

Esther Among Her Peers: Intertextuality and Religion in the Book of Esther

Abstract

Many have written about religion in Esther and intertextuality in Esther, but few, if any, have connected these two topics, except in passing comments. This study suggests that there is important overlap in these two seemingly-unrelated areas. The most significant examples of intertextuality are systematically compiled, showing that Esther draws from all three parts of the Hebrew Canon and interacts with several key canonical themes. The close reading of these distinct and multidimensional interactions reveals that the author intended his or her work to be read in a canonical context and as a religious text, regardless of the motivations of his or her characters.

Esther fits well into the Old Testament Canon. This might seem like an odd starting point, since, God is not mentioned anywhere in the text of Esther, either by his name Yahweh, the more generic “Elohim,” or any of the other “El” variants. Jerusalem and the temple are never mentioned, nor are the Law or covenant, love or forgiveness. No one prays, prophesies, has a vision, or performs a miracle. On this basis, K. Jobes says, “If one went through the text and replaced every occurrence of the word ‘Jews’ with the name of some other ethnic group, there would be no reason to think the story had anything at all to do with the Bible.”¹ Further, in reception history, interpreters have frequently added religious elements and moralized the characters, suggesting a felt need to add religion to an otherwise “irreligious” story.² Whether or not the characters in the narrative of Esther are exemplars of morality, the story itself is written in such a way as to be read in the context of the Old Testament canon and, thus, religiously.

In addition to the lack of overt religion, the “morality” of the heroes also may call into question the religiousness of the story. There is little-to-no evidence from the narrative to suggest

¹ K.H. Jobes, *Esther* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 19.

² For a brief history of interpretation, see Nathan Ward, *God Unseen: A Theological Introduction to Esther* (Chillicothe, OH: DeWard Publishing, 2016), 11–26.

the characters see themselves as devotees of Yahweh. Indeed, a reading that does not presume the best of them might suggest Esther and Mordecai have been fully assimilated into Persian culture. J.A. Dunne, for example, argues the characters in Esther are completely secular.³ Further, he agrees with M.J. Klaassen that the Purim festival of drunkenness, parallel to the Persian feasting of Esther 1, “shows the extent to which the Jews have become Persian.”⁴

There is a natural tendency to view beloved Bible characters in the best possible light, but Dunne and others pose another interpretive option. For example, Esther and Mordecai are Jews who chose not to return to the Promised Land.⁵ Esther shows no concern for dietary laws when brought into the king’s court, and she conceals her Jewish identity during the search for a queen (and continues to do so as queen).⁶ She then loses her virginity in the bed of an uncircumcised pagan king to whom she is not married, when Vashti has already demonstrated that it is possible to say “no” to this monarch (Est 1). She only risks her life by going to the king after Mordecai points out that she will not escape harm if she refuses to act. Finally, when she finds out the Jews have killed 500 people in Susa, she asks that the massacre be permitted for yet another day and the bodies of Haman’s ten sons be impaled on the city gate.

Mordecai can also be seen in a less-than-positive light. He is the one who insists Esther conceal her Jewish identity, even though it would mean compromising whatever faith she has and violating the Law. His refusal to pay homage to Haman is what jeopardizes the Jewish

³ J.A. Dunne, *Esther and Her Elusive God: How a Secular Story Functions as Scripture* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 19. Dunne points to this as evidence of the assimilation that took place during the exile, contrasting it with Jeremiah 51:50 and Psalm 137:5–6. While Esther’s apparent indifference to Jerusalem is a striking contrast with Nehemiah (Neh 1), the reader must be careful not to indict all Diaspora Jews of all time as secular and assimilated or to presume that we have full insight into their mindset from this narrative alone.

⁶ I. Duguid, “But Did They Live Happily Ever After? The Eschatology of the Book of Esther” *WTJ* 68 (2006): 89 points out she lived such an assimilated life that even her closest companions were unaware of her Jewishness, which likely meant ignoring essentially all of the Law.

people and his motivation is unknown—that early interpreters added the element of idolatry shows their concern to clarify what was left vague in the text.⁷ Some interpreters have even suggested his statement that Esther would not escape death is a thinly-veiled threat.⁸

The text reveals little about the motives and thoughts of Esther and Mordecai. The narrator does not say what Esther thought about being taken into the king’s harem or why Mordecai refused to bow to Haman. It neither exonerates nor condemns Esther and Mordecai. Nor does it evaluate their behavior in the eyes of God.⁹ As a result, the reader is left to decide whether to view Esther and Mordecai with rose-tinted lenses or to presume the worst. The truth, as usual, is likely somewhere in the middle. Again, this raises the question of the religiousness of the book: if the heroes of the story are not models of faith, how religious a story can it be?

