

## **The Book of Esther:**

When it comes to genre, Esther is one of the hardest books to place. On the one hand it is written as a historical narrative with intimate knowledge of the Persian court. On the other hand it does not conform to this genre as it is found in the Bible for one main reason: it does not feature God. God is a character in every other biblical narrative, but in Esther there is only one allusion to divine providence at the end of Esther 4, and it is indirect.

What is the meaning of God's absence in the Book of Esther? Two possibilities present themselves. Esther may be taking the idea that God guides history from afar to a further extreme than even the Joseph story does (God only really appears in the Joseph story once), this statement is corroborated by the aforementioned allusion to divine providence in Esther 4.

The other possibility, which I am more inclined to accept, is that God or more accurately gods appear throughout the book of Esther, they are just *sub rosa*. Consider that the two Israelite protagonists' names, Esther and Mordecai, are names of Mesopotamian gods. Esther is Ishtar, the *femme fatale* of Mesopotamian goddesses, and Marduk (Mordecai) is the creator of the world and king of the gods according to Babylonian myth. King Xerxes is often referred to simply as "King", which rabbinic commentators have contended is an allusion to God (in which case he would be a pretty capricious and easily

influenced god). It is entirely possible that the writer of the book of Esther is playing with the idea of *theomachy* (war between gods), a racy theme for a late biblical book.

There are also signs that this book has a deeply comic undercurrent to it. Consider one of the central plot lines – Mordecai refusing to bow down before Haman. The premise might seem plausible at first glance, but if one considers it more closely it is very flimsy. There is no interdiction in the Bible against bowing down before people, in fact Esther bows down before Xerxes several times. King Xerxes is portrayed as an easily influenced buffoon, and you can almost see Haman’s sinister moustache.

If it is true that King Xerxes symbolizes the god of gods in this book, one may go further down the dark road of heresy and say that the author is making a deeply irreligious statement regarding God’s capriciousness and decision making. There are other signs (aside from the themes of theomachy and capriciousness) that this book does not follow conventional notions of religiosity: When Mordecai and Esther hear of Haman’s plot they fast and rend their clothes, but they do not pray, which is highly irregular in Second Temple Judaism. [The author of the Greek translation (or perhaps the precursor to the Greek translation) noticed this and added supplications to God by Mordecai and Esther in all the appropriate places.] Perhaps the author of Esther was like

Ecclesiastes the heretic who thought that one should not pray to God. Finally Purim is celebrated as a secular holiday according to the book of Esther (which makes it unique in the Bible), there are no religious feasts, no special prayers, and no offering to priests or to God, human beings are the sole agents of salvation. Purim seems more like the modern Israeli Independence day than a biblical holiday.

### **Participating Authors**

As in the case of Ecclesiastes the base narrative was supplemented by a more conventional second author mostly evident in Chapters 8-9. This second author makes Purim into a perpetual ordinance to be celebrated by the Jews forevermore, instead of a one time “historical” occurrence (and compare what H does to P’s Passover in Exodus 12). He also makes Mordecai into a Benjaminite and a descendant of Saul and Haman into an Amalekite Scion. He imagines this story as just one more manifestation of Israel’s perpetual battle with Amalek, which began in Exodus 17, continued with Saul the Benjaminite king fighting Agag the King of the Amalekites in I Samuel 15, and ends in Esther.

Finally (as mentioned above), Esther is supplemented by a source only evident in the Septuagint version of Esther, with prayers by Mordecai and Esther, ensuring that this book is not misunderstood as heretical (or from our perspective IS misunderstood).