Esther: Responses to Questions

*How does Esther fit in the Old Testament? God’s name is never mentioned, there were clear violations of moral action and yet it is included in the story of God’s people. How does Esther impact the story of the people of Yahweh?*

*If there is no mention of God in this book, is this a book to simply recount the history of the Jews’ deliverance? Or is there something that we (as modern readers) should or can learn from the book of Esther about God?*

*What does this tell us about the character and ways of God in our lives today seeing as though the book does not speak once the name of God?*

*Was this story written under situations where Yahweh’s name was not to be mentioned, especially since Mordecai and Esther had to hide their Jewish identity?*

*What role do you think Esther should play in our teaching, preaching, and understanding of Israel? What about in our lives as Christians today?*

*Why are there the long and the short versions of Esther?*

\*\*The non-mention of God in the story reflects the way events were experienced—there was no special intervention of God. There were just coincidences and the human accepting of responsibility for what happens. It’s not that the story’s are simply avoiding the name of Yahweh—it could have used the ordinary word for “God,” like other parts of the OT. It hardly implies that the author didn’t believe in God’s involvement; it’s just that this involvement is behind the scenes. So what it reminds us to do is see God behind the scenes. As regards violations of moral action, God’s people do do the wrong thing sometimes, and both OT and NT tell it like it is. So the story fits in with the rest of the story of God’s people in that often God’s activity is behind the scenes, and often God’s people do the wrong thing and God works via them nevertheless. But evidently some people felt uncomfortable about the non-mention of God, so they produced the long version with lots of mention of God. It’s then interesting that the first version is the one in the Bible “proper.”

*If the history of Esther is unknown and this book is thought to be more of a moral story than a historical document, why was it chosen to be included in the canon?*

\*\* (a) We don’t know anything about how documents came to be included in the canon.

(b) But we know that things didn’t get into the canon because they were historical. The books in the canon were books with a message.

(c) To call it a moral story, then, is at least too narrow. It’s a book with a message, a theological story.

*Are the Jews in the Diaspora still considered to be in exile at this time despite being permitted to return to Jerusalem?*

\*\*Really exile and dispersion are different. Because they could go back, they are not longer in exile (in a foreign country involuntarily) but in dispersion.

*Is there no record or legitimacy to a historical Esther?*

*On what basis can we decide whether it is basically history or fiction?*

*I'm interested in the concept of a fictional novella within the canon of scripture. This is a concept that is completely new to me.*

\*\*There’s no reference to Esther outside this book, but that’s true of most of the people and events in the Bible, so it doesn’t prove anything in itself. To me its humor, exaggeration, and so on suggest it’s pretty fictionalized, but it may quite likely start off from something that actually happened. Yes, I think many people have been taught to assume that all the Bible stories are things that happened, but it wouldn’t be surprising if God inspired some fictional stories. See #.

*Why exactly did Queen Vashti refuse to appear before the King?*

\*\*It doesn’t quite say, though it hints that she doesn’t wish to be shown off. The Talmud says she was expected to appear naked, but it’s just drawing an inference from the fact that she is to be wearing a crown (it infers “and nothing else”).

*I’m curious about the roles in society that Judahites had when they were in the minority. Were they the bedrock of society’s labor? Were they utterly marginalized (like perhaps a heroin-addicted prostitute might be today)?*

\*\*I think they’d be like Jews today—they would be a cross-section of well-off and successful and ordinary, but they would be marginalized in the sense of being regarded as weird and different.

*How has the emergence of the feminine voice in biblical criticism influenced current understandings of the story of Esther?*

*What understandings and vision of womanhood appear in the story?*

*Can Vashti be seen in a favorable light.?*

*How far would Vashti and Esther's actions be deemed appropriate according to what was considered 'proper' conduct for women of that stature at the time? Would it have been considered unthinkable for a Queen to reject her husband's demands regardless of the request?*

\*\*Vashti and Esther model two visions: there is Vashti who won’t be pushed around and Esther who is willing to work the system. In the context of the Persian court, the Persian leaders evidently disapproved of Vashti’s action. But I don’t see any indication that either is disapproved in the story. God works through the actions of both.

*Is it not completely dishonoring to Esther to have her be a virgin sent in to seek the sexual acceptance of the king? Is this story more about the Jewish people remaining a distinct community and unique people while in exile than it is about giving honor to God?*

\*\*Yes, it is completely dishonoring, though oddly the story also brings Esther great honor as the means by which her people are delivered. It’s not so much about remaining distinct and unique as remaining in existence at all—that is, it is her action that leads to their not being annihilated. The presupposition of the book in the context of scripture is that the survival of the Jewish people is linked to God’s honor.