As a result of such interpretive issues and problematic questions, many have taken a strong position against Esther. For example, J. Calvin never preached from Esther and did not include it among his commentaries.¹⁰ R. Pfeiffer asserts that “secular nationalism” is the book’s guiding light and that the author considered religion a garment to be lightly discarded whenever it hindered worldly aims.¹¹ C.H. Cornhill calls it “an entirely profane story in a purely worldly sense for the sake of satisfying worldly pleasures and instincts,”¹² and E. Bertheau says, “It

⁷ A variety of motives have been suggested for Mordecai’s refusal to bow. In addition to Haman expecting worship (or some other idolatrous interpretation), it has been suggested Mordecai was disgruntled about being passed over for the promotion Haman received or that Israelite-Amalekite conflict was the basis for the refusal. The only explanation the text gives is Mordecai’s Jewish identity (3:4). This is one of the key points where the narrator refuses entry into Mordecai’s psyche. See M.V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 191–195.

⁸ See R.W. Pierce, “The Politics of Esther and Mordecai,” *BBR* 2 (1992): 87, who argues Mordecai is prepared to kill Esther himself if she does not try to save her people.

⁹ Jobes, *Esther*, 20.

¹⁰ Although Calvin wrote commentaries prolifically, he only covered 24 of the 39 Old Testament books. Notably, he did not write on most of the historical books, including all three post-exilic histories. It is, thus, hard to know whether he intentionally excluded Esther from his writings or just never got to it.

¹¹ R.H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1948), 742–743.

¹² C.H. Cornhill, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Leipzig, 1891), 153, qtd. in Morris, 124.

stands further from the spirit of the Old Testament revelation and the Gospel than any other book in the Old Testament.”¹³

Others are even more adamant. M. Luther is well known for expressing his hostility against Esther, wishing even that it did not exist, as it “Judaize[s] too greatly and [has] much pagan rubbish.”¹⁴ S. Sandmel echoes the sentiment: “I should not be grieved if the book of Esther were somehow dropped out of Scripture.”¹⁵ Pfeiffer goes on to say, “Such a secular book hardly deserves a place in the canon of Sacred Scriptures.”¹⁶ O. Eissfeldt adds, “Christianity... has neither occasion nor justification for holding onto it,”¹⁷ and A.E. Morris calls it “a standing embarrassment to Christian expositors.”¹⁸ B. Anderson says, “One gains the impression that the author had an indifferent, if not cynical, attitude toward the Jewish religion. Not least of all, the book is inspired by a fierce nationalism and an unblushing vindictiveness which stand in glaring contradiction to the Sermon on the Mount. Surely this book is of the earth,”¹⁹ and goes on to say it unveils the dark passions of the human heart—such as envy, hatred, fear, anger, vindictiveness, and pride—which are then blended into an intense nationalism, concluding, “A more human book has never been written.”²⁰

Morris, after celebrating “emancipation from the tyranny of verbal inspiration” in regard to Esther says, “As history it would be a serious blot upon the character of the Jews; as an

¹³ Qtd. in B.W. Anderson, “The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible,” *Journal of Religion* 30 (1950): 34.

¹⁴ M. Luther, *Table Talk*, 22.2080.

¹⁵ S. Sandmel, *The Enjoyment of Scripture* (New York: Oxford, 1972), 44.

¹⁶ Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, 743.

¹⁷ O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 511–512.

¹⁸ A.E. Morris, “The Purpose of the Book of Esther,” *Expository Times* 42 (1930–31): 128.

¹⁹ Anderson, “Esther in the Christian Bible,” 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

historical romance it condemns only those who delight in its repellent features.”²¹ Cornhill concludes, “Valuable as this book is to us as a document for the history of religion, in receiving it into the collection of sacred writings the framers of the canon committed a serious blunder.”²² M.V. Fox says, “The lack of reference to God may show that [the author] did not intend his book to be regarded as sacred scripture.”²³ Finally, according to Anderson, “If a Christian minister is faithful to the context, he will not take his text from Esther; and, if the leader of a church-school class shows any Christian discernment, he will not waste time trying to show that the heroes of the book are models of character, integrity, and piety.”²⁴

In addition to this modern distaste for Esther, its canonicity was debated for centuries. Among Jews, there seems to have been some hesitance to canonize a book “whose apparently vindictive spirit might be misunderstood by the Gentiles, and which instituted a festival for which they found no explicit sanction in the Law.”²⁵ Even after it was acknowledged as canonical, discussion about its inspiration continued and its absence at Qumran—the only Old Testament book not found there—raises the question of how early Jews viewed it.

Christians also debated its canonicity. Esther was absent from the list of Bishop Melito of Sardis (AD 170).²⁶ Uncertainty about it is reflected in Christian catalogues as late as the fourth

²¹ Morris, “Purpose of Esther,” 124. B.W. Jones, “Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther,” *CBQ* 30 no. 2 (1977): 171–181 takes these approaches to task. After carefully working through various objections, he concludes, “Those who are offended by the blood and by the so-called Jewish nationalism are either literalists or are acting as if they were. Even when they recognize that the story is fiction, they treat it more seriously than it was intended. Pity the theologians who were offended because they could not laugh” (180–181).

²² Morris, “Purpose of Esther,” 124.

²³ M.V. Fox, “The Religion of the Book of Esther,” *Judaism* 39, no 2 (1990): 137.

²⁴ Anderson, “Esther in the Christian Bible,” 42.

²⁵ Anderson, “Esther in the Christian Bible,” 32.

