

“IN THE CITADEL OF SUSA WAS A JEWISH ‘TROUBLE-
MAKER’”: A SOCIOPOLITICAL READING
OF ESTHER 3 AND 4

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Abstract: *Like most other Bible narratives, the Book of Esther may be read without much attention given to the evaporating humanness of the Jewish actors. The traditional view has been to treat the outcome of the tension between ‘bad’ Haman and ‘good’ Mordecai as divine fiat in favor of the Jews. How much ethical issues are embedded in the story has not been plausibly decoded through the centuries. By means of deconstruction, this paper engages the text critically to uncover the embezzled, hidden ‘other’ in it. Consequently, it brings out several critical ignored spots in the narrative that are necessary for sociopolitical consideration in a world beset with suspicions, religious and ethnic/racial mistrust and hatred.*

Key Words: Religion; otherness; socio-political; ethical conflict; ethnicity; injustice; racism.

Introduction

The appeal to religious authority and practices to justify actions has been part of religious people throughout history. While religious convictions and beliefs are not bad when properly upheld, much thought may not be given to a clash with other authorities such as political authority. It is easy for religious people to appeal to their religious traditions as the source of their actions and to celebrate every action of historical figures in their scriptures. But do we really pay attention to the stories that we read to learn more than spiritual lessons from them? Do we go beyond our claim of divine inspiration of the text to uncover the evaporated humanness of the actors to decode the ‘otherness’ for effective and appropriate applications to our lives? Well, I propose that the narratives in the Book of Esther are a classic case for our uncovering sociopolitical ethics. And this paper concentrates on the Mordecai-Haman drama (Esther 3 and 4).

Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the Old Testament refers to Mordecai as the savior that God prepared in anticipation of the massacre of

Israel.¹ Some commentators also assert that the Jews were saved because of their special relationship with Yahweh. It is important to state that the text does not explain how he came to join the palace gate keepers. Did he impose himself or got Esther to appoint him? Why did he occupy himself at the gate? What was his interest? Did he become a gatekeeper to take advantage of the naivety and docility of Esther to foment trouble for everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike?

In this discursive, analytical and evaluative paper, I seek to decouple the sociopolitical ‘otherness’ of the text from the surface religious lobes for purposes of theological reflection. I will demonstrate how our religio-cultural notions can result in social and political conflicts. I will also show that sometimes there is more than the eye can catch in the clash between the proletariat and the upper class. Again, whenever God is domesticated by a select few, it breeds religious pomposity, arrogance, disrespect for others, intolerance and lack of understanding for peaceful human existence. Furthermore, when we fail to vent our displeasure at the right offender or target, we succeed to generalize our anger and in the process incur the wrath of God. Consequently, we become the victims rather than the just victors. I do not approach this paper as a biblical scholar but as one attempting to deconstruct the text for a meaningful socio-political application.

An Embezzled Text

Gary A. Phillips understands biblical deconstruction as an alteration of and departure from the authoritative, traditional and biblical interpretation of Scripture.² This traditional interpretation undermines our efforts as readers to see how the place of the ‘other’ in the text affects the meaning of the text. This deficiency, therefore, suppresses appropriate response from us. Phillips asserts that in response to widespread

¹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1993). Libronix Digital Library System.

² Gary A. Phillips, “The Ethics of Reading Deconstructively, or Speaking Face to Face: The Samaritan Woman Meets Derrida at the Well,” *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament*, ed. Elizabeth Struthers Malbon and Edgar V. Knight (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 284-325.

postmodern crisis, deconstruction has ethical and political implications. It also challenges biblical criticism to engage with globalization and its associated implications.