*Is this book important for the Jewish people today?*

\*\*It’s become much more important in light of the Holocaust. See the reference to Michael Fox in #.

*I do not understand why the king would follow through with the request to destroy all the Jews. While he relinquishes because of Esther’s plea, it does not make much sense to me that he is swayed one way by Haman and then easily swayed in the polar direction by Esther.*

\*\*I imagine that’s part of the point. The king is stupid. Compare the stories in Daniel.

*While the reading primarily addresses the post-modern perspective on the book of Esther, how would the pre-modern and modern readings interpret the text?*

\*\*I think the book was pretty much ignored by the church fathers and the reformers. Luther is often quoted as having said,“I am so great an enemy to the second book of Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities,” but I think it may be a misquote and that he was referring to Esdras in the Apocrypha. Modern readings were concerned to investigate whether it is historical or to prove that it is historical.

*How was this story understood by its earliest listeners/readers. I am not sure how I am supposed to react to it today. Were they entertained, shocked, tearful, laughing… a combination? What is the impact of the humor on so serious a story?*

\*\*We have no information on how it was understood by those earliest listeners/readers. I wouldn’t be surprised if there were all those reactions. Many serious stories use humor as a way of making it easier to get engaged with the serious questions they raise (the movie *Dogma* is my favorite example).

*The story seems to showcase God’s anger as being devoid of mercy. Divine wrath in wanting to do away with the Amalekites both during King Saul’s time and during Mordecai’s time seems to lack a restorative quality to it.*

Yes, while the Bible often talks of justice as restorative, sometimes it speaks of justice as simply punitive. Sending people to hell is the great example of the latter. So people are given lots of chance to avoid getting slaughtered, but in the story they let themselves in for it.

*Can you comment on the destruction of the Jews’ enemies at the end of the story?*

*Was it unnecessary brutality because the Jews now had power or was it really an act of self-defense to defend themselves against aggressors? Or am I asking the wrong question?*

*What is the significance of oppressed into oppressor? It seems that peace, rather than bloody vengeance, would be a better ending.*

*I was very surprised the number of the killed by Jews after changing the king’s command. In this way, is the story too nationalistic? Did God want Jews to punish their enemies by killing by their power?*

*I find it odd that the Jewish people needed permission to defend themselves. What does that mean? As if they would just accept murder and genocide freely? What did it mean when an edict was signed ordering the Jews’ destruction? Does that mean that royal authorities in the different areas were ordered to kill them, either on sight or to hunt them down? If this was case, why didn't Esther just ask for that edict to be revoked? Just call of the imposing forces? Instead she asked permission for the Jewish people to defend themselves. Seems strange.*

*Why did Esther want to kill Haman's family, even though it was deserved.*

*I think it’s odd that the Jews are given authority to kill anyone they want for a day. How is that morally okay?*

*Probably the most disturbing passage for me in Esther was 9:5 where the Jews killed whoever hated them. Perhaps, these people intensely hated them and could potentially become the next Haman and the Jews attacked preemptively.*

*Is there a significance in the mention of not taking plunder in the killing spree at the end of the story?*

\*\*In # I mention one Jewish approach to the story, though I am not sure I am persuaded by it. It is that the slaughter expresses the final irony in the book—that the Jews are morally no better than their enemies. Its function is therefore to hold up a mirror to the readers. But I think more likely (or maybe as well) the place to start is the way the story pictures the Jews’ deliverance as both like and unlike the exodus. At the exodus the Israelites plundered the Egyptians but didn’t kill them; here they do kill but they don’t plunder (which incidentally links with the idea that war for self-defense might be okay but war for the sake of gain is not). The motif also relates to the way God looked after the defense of Israel at the exodus in an active, interventionist way; more usually, God works via human beings accepting responsibility for their destiny. So there, God kills their attackers and thereby both defends them and sees that justice I done; here, they do so (Esther does not ask for the sons to be killed—they are already dead; she asks for their bodies to be impaled, which would make it clear that they have got what they deserved). Note that they are not attacking anybody, only acting in self-defense (and note that “hate” in the Bible, like love, is not just an emotion but an action—the most common word for “enemy” in Hebrew is “hater”). Another motif in the story comes out in the stupidity of the people who attack the Jews when the authorities have given them the right to fight back, and in the huge numbers of people who do attack and get themselves killed. Yes, peace would make for a nicer ending; peacefulness has usually been the Jewish attitude and Jews have fought many less wars than Christians. But in real life Jews have usually been on the receiving end of attack, and the story is a kind of fantasy dream of the possibility that the imperial power might give them the chance to defend themselves instead of sending them to the gas chamber.