²⁶ Eusebius, *Church History*, 4.26.13–14.

century as there was a strong tendency, especially among churches in the West, to view the book with suspicion.²⁷ Indeed, it is neither quoted nor even alluded to in the New Testament.²⁸

But does Esther itself give any indications that it should be considered a religious work? The absence of everything associated with Israelite religion certainly seems to suggest it does not. Fox says, “If, then, we seek to interpret the author’s intention, regarding that as the source and determinant of its primary (though not sole) meaning, we must try to read the book as an independent unit, unconstrained by the canonical contexts that it was later to enter.”²⁹ This, however, begs the very question we are seeking to answer. While it is true that a later placing of the book in a canonical context should not be determinative, I will argue that it becomes apparent that the worldview of the author of Esther is fully congruent with the work’s canonical location. This is most clear in a series of echoes of Old Testament narratives that are interspersed throughout Esther and show it to be firmly within a canonical and religious context.

Intertextuality as a Clue to Esther’s Religion

It has frequently been noted that the book of Esther alludes to other Old Testament narratives, though there has been debate as to which narrative it draws from. G. Gerleman suggests Esther should be read in the light of Exodus—taking clues from the foreign court, threat of death, deliverance, triumph, and establishment of a feast—and that Mordecai and Esther correspond to Moses and Aaron.³⁰ Others see a stronger connection with the Joseph Cycle—taking clues from

²⁷ Anderson, “Esther in the Christian Bible,” 33.

²⁸ L.A. Brighton, “The Book of Esther: Textual and Canonical Considerations,” *Concordia Journal* 13, no. 3 (1987): 204 says, “As far as the New Testament is concerned, Esther does not exist.”

²⁹ Fox, “The Religion of the Book of Esther,” 137.

³⁰ See R.E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther*. The Forms of Old Testament Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 154. D.J.A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 267 concludes Gerleman’s claim is “too exclusive.”

the foreign court, advancement from lowly status to high position, deliverance of people, and similar verbiage in certain passages.³¹ J.A. Loader splits the difference, arguing it should be read as a new exodus story and as a new Joseph story.³²

The primary problem with these approaches is that they miss the multiplicity of echoes from a variety of Hebrew Bible contexts found throughout the Esther narrative. Allusions from all three sections of the Hebrew Canon set the story of Esther in a canonical context.³³ While commentators often mention these echoes in passing, I am not aware of any who have undertaken a systematic compilation for the purpose of arguing the author intends his narrative to be understood within a religious framework.³⁴ The remainder of this article seeks to make such connections, showing that, regardless of whether the characters themselves are paragons of virtue or the text explicitly mentions God or religious matters, the context in which the author intended his story to be read was a religious one.³⁵

³¹ S. Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure*, SBL Dissertation Series 44 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 142, for example, concludes, “[T]he book of Esther seems dependent upon the story of Joseph, although the precise nature of, and reasons for, this dependence remain unclear.”

³² J.A. Loader, “Esther as a Novel with Different Levels of Meaning,” *ZAW* 90 no. 3 (1978): 421.

³³ It should be noted that this canonical context does not necessitate canonical inclusion. Esther’s inclusion in the canon is a different matter entirely, which is outside the scope of this article.

³⁴ The closest thing I have found to this are brief sections in the introductions of T.S. Laniak, “Esther,” *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 172–174, and D.G. Firth, *The Message of Esther: God Present But Unseen*, (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2010), 33–35. The issue of authorial intent is, admittedly, a hotly debated issue. Given time, culture, and language differences (among other things), it can be difficult to determine an author’s intent. Even so, some authors leave sufficient clues to imply what he or she intended. This article will argue this is the case with Esther’s author and his or her religious views. For the sake of simplicity, the remainder of this article will refer to the author of Esther with the masculine pronoun.

³⁵ The following does not take into account every proposed connection, but only those which I feel are the strongest. For example, J. Grossman, “‘Dynamic Analogies’ in the book of Esther,” *VT* 59 (2009): 394–414, offers possible connections to the Jacob/Esau story, the Ahab/Jezebel/Naboth story, the greatness of Joshua, and even the building and inauguration of the temple. I find these less convincing and, ultimately, potentially damaging to the strength of the cumulative case. (See S. Sandmel, “Parallelomania,” *JBL* 81 [1962]: 1–13).

A. *Esther and Genesis*

1. Mordecai and Joseph (Est 3:2–5; Gen 39:6b–10)

After alerting King Ahasuerus to a plot against his life, Mordecai is passed over for a promotion that is instead given to Haman (Est 2:19–3:1). Upon his appointment, the King issues a decree that everyone bow to Haman, a law Mordecai refuses to honor (Est 3:2).³⁶ Joseph, a slave in Egypt, has been appointed to a significant position within Potiphar’s house when the mistress of the house begins to desire him (Gen 39:7). Both Mordecai and Joseph are appealed to “day by day” (yôm wāyôm), but “would not listen” (w^elō-šāma’) (Gen 39:10; Est 3:4). As a result, both situations result in angry, false accusations that place a previously-trusted “Jewish” exile in danger of death (Gen 39:13–18; Est 3:8–9). Potiphar’s wife lied that Joseph tried to rape her. Haman engaged in a series of truths, half-truths, and outright lies to accomplish his purpose of convincing Ahasuerus to sign off on his edict. However, against all odds, both of these endangered Jews become agents of Jewish salvation and are promoted to higher positions, made second only to the king.³⁷ Such a strong resonance with the Joseph story, particularly in the motifs of danger and elevation, could indicate God’s providential actions in the story of Esther.