Deconstruction challenges biblical scholars to rethink in a certain way the nature of the Bible as a particular text, the event of reading and writing, the nature of our disciplinary practices, and the ethical responsibilities we face as readers of texts and as intellectuals in today's society. Given the wider cultural and institutional stakes of deconstruction, traditional biblical critics have reason to wary. Operating against the gain of a persuasive masculinist metaphysical tradition that has shaped our modern presuppositions, practices and privileges, deconstruction vies for an alternative understanding and critical practice.³

Deconstructing readers are interested in the specificity of textual understanding and critical reading since the approach is orderly, intelligently regulated, well-structured and shows deep respect for text, reader and historical location. As an *event*, deconstruction approaches the text via the historical-critical and traditional literary readings to identify and disclose the spots blushed over in specific texts for further readings. Consequently, there is “an irreducible process of opening/closing that reforms (the text) without let-up” since its future is “yet to arrive.”⁴

As Phillips identifies the presence of ironic tensions in the Samaritan Woman's Encounter with Jesus, so do I also with the Mordecai/Haman Encounter in the Esther narrative. In the Samaritan Woman's story, Phillips thinks there is a striking feature which is not appropriately dealt with by many critical methodological readers which miss the endemic significance of textual irony in Johannine textuality. Again, they miss how ironic textuality makes room for more meaning or the unraveling of the inexhaustible presence of the ‘other’ in narratives like this.

The ironic presence in that story is an ethical challenge and also portrays our encounter with

³ Phillips, “Reading Deconstructively,” 314.

⁴ Phillips, “Reading Deconstructively,” 290.

Johannine textuality which is not reducible to redactional or narrative intention... [because] irony keeps meaning and readings flowing, even though pressure builds as the narrator struggles to contain the unruly, semiotically unstable text and make it theologically safe.⁵

It is irony that discloses the text for us readers to sign on in new and different ways, by intervening in the text in an unpredictable manner so that multiple textual meanings are made possible in spite of our likes or dislikes. As we engage the text, the need for the subversion of the embezzled ideas underneath the surface becomes crucial for our appreciation and learning.

The story before us is about a ‘genocide’ that was initially targeted at the Jews in Assyria, but which reversed to the disfavor of the hunters of the Jews. The protagonists in the narratives are Haman and Mordecai. We will approach our discourse in two parts. Part one discusses the immediate cause of the genocide which concerned Haman’s displeasure with Mordecai, the Jewish gatekeeper at the Susan palace (Esther 3).

According to this first part of the narrative, the Assyrian Emperor Ahasuerus or Xerxes promoted Haman to be his Prime Minister and demanded that all his subjects pay Haman homage by bowing before him. Mordecai refused to accord Haman this respect. The inquisitiveness of his fellow gatekeepers revealed the reason for his refusal: he was a Jew and would not give honor due his God to a mortal. C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch posit that this reasoning was insufficient since it was customary for Israelites to bow before kings (2 Sam 14:4; 18:28; 1 Kings 1:16).⁶ Hence, to appreciate Mordecai’s refusal we must acquaint ourselves with the prevailing Assyrian religious connotation of such political reverence: Assyrian kings were regarded as incarnated deities.⁷ In other words, bowing to a king or his representative was more than cultural and entailed religious rite or worship which a pious Jew of Mordecai’s stature would not condone. Indeed, even the

⁵ Phillips, “Reading Deconstructively,” 300.

⁶ See C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch (trans. James Martin), *Commentary on the Old Testament, 10 Volumes*. New Updated Edition (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996). Libronix Digital Library System.

⁷ Alexander the Great imitated this during his march to India.

Greeks would not conform because they considered it as a worship to a mortal.⁸

Consequently, the genocide became the ‘natural child’ of Haman’s vindictiveness at a whole race. In his pride, and upon learning that Mordecai was a Jew, he decided to exterminate the entire Jewish race. He, therefore, schemed to carry out his atrocity. Haman succeeded to get the king to seal his letters with his signet ring that were dispatched to the twenty-seven provinces to exterminate all Jews. Haman subtly got the king to agree to his wicked scheme: “If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business.” (Ester 3:9, NIV) Kiel and Delitzsch point out that

