identity) contains a theology a bit “in the closet” (implicit), that is concerned with the “providence” of a God (also hidden behind the book’s coincidences). It’s just that, like “God”, the word “providence” also doesn’t appear in Esther, nor in the entire Bible, since it is a word taken from philosophy (especially from Plato and Stoicism), not the Scriptures. As James I. Packer affirms: “Not one term in the Hebrew or Greek Bible expresses the concept of divine providence”⁴³. Certainly, as in the case of “trinity”, there exist in the Bible thousands of texts that we could group together under the term “providence”. The Liberation theologians prefer to liberate themselves from the philosophical categories of Plato and Aristotle and refer to God as the “Lord of History” – and (with the ecologists) we could add “Lord of Creation”, since, after the creation God, continues to help and guide all his creation and especially human beings. In Esther we can discern the fundamental conflict: pagan chance vs. divine direction; between coincidence and providence, between human initiative and divine omnipotence.

- 1:1-21 By the great wisdom of the learned royal advisors, Vashti’s punishment for insubordination was, ironically, precisely what she wanted: to not have to be in the king’s presence again. All the resources of the imperial bureaucracy are needed to confront the danger of a willful woman (HCSB note 1:21-22). Seven eunuchs can’t bring her, and seven wise advisors could only convince the king to decree what she wanted.
- 2:1-23 The king’s young slaves make him remember that he must search for a successor to the divorced queen Vashti. Only after a year of cosmetic treatments (2:12) could Esther be with the king.
- 3:1-15 Haman’s project: *destroy* all the Jews (a verb used 25 times in the book); see Lamec, Genesis 4:23-24.
- 4:14-16 Mordecai appears to refer to God’s project of liberation in history (“relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from *another quarter*” = God, in his providence; see DHHBE 4:14, note b). Esther: “and if I perish, I perish”; see Prisca, Rom. 16:3-5).
- 6:1 The king couldn’t sleep. Did he have a bad conscience for not having rewarded Mordecai? or does he fear Haman’s power and is searching for someone trustworthy to protect him from another conspiracy? According to LXX, God caused the king’s insomnia.

Conclusion concerning the “theological meaning” in Esther. Instead of focusing so much on “providence”, it is better to note how God, the Lord of History, carries out his historical project of liberation, lifting up the oppressed and frustrating the violent oppressors (see introduction above). The concept of “providence” springs from elitist philosophies which attempt to maintain an unjust status quo, but Yahweh, the Liberating God of the Exodus, overturns the oppressive order of the world.

Notes

1. Carey Moore 1971:xxxii.
2. Berlin, Adele (2001:xvi-xxii). *Esther*. JPS.
3. David Pleins 2001:191
4. Luther, WA 3:302, cited by Carey Moore 1992:635.
5. Brevard Childs 1979:602
6. Brevard Childs 1979:607
7. Hanks 1982/83; 1992; 2000
8. Joyce Baldwin 1984:24-32
9. See Allen Verhey's important study, *The Great Reversal: Ethics in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).
10. Jon Levenson 1997:19
11. David Pleins 2001:194 (See "P" in the Pentateuch)
12. Klara Butting 1999:171
13. Adele Berlin 2001:xl
14. Carey Moore 1971:39; cp. 5:11
15. Gillis Gerleman 1982, 11-23, 80, cited in Jon Levenson 1997:61
16. José Miranda 1972
17. For *tsar(ar) I and II*, "oppress, oppressor" see Hanks 1982:41-42; 1983:127-128.
18. Jacques Pons 1981:27-52
19. Adele Berlin 2001:70
20. Adele Berlin 2001:22
21. Baldwin 1984:100; Berlin 2001:78; Schökel 1994:511
22. Baldwin 1984:100 (citing a 16th century proverb)
23. Sidnie Ann White-Crawford (1998:133)
24. David Clines 1992:903
25. Carey Moore AB 1971:lii, cited by Sidnie Ann White-Crawford 1998:133
26. L.B.A. Paton 1908: 96, cited in Sidnie Ann White-Crawford 1998:133
27. Adele Berlin 2001:18
28. Adele Berlin 2001:93
29. Adele Berlin lv-lvi, 17
30. Gary Comstock 1993:53
31. Gary Comstock 1993:57 (actually it was drag queens who initiated Stonewall).
32. HCSB, note 1:9
33. Brooten 1996:303-357
34. see HCSB note 3:1
35. Adele Berlin 2001:xxix
36. Scroggs 1983:66-98
37. Jon Levenson, 1997:105
38. Jon Levenson 1997:32-34
39. Berlin 2001:25
40. Sidnie Ann White-Crawford 1998:135
41. Carey Moore 1971:36-37
42. Marti Nissinen 1998:37-44;
- 42a John Barclay Burns (1999).
43. James I. Packer 1982/91:1136

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