³⁶ Some have sought to connect this scene to the story in Daniel 3 (see C. Bechtel, *Esther*, Interpretation [Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002], 37 and I. Duguid, *Esther and Ruth* [Phillippsburg: P&R Publishing, 2005], 34–35 for authors who reflect this perspective) as an explanation of why Mordecai did not bow, viz. he would only bow to God. Although some argue that Haman would have expected a worshipful bow (e.g., Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993], 327: “Persians saw it as an act of reverence that bordered on recognizing the official as divine”; cf. C.F. Keil, “Esther,” *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001], 213–214, who makes the case from Herodotus). Mordecai likely would have had to show such deference to the king on multiple occasions in order to have attained his current position (cf. F.B. Huey, “Esther,” *1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988], 812) and many commentators point to Esther’s later bow before the king in chapter 8 (e.g., Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, 33).

³⁷ Jon Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 68.

2. Haman and Joseph (Est 6:6–10; Gen 41:39–45)

The honors bestowed upon Joseph at his ascension to the position of grand vizier are a contrasting echo with Haman’s private desires for his own glory.³⁸ At each point of his request, Haman seeks more than the usual level of honor. Whereas Joseph receives a linen garment and gold necklace (Gen 41:42), Haman seeks a garment the king himself had worn (Est 6:8). Joseph rides in the chariot of the second in command (Gen 41:43); Haman wants to ride on the king’s own steed, dressed in royal array (Est 6:8). A simple call of “bow the knee” precedes Joseph as he is honored by the people (Gen 41:43); Haman wants it declared that the king himself honors him (Est 6:9).³⁹ T.S. Laniak concludes that Haman wants to be honored *like* a king *by* the king; he has royal ambitions that are at the expense of true loyalty to the king: “In contrast, Mordecai and Joseph ... are presented as paragons of loyalty to their sovereigns.”⁴⁰ This scene reveals something about Haman’s character: it is not that his great ambition is to play dress-up, but that he desires to be king.⁴¹ As C. Bechtel points out, with Ahasuerus’ signet ring, adding the king’s clothes and horse “would represent a virtual clean sweep. The only ‘thing’ Haman would lack would be the queen.”⁴²

³⁸ The difference between Egyptian and Persian culture, not to mention the amount of time that has passed between Joseph and Esther, may account for some of the contrast. On the other hand, some things would have been seen as overreaching in any cultural context of any era (e.g., wearing the king’s clothes and riding the king’s horse).

³⁹ Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 308. Cf. Laniak, “Esther,” 241.

⁴⁰ Laniak, “Esther,” 242.

⁴¹ Laniak (ibid.) also says that he is likely “seeking royal validation for succession to the throne.”

⁴² Bechtel, *Esther*, 59. Perhaps Ahasuerus is not so daft as to miss the significance of Haman’s request. It may be his reaction to Haman falling on Esther’s couch in 7:7–9 is prompted by this very conversation—either because he mistook it for sexual assault to lay claim to the throne or because he saw it as a convenient excuse to execute a person with known royal aspirations.

Some have also suggested Ahasuerus’ jealousy may have been aroused by Haman repeatedly being invited to the banquets. J.G. McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 177 points out that although the first dinner is “for the king” (5:4), the second is “for the king and Haman” (5:8): “There is just a hint here that Esther’s purpose is to sow a resentment in the king’s mind and have him think that this Haman was staking too big a claim both in the kingdom and in his wife’s esteem” (cf. Ze’ev Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998], 151).

3. Other Connections

In addition to these specific scenes, there are many other shared phrases and motifs with the Joseph story.⁴³ These include matters such as the motif of finding “favor” (ḥēn) in the eyes of a human master (Est 2:8–20; Gen 39:4); enemies who sit down to eat or drink when the hero is dispensed with (Est 3:15; Gen 37:25); the “anger” (qāṣaḥ) of the king regarding his two ministers’ sins, followed by “hanging” (tālāh), and indifference to the loyal “Jew” who is forgotten until a sleepless night (Est 2:21–23; Gen 40:1, 19, 22–23); ritual mourning preceding the surprise of new life (Est 4:1–3; Gen 37:34); a promotion to grand vizier along with the gift of a signet ring to the loyal Jew and a recognition parade (Est 6:8–11; Gen 41:37–43); “pleading” (ḥānan) for one’s life (Est 8:3; Gen 42:21); and prosperity for the Gentiles as well as the Jews (Est 10:1–3; Gen 47:13–26).