First, Haman casts suspicion on the Jews as a nation scattered abroad and dwelling apart, and therefore unsociable-as refractory, and therefore dangerous to the state; then he promises the king that their extermination will bring into the royal treasury a very considerable sum of money, viz., the property of the slaughtered. Ten thousand talents of silver, reckoned according to the Mosaic shekel, are £3,750,000, according to the civil shekel £1,875,000; see rem. on 1 Chron. 22:14, those who execute a work, builders in 2 Kings 12:12, are here and Esther 9:3 the king's men of business, who carry on the king's business with respect to receipts and disbursements, the royal financiers.⁹

Thus, through intrigue, Haman hoped to get the king to his side of the dastard business. However, it appears the king did not show interest in the booty from the bloody project. He was not induced to accept the booty from the confiscation of the victims. Rather, he awarded it to Haman and his accomplices (Ester 3:11).

According to the narrative, the day for the extermination was decided by casting lots (Ester 3:7), an ancient Near Eastern astrological custom. Kiel and Delitzsch write:

The words “from day to day, from month to the twelfth month,” must not be understood to say that lots were cast day by day and

⁸ See Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*.

⁹ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*.

month by month till the twelfth; but that in the first month lots were at once cast, one after the other, for all the days and months of the year, that a favorable day might be obtained. We do not know the manner in which this was done, the way of casting lots being unknown to us.¹⁰

In the second part of the narrative (Esther 4), we see the reversal of Haman's evil scheme. He becomes the victim rather than the destroyer, while Mordecai succeeds him as the Prime Minister. We can see a repeat of actions in this part of the narrative when like Haman did to the king (Esther 3:11), Mordecai appealed to the sensitivity of Queen Esther to save the Jews:

When Esther's words were reported to Mordecai, he sent back this answer: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4: 12-14, NIV).

The difference between Mordecai and Haman is that while Haman trusted in magic to determine when to exterminate the Jews, Mordecai appealed to the Jewish hope in their God to save them. It may seem that he does not explicitly mention God's name in his statement, nonetheless, he shared the Jewish common belief that their nation's safety was guaranteed by divine promise.¹¹ Perhaps, Mordecai meant that Esther had attained to royalty (to the dignity of queen) for a time like this, to use her position for the deliverance of her people. "In the turn thus given to the sentence it contains the most urgent injunction to Esther to use her high position for the preservation of her fellow-countrymen".¹² This injunction carries social and political implications in the Ghanaian or African context where political appointment is corrupted by ethnocentrism and nepotism. Maybe Mordecai appealed to the religious feelings of Esther to save the situation.

¹⁰ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*.

¹¹ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*.

¹² Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*.

Meanwhile, we have seen in African politics how such religious appeals have been exploited to win votes during an electioneering year. During the 2016 presidential elections in Ghana, both the then President John Dramani Mahama and his main opponent, now President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo Addo appealed to the Ghanaian religious sensitivity. While Mahama claimed that political power was given by God, Addo insisted that “The Battle is the Lord’s”. Assuring the nation of his desire for peaceful elections amidst religious clichés, President Mahama stated that “Politics is not a matter of life and death. It is a matter of who God chooses to lead depending on his will, so, any time I go on my knees and pray, all I ask God is: Thy will be done in my life.”¹³ This last statement is very significant. It posited Mahama as a God-fearing Christian who submitted his thoughts, actions, desires and intents to the will and purposes of God.

Eventually, as God would have it, the ‘enemies’ of the Jews became the victims. While our contemporary term ‘holocaust’ was unknown by our author, the plot contains implicit ideas of holocaust as “a paradigm for interpreting [the Jewish] struggle against state-organized terror in [Assyria], and a conceptual tool for extracting [readers’ religious] favor and [sympathy]”.¹⁴ In a sense, the story is “a moral template or an ethical paradigm for discussing human rights far away from where the holocaust occurred”.¹⁵ My decision to deconstruct the story is strengthened by Keil and Delitzsch’s comments below:

For though his mode of representing events, which does not even once lead him to mention the name of God, is not caused by the irreligiousness of the author, but rather by the circumstance, that he neither wished *to depict the persons whose acts he was narrating as more godly than they really were*, nor to place the whole occurrence--which manifests, indeed, the dealings of Divine Providence with the Jewish people, but not the dealings of Jahve with the nation of Israel---under a point of view alien to the actors and the event itself,

¹³ Ghanaweb, “Cut politicians down to size”—Mahama tells clergy,” accessed May 5, 2016, <http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/Cut-politicians-down-to-size-Mahama-tells-clergy-436300>

¹⁴Edward Kissi, “The Uses and Abuses of the Holocaust Paradigm in Ethiopia: 1980-1991,” *Bridges: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Theology, Philosophy, History, and Science* 10, no. 3-4 (2003): 236, 240.

¹⁵ Kissi, “The Uses and Abuses,” 236.

yet a historian acquainted with the theocratic ordinances and relations of Judah would scarcely have been capable of so entirely ignoring them.¹⁶

That the author did not seek to present flawless, godly and saintly actors to us allows us to shred the story of its traditional, spiritual, capital and uncover ethical implications. The story is cast at a time when most Jews lived in several provinces of the Assyrian Empire, but as remnants in their native land. Despite scholarly conjectures, it appears that the authorship of the book of Esther remains uncertain.

The omission [...] of all reference to Judah and Jerusalem, together with the absence not only of theocratic notions, but of a specially religious view of circumstances, favor the view that the author lived not in Palestine, but in the more northern provinces of the Persian realm, probably in Susa itself.¹⁷

Concerning the date of the book, Kiel and Delitzsch write that

...both the reference to the chronicles of the Medes and Persians (Esther 10:2), and the intimate acquaintance of the writer with Susa and the affairs of the Persian monarchy, decidedly point to the fact that the date of its composition preceded the destruction of the Persian empire, and may perhaps have been that of Artaxerxes I or Darius Nothus, about 400 B.C.¹⁸

The book is decidedly written to rationalize the origin of the Jewish feast of Purim or Lots. Nonetheless, going beyond a cursory observation, it is possible to glean several theological issues with political ramifications that call for our attention.

Our story is set in the city of Susa in the days of the Jewish exile in Assyria. This was during the reign of Emperor Ahasuerus who had divorced his queen/wife Vashti despotically due to her refusal to flaunt her beauty before his princes. According to the *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament*, Ahasuerus, a 'puppet king,' listened to the advice of many people with several of his chiefs pulling

¹⁶ See Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*.

¹⁷ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*.

¹⁸ Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*.

the strings.¹⁹ The assessment of the editors of the *Bible Knowledge Commentary/Old Testament* differs though. They argue that as was the custom of the ancient Near Eastern courts, the king consulted his wise men for advice concerning the refusal of Vashti.²⁰ Whichever way we look at it, he obliged to depose his wife Vashti as queen. From the narrative, we can gather that he later regretted his decision and was again coerced to look for a new queen that brought Esther to the palace in the year 479 BCE.²¹

This autocratic disgrace of Vashti brought the Jewess Esther, a cousin and adopted daughter of Mordecai, to the corridors of power as the queen of Assyria. The dethronement of Vashti raises serious moral questions which, unfortunately, are ignored or go undetected by religious readers.

First, was it right for a queen to be reduced to an entertainment object to please a drunk, senseless and irrational king? Second, does Ahasuerus' command not suggest his meanness and disrespect for others, especially women including his own queen? This is further heightened by the counsel of his officers to disgrace and depose Vashti. Again, the fact that even his queen and wives could suffer death for encroaching on his privacy summarizes his meanness. Third, is such display of chauvinism by the king and his officers a paradigm for all times? Obviously, women were abused in Ahasuerus' Assyria for domestic and political advantages. This sexist attitude is present with us today. Sexual exchange for political and occupational favors is rampant. It is often alleged that some African politicians and people in high places have harems of consorts to the chagrin of their legitimate wives. Meanwhile, for fear of forfeiting their financial security, they keep quiet over their husbands' sexual indiscipline. Such women are very much aware that any adamant objection to their husband's filthy behavior will mean their marginalization since these insensitive men are poised to exchange their unwilling wives for equally insensitive base women.