B. Esther and Exodus

1. Esther and Moses (Est 4–5; Exod 1–15)

A full summation of the connections between Esther and Moses is beyond the purview of this subsection. In brief, both Moses and Esther received the privilege of nobility without being born into it (Exod 2:10; Est 2:5–7, 16–17). Both gave up the comfort of their unusual position to identify with their people rather than their peers by interceding with the king (Exod 5.1–5; Est 5:1–7). Both are hesitant: Esther considers remaining silent and Moses argues to God that he cannot speak eloquently (Exod 3.11, 13; 4.1, 10; Est 4:10–14). Both have a life-threatening encounter (Exod 10.28; Est 4:11, 16). The success of each is connected with finding “favor” (ḥēn) (Exod; 3.21; 11.3; 12.36; Est 5:2). Both risk this favored status by returning to the court of

⁴³ The following is taken from Laniak, “Esther,” 172–173.

the Gentile king to seek the deliverance of their people (Exod 8.20; 9.1; et al.; Est 7:3–4). Finally, as seen below, both stories connect to Passover.⁴⁴

2. Purim and Passover (Est 3:7, 12; 4:1, 12; Exod 12:1–28; cf. Lev 23:4–8)

One of the purposes of Esther is to provide the etiology of Purim, the one Jewish feast not mentioned in the Law of Moses. The Exodus connections alone, mentioned above, suggest a parallel between Purim and Passover. This link is obvious once one realizes Haman issues his edict on Nisan 13, mere hours before the Passover feast would begin.⁴⁵ From there, the story becomes a narrative of threat to the existence of God’s chosen people followed by deliverance. This deliverance features a Jew with unlikely royal connections and a precedent-setting ritual, followed by formal legislation regarding the perpetual festival observation.⁴⁶

In addition, B.G. Webb connects both Passover and Purim with the Abrahamic promise, because of the Agag/Kish connection. This link marks the conflict in Esther as the next chapter in an ongoing conflict, beginning when the Amalekites tried to destroy Israel after the Exodus (Exod 17:8)—which was itself rooted in the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod 2:24). Thus, he argues Purim and Passover, “standing back to back in the festival cycle, testify to two complementary aspects of a single reality: the election of Israel, which had its beginning historically in the call of Abraham.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Ibid., 229–230.

⁴⁵ Esther’s fast should also be considered in the context of Passover. Does the fast mean the situation is so severe they fast on Passover itself (Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 303) or that they are so secularized that they are not showing trust in God at the very moment when the need for it should be most obvious (Dunne, *Esther and Her Elusive God*, 55)?

⁴⁶ Laniak, “Esther,” 262. V.P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 545.

⁴⁷ Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 127–128. F.S. Weiland, “Literary Clues to God’s Providence in the Book of Esther,” *BSac.* 160 (2003): 45–46 argues that Haman’s plot “struck at the heart of the Abrahamic covenant,” since his intention would have annulled the promises made to Abraham and his offspring,

3. Other Connections

Most of the connections to Exodus are noted in the two above points, but there are a couple of loose ends that are not part of a specific narrative. These include the growing reputation of Mordecai and Moses (Est 9:3–4; Exod 11:3) and the enemies’ fear of God in the context of military victory (Est 9:2–3; Exod 15:14–16).⁴⁸

C. Esther and Samuel

1. Mordecai and Saul (Est 2:5–9; 3:1; 9:10, 15–16, 22; 1 Sam 15:1–9)

Mordecai is introduced as a Benjaminite descendant of Kish (Est 2:5)⁴⁹ and Haman as an Agagite (Est 3:1), thus immediately calling to mind the Benjaminite son of Kish, King Saul (1 Sam 9:1–2), and his conflict with Agag, king of Amalek (1 Sam 15:1–9). The battle with Agag was one of Saul’s most detrimental failings (1 Sam 15:22–23, 26–29). Rather than fulfilling the Holy War God assigned him, Saul spared some of the Amalekites and took plunder. Esther tells of a conflict between a Kishite and an Agagite that again results in war. In this instance, Haman tries to reverse the narrative and kill and plunder all of the Jews, but the Jews utterly destroy

including the Messianic line and God’s plan to bring salvation to both Jews and Gentiles. He says, “Whereas disobedience to the Mosaic Law brought about the covenant curse of captivity, the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant assured that the Jews would not be eradicated as a people and God’s purposes could not be ultimately thwarted.”

⁴⁸ Laniak, “Esther,” 173.

⁴⁹ Whether the Kish in Mordecai’s genealogy is to be understood as identical with Saul’s father is a debated matter that hinges on the antecedent of [’]āšer in Esther 2:6, who was taken captive with Jeconiah. The immediate antecedent is Kish, which would exclude the possibility of him also being Saul’s father. The other option is Mordecai, though he seems far too young in the narrative to have been a deportee. An attractive solution suggested by Dunne, *Esther and Her Elusive God*, 20n5 is that Mordecai is the antecedent, but the text is not indicating they are contemporaries but instead expressing “corporate solidarity in exile.” At the very least, the narrator surely expects the reader to make the Saul/Agag connection, especially when the thrice repeated refrain about not taking plunder (9:10, 15–16) is added.

their enemies and do not take any plunder (Est 9:5–19). With the task completed, the Jews enjoy “rest from their enemies,” which is tied to the destruction of the Amalekites (Deut 25:19).⁵⁰

2. Ahasuerus and Haman; Nabal and Amnon; (Est 1:10; 5:9; 1 Sam 25:36; 2 Sam 13:28)

Ahasuerus makes his decision to invite Vashti to the party when “the heart of the king was merry with wine” (k^ʿtôḇ lēḇ-hameḷḷēḵ bayāyīn). Haman, drinks both to celebrate his plan (3:15) and to revel in his honor (5:6), becoming “glad of heart” (w^ʿtôḇ lēḇ, 5:9). Only two other individuals are said to have merry hearts from the consumption of alcohol: Nabal, who resisted David (1 Sam 25:36), and Amnon, who raped Tamar (2 Sam 13:28). Both made foolish decisions that led to their downfall.⁵¹ Likewise, their wine-filled, glad hearts led to actions that were the undoing of Ahasuerus and Haman. With Ahasuerus, his decision to parade his wife before the men of the party was rebuffed and he was left with a perceived major state crisis—one that ultimately led to the publication of his shame by royal edict and his choice of a wife who was more domineering. Haman’s downfall was even more dramatic. His glad heart led him to listen to his wife’s advice (in violation of Ahasuerus’ decree!) and seek the execution of Mordecai—only to be compelled to honor Mordecai and die on the very stake he prepared for Mordecai.

⁵⁰ R.B. Dillard and T. Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 197.

⁵¹ D.G. Firth, “When Samuel Met Esther: Narrative Focalisation, Intertextuality, and Theology,” *Southeastern Theological Review* 1 no. 1 (2010): 23.

D. Esther and the Prophets

1. Esther and Daniel (Est 2:8–10; Dan 1:8–16)⁵²

There are strong contrasting parallels at the beginning of each book. Each account begins with a young Jew in a foreign court with emphasis placed on ethnicity, food, and relationship. Daniel refuses the food because of his Jewishness (Dan 1:8); Esther hides her Jewishness and accepts the food (Est 2:9–10), apparently having “no ethical qualms about eating the empire’s food and being used as the emperor’s plaything.”⁵³

2. Esther, Jonah, and Joel (Est 4:3, 14; Jon 3:9; Joel 2:12, 14)

Esther 4:3 and Joel 2:12 list “fasting” (šôm), “weeping” (b^ekî), and “lamenting” (mîs^epēḏ) in the same order. Jonah 3:9 speaks of widespread fasting in “sackcloth and ashes” (śaq wā’ēp̄ḗr) and features the reversal of an irreversible edict of destruction (Jon 3:10; cf. Est 4.3; 8.8).⁵⁴ Finally, along with Esther 4:14, Joel 2:14 and Jonah 3:9 ask, “Who knows?” (mî yôḏē’), all of which show the same perspective of faith in God’s action without presuming to know what he will do.⁵⁵

3. Purim and Zion (Est 9:22; Jer 31:13)

Jeremiah 30–33 is one of the few prolonged bright spots in an otherwise bleak book. Among other things, these chapters contain Jeremiah’s vision of the exiles returning to Zion, where God

⁵² While the book of Daniel is not among the prophets in the Tanak, for convenience, I have included the connections with the book of Daniel among the prophets of the Christian canon.

⁵³ Duguid, *Esther and Ruth*, 23. This particular echo may be intended to convey the moral weakness of the main characters as the story begins. Duguid continues, “At this point in the story, Esther is certainly no Daniel. She is both in the world *and* of the world, fully complying with the empire’s outrageous demands with the goal of winning the ‘love’ of an unworthy royal husband. She would perhaps have objected that she had little choice, but if someone is willing to suffer the consequences, full obedience to God’s law is always an option. Vashti, the pagan, had already shown in the previous chapter that the empire cannot ultimately compel our obedience” (29).

⁵⁴ Laniak, “Esther,” 229.

⁵⁵ See Jobes, *Esther*, 137 and Laniak, “Esther,” 230 for the Esther/Joel connection and Nathan Ward, *God’s Unseen Presence and Providence: An Interbiblical Reading of Esther and Theological Exegesis of Esther 6* (D.Min. Major Project, Knox Theological Seminary, 2015), 130–139 for a further discussion of the “who knows?” question.

will “turn their mourning into joy ... and give them gladness for sorrow” (Jer 31:13). In the very verse that connects the Jews’ victory over their enemies with God’s promise of rest in Deuteronomy, we read of “the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday” (Est 9:22): each passage uses “turned” (hāpāk), “sorrow” (yāgôn), “mourning” (’ēbēl), and “gladness” (śāmāh).⁵⁶ According to Laniak, these words frame this event “in terms of God’s covenant faithfulness to the postexilic community.”⁵⁷ If this is correct, then it places the Esther story squarely in the context of God’s covenant relationship with Israel.⁵⁸

E. Minor Echoes

Once these larger connections have been established, other minor echoes may be considered.⁵⁹ For example, according to Phillips, Esther 6:13 fits the pattern of non-Israelites aware of God’s support for Israel (cf. Num 22–24; Josh 2:8–11; 1 Sam 4:8),⁶⁰ which is similar to the motif of the nations fearing God’s people (9:2; see Exod 15:14–16; Ps 105:38).⁶¹ Finally, Esther 9:30

⁵⁶ Jeremiah uses the verb; Esther uses the noun (šim’ḥāh).