¹⁹ Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines*.

²⁰ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary/New Testament* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1989). Libronix Digital Library System.

²¹ Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines*.

Fourth, is it proper for religious persons to deceive for a position as Mordecai coerced Esther to do? We see in his behavior the characteristic of irresponsible African parents and relatives whose desire for overnight affluence makes them trade their daughters and sisters into marriage against the will of the women. As discussed above the patriarchal ‘otherness’ of the text disregards the rights of Vashti and Esther.

We agree with African feminists that gender issues have deprived women of their true values and potentials. Hence, even in the marriage relationship they are reduced often to the roles of mothers and wives, and sex objects.²² We must not ignore these ‘noises of women’ as some untenable view from some females disgruntled about the status quo. Such attitudes mainly succeed to define women as villains rather than heroines in the human development and salvation.²³ Often, women’s identity is mortgaged for the pleasure of their male colleagues and relatives. Thus, we have still not found it unfit to define a wife by her husband’s name although culturally and biblically it has no basis.

Religiosity and Political Conflict

The necessitation of the ‘purim’ by Haman is obliterated by a superficial reading of the narrative which presents him as a Gentile villain incensed with unjustifiable hatred for the Jews. Meanwhile, a deeper reading will reveal that like many conflicts there was a deeper root, in this case a religio-cultural supremacy one. The narrator plots the narrative in a manner that without critical observation makes it easy to settle for the surface meaning.

As argued above, at the surface, Mordecai’s refusal to honor Haman is on religious grounds. However, I suggest a more critical reading, which reveals Mordecai as a religious person whose attitudes and actions disconcerted the political system. As such, his religiosity was interpreted as a sneer at Haman’s promotion to the high office of a

²² Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “Feminism: A Pre-Condition for a Christian Anthropology,” *African Theological Journal* 11, no. 3 (1982): 193-208.

²³ Joseph Quayesi-Amakye, “Noises from the ‘Mistaken’ Womb-Man,” *E-journal of Religious and Theological Studies*, 2 (2016): 107-133.

Prime Minister. Per the king's edict, both great and small were to honor Haman by bowing before him. It is easy for us to commend Mordecai's religious frenzy as religiously correct. Nevertheless, he could not be more politically correct than religiously correct. In the first place, his encouragement to Esther to contest for the palace queries his Jewish religiosity. We may say that it was God's way of saving the Jews in Susa from the ruthlessness of Haman. But as the text reveals, the clash with Haman was necessitated by Mordecai's objection to honor Haman.

According to the Jewish tradition, it was irreligious for a Jew to marry a Gentile (see Exod. 34:12-16; Deut. 7:3; Josh 23:12; Judg. 3:6; Neh. 10:29-30). The editors of the *Bible Knowledge Commentary/Old Testament* are right to point out that

By Law Esther was not to marry a pagan (Deut. 7:1-4) or have sexual relations with a man who was not her husband (Exod. 20:14), and yet this was the purpose of her being included in the harem. Esther could be contrasted with Daniel who refused to eat the things from the king's table (Dan. 1:5) because the food would include items considered unclean by the Jewish Law. Apparently, Esther had no qualms about the food she ate (Esther 2:9). She certainly did not set herself apart as Daniel had done.²⁴

Indeed, the court historians of the kingdoms of Samaria and Judah evaluated the successes and failures of the Hebrew kings in terms of political marriage conveniences. Again, the method of queenly ascension Esther participated in would be sneered by the prophets and theologians of Israel. Obviously, Mordecai's 'innocent' effort to get Esther to queenly status tilted unconsciously toward a situational ethic of the end justifies the means (see Esther 1:13-22). He encouraged Esther to 'enter the contest' but not to disclose her Jewishness: "This meant that Esther probably had to eat unclean foods and break some of the OT laws; otherwise she could not have held her own among her Gentile competitors."²⁵ So it is tempting to accuse Mordecai of having no religious authority, conscience and right to despise Haman in the name of loyalty to the God of Israel. As we may be aware, it was due

²⁴ Walvoord and Zuck, *Bible Knowledge Commentary*.