⁵⁷ Laniak, “Esther,” 263.

⁵⁸ The implications of this covenant relationship is debated. Although it could be argued that this connection vindicates Diaspora Judaism (cf. Jobes, *Esther*, 42), Huey, “Esther,” 787 and Dunne, *Esther and Her Elusive God*, 4–5 both argue God’s conspicuous absence in the narrative shows God is faithful and steadfast even though the people do not deserve it. Huey goes even further in “Irony as the Key to Understanding the Book of Esther,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 32 no. 3 (1990): 38–39, arguing the primary intent of the book is “to show that the post-exilic people of Israel have not changed in spite of the punishment inflicted on them” and that God’s hiddenness may indicate his disapproval of their acts. Huey concludes that instead of providence being the key to understanding the book, just the opposite may be the intent: “[B]ecause his people did not seek help from God, he deliberately became the hidden God.” Similarly, E.R. Stern, “Esther and the Politics of Diaspora” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 100 no. 1 (2010): 25–53 argues Esther does not defend diaspora life, but comically critiques it.

⁵⁹ See Ward, *God’s Unseen Presence and Providence*, 53–57 for an attempt to illustrate Messianic foreshadowing in Esther without being unnecessarily inventive.

⁶⁰ Elaine Phillips, “Esther,” *1 Chronicles–Job*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 647.

⁶¹ Levenson, *Esther*, 120. Cf. Phillips, “Esther,” 662.

contains echoes of Zechariah 8:19, “which indicates that institutionalized fasts would become festivals of joy and urges the people of God to love truth and peace.”⁶²

F. Summary Observations

Not all of the echoes listed above are equally convincing and any single instance of such a connection could be written off as either interpretive over-reading or mere coincidence. The constant echoing of other Old Testament narratives, however, cannot be ignored. Even if the minor echoes are disqualified from consideration, the book of Esther still calls attention to the books of Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, Samuel, Jonah, Jeremiah, Joel and Daniel—all three parts of the Hebrew canon. It alludes to pervasive canonical themes like the Abrahamic promise, Exodus, Passover, Zion’s Restoration, and the long-standing Amalekite conflict. It seems clear, then, the author framed his book within the context of the Israelite faith. Laniak rightly says, “Esther is a thoroughly ‘biblical’ book in this sense. In its *intertextuality*, it provides an *interbiblical* dialog, making allusions to other heroes and incidents throughout. The naming of God in these other stories makes his presence all the more implicit in Esther.”⁶³

Admittedly, there are silences in Esther where readers might prefer explicit statements. Given the “interbiblical dialog” in Esther, however, these blank spaces must be related to Scripture as a whole.⁶⁴ Firth also makes this point:

Once we realise that so much of the story is told in a way that alludes to other passages in the Old Testament we begin to realise that our reading of Esther is meant to be shaped by what we know from these other passages and these allusions are consistently theological in their emphases. ...

⁶² Phillips, “Esther,” 672.

⁶³ Laniak, “Esther,” 172–173.

⁶⁴ J. Teuffel, “Fate and Word: The Book of Esther as Guidance to a Canonical Reading of Scripture,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 36, no 1 (2009): 29–30.

We are not seeking God in a text where he is absent. Rather, we are having our understanding of God enriched by the conversation that is generated.⁶⁵

G. Implications

The interbiblical context provided by the author may help answer some of the questions about various verses in the narrative. For example, much has been made of what Mordecai meant when he said deliverance would come from “another place” (Est 4:14),⁶⁶ but it could be argued that Mordecai’s meaning is less significant than the author’s meaning. Even if one reads Mordecai as irreligious,⁶⁷ the author may be hinting at a providential answer after all.⁶⁸ The New Testament establishes the principle that people need not have full awareness of either the details of the prophecy or that they were even speaking prophetically. Peter tells his readers that even prophets who intended to speak for God did not fully understand their messages (1 Pet 1:10–12). More significantly, John tells us that Caiaphas, who did not intend to speak for God, prophesied unwittingly (John 11:49–53).

A second example of a potentially providential passage comes from Mordecai’s letter, which retells the events leading up to the inauguration of the Feast of Purim. Mordecai writes, “For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, had plotted against the

⁶⁵ Firth, *The Message of Esther*, 34.

⁶⁶ The LXX, Targumim (Midr. *Leqah Tob* 4.14), and Josephus (*Ant.* 11.227, 279–282) all understand “place” to be an oblique reference to God (cf. S. Talmon, “‘Wisdom’ in the Book of Esther,” *VT* 13, no. 4 (1963): 429n1, and Moore, *Esther*, 50 who connects it to *eleos* in 1 Macc 16:3). Others, such as Clines *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 302, suggest it is not God, but that it could be “Jewish officials (of similar standing to Nehemiah) or an armed revolt by the Jews.” Firth, *The Message of Esther*, 76, suggests that it could refer to political deliverance. J. Wiebe, “Will Relief and Deliverance Arise for the Jews from Another Place?” *CBQ* 53 no. 3 (1991): 413, followed by Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (Nahsville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 1996), 395–397, suggests it be read “as an interrogative apodosis, asking in effect a rhetorical question expecting a negative answer. ... He has no reason to expect [help] from any other place. He is attempting to motivate her to act.”