²⁵ Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines*.

to Israel's stubbornness that Yahweh "sold them out" into exile (see 2 Chron. 36:15-21; Jer. 25:1-14; Neh. 9). The exile was intended to form a meeker, humbler and respectful nation out of the Jews to showcase them as God's peculiar people who exuded his love and concern for all peoples.

It is important for religious people to understand that religion is not parochial, myopic, and self-centered. Rather, it is a wheel for human respect, conviviality, love, care, goodness and kindness. That religious bigotry has often sparked off troubles in the world is a fact of life.²⁶ Whenever religious people choose a narrow understanding of their religions they create room for self-inflicted evil and suffering. Sometimes, we fail to draw a line between religious obligations and demands and our political and civic responsibilities. How far can the Christian go in search for religious liberty in a state? Must the Christian disobey political authorities and laws because of any religious demands and convictions? This is what we see in Haman's reaction to Mordecai's disrespect to his person and position. Political figures are proud and protective of their positions and so religio-cultural prejudice toward them can naturally breed ungracious reaction from them. It is, therefore, important to examine our religions to identify those aspects and imperatives that require us to submit to all authorities. We must be aware that God is not necessarily opposed to authority, political or otherwise. He only opposes human authorities that usurp his right over his creation. In fact, he frustrates those who oppose legitimate authorities. Indeed, the Bible is replete of so-called despotic political powers that God used to achieve his purposes. Hence, the Christian must seek to represent God before political leadership and civil authorities as the salt and light in a dark world.

It is important also to state that in many cases people do not choose their religion and culture. They are born into them. This is why we talk about religious conversions which involve determinate effort to get others to adopt our religion. It may take diverse approaches such

²⁶ This is why religious/interfaith dialogue is critical for human conviviality. See Hendrik M. Vroom, *A Spectrum of Worldviews: An Introduction to Philosophy of Religion in a Pluralistic World* (Amsterdam - New York: Editions Rodopi, 2006); Gerard Forde, *A Journey Together Muslims and Christians in Ireland: building mutual respect, understanding and cooperation. A Resource for Christian Muslim Dialogue* (Wilton, Cork: Cois Tine, 2013).

as persuasive and non-violent conversations or aggressive and military compulsion. The Christian approach has been the former than the latter.

It may be argued that no religion or culture is wholly evil; they contain some goodness in them. This is aptly captured by Paul when he states that God has not left himself without a witness in the nations of the world (cf. Acts 17:24-28). Accordingly, Christian theologians talk about primal cultures and religions as *preparatio evangelica* for the good news of Christ. It must be stated, however, that Christian missions imply the vulnerability of every culture and religion for cleansing by the Gospel of Christ. This is the essence of Christian evangelization which must take account of the insipient goodness in receptor cultures as effective missiological conduits while at the same time recognize the supremacy of the Gospel to purify the rot in them.

Conclusion

The Mordecai/Haman narrative offers us insight into how religious people can trivialize political actors and power. It shows how we can be oblivious to reality amidst misplaced religiosity. The misuse of religious autonomy can result in complacency, pomposity and disrespect for others. Traditionally, the story has been read uncritically and so the social, political and ethical implications have not been applied for holistic benefit of the people of God. It is possible that some Christians have often taken cover under it for religious intolerance towards people of other faiths. However, if there is any lesson to learn from globalization then it is that of tolerance, respect and accommodation of others. Our globe has aged beyond normalizing the abuse of minorities, racial, ethnic, sexual and religious otherness. Much of the pains in our world today can be prevented if we show a little respect to others and be altruistic.

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