⁶⁷ E.g., Dunne, following Wiebe (*Esther and Her Elusive God*, 46–47).

⁶⁸ Even if Wiebe’s view is correct, given the interbiblical dialog taking place in Esther, what sounds like a negative rhetorical question to Esther surely sounds like a positive rhetorical question to the Jewish or Christian reader.

Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur (that is, cast lots), to crush and to destroy them. But when it⁶⁹ came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows” (Est 9:24–25 ESV).

The difficulty with this passage is that it does not very closely correspond to the events as previously recorded. In Esther 3, the king is complicit, if negligent, in signing the death sentence of the Jewish people. In Esther 7, it is Harbona, one of the king’s eunuchs, who suggests hanging Haman on the very gallows he built for Mordecai. In Esther 8, having executed Haman, Ahasuerus initially seems reticent to do anything further,⁷⁰ yet eventually allows Esther and Mordecai to compose a counter-decree. In chapter 9, it is Esther who requests Haman’s sons be hanged. But, in Mordecai’s letter, Ahasuerus takes center stage: *he* learns of the plot; *he* hangs Haman; *he* gives orders that a counter-decree be written; *he* orders that Haman’s sons be hanged. Duguid suggests the mismatch between the letter and the events points to a king other than Ahasuerus who was truly in control of the events and changed the course of history to save the Jews. He argues that Ahasuerus is nowhere named because it was God himself who had reversed the fortunes of Haman and the Jews: “His decrees, written in the heavenly scrolls, were the only ones that truly could not be reversed!”⁷¹ Duguid seems to suggest Mordecai did this intentionally, which is a difficult position to prove. If, however, Mordecai is allowed to speak

⁶⁹ The pronoun is feminine and could refer to either Esther (e.g., RSV: “when Esther came before the king”) or the plot (e.g., NIV: “when the plot came to the king’s attention”). J.G. Baldwin, *Esther* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1984), 108–109 rightly suggests that Mordecai’s purpose is not to emphasize his or Esther’s role but to credit the king (but see Moore, *Esther*, 92–94 for an argument from textual corruption that it refers to Esther).

⁷⁰ Ahasuerus’ reaction to Esther’s request shows his primary concern was not with Haman’s threat toward Esther as a Jewess, but with Haman’s threat toward Esther as his queen. See Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 445; T.S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, SBL Dissertation Series 165 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 114.

⁷¹ Duguid, “Eschatology,” 94.

more truly than he knows, like Caiaphas after him, Mordecai's edict may hint strongly toward the inclusion of God.

A third example is the introduction of Mordecai and Esther (2:4–5), which the author may use to hint at providence. The shift from narrative to character introduction, smoothed over by most English translations, is abrupt. Midrash Esther Rabbah looks at a series of parallel passages (Exod 2:25; Jdg 4:4; 11.1; 1 Sam 17:12) where each abrupt introduction presents a new character appropriate for the task mentioned in the previous verse:⁷² the right person is in the right place at the right moment. Given the clear canonical context in which the author has framed his narrative, what initially appears to be coincidental may instead be understood as providential.

Finally, there is the grand solution in Esther 10. After the Jews' great victories and the subsequent edicts about Purim, life returns to normal in the Persian Empire—Ahasuerus taxes the people and Mordecai goes about his business, rising in favor with the populace (10:1–3). All seems well. The problem with this ending, however, is that no Jewish reader could have possibly seen a Benjaminite descendant of Kish, second to a pagan emperor, as God's grand solution. Duguid asks, "How could anyone possibly remember the receiving of rest from one's enemies without thinking about God, and more specifically about God's promise to David of rest for Israel and peace while they dwelt in their own land?"⁷³ While it is certainly better for Mordecai to occupy the position of grand vizier than for Haman to do so, it is anticlimactic in the larger canonical context—the very context in which the book of Esther is so firmly set. Further, danger looms as long as an emperor who is indifferent to genocide remains on the throne.

⁷² Midrash Esther Rabbah, 35.1. Cf. T.K. Beal, "Esther," *Berit Olam: Ruth and Esther* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 24.

⁷³ Duguid, "Eschatology," 95.

Duguid concludes,

It was good news that Mordecai was now second in rank to Xerxes, in a place where he was able to seek good for his people and speak peace to all his seed (Est 10:3). The position once filled by the enemy of the Jews was now occupied by their friend. This was good news, but it was not yet the best of news. A major crisis had been resolved but the consummation had not yet occurred. When they truly had rest from their enemies all around, their king would surely no longer be named Xerxes, but would be a king who embodies the virtues described in Psalm 72, especially the pursuit of justice and righteousness. True rest would come when the one who seeks their good and speaks their peace was not a descendant of Saul who was *second in rank* to anyone but the promised seed of David, reigning as the true king.

In other words, the text itself shows us that the great reversal of the Book of Esther is not yet the Great Reversal of all of history. It was not yet the inbreaking of the heavenly kingdom on earth. It was a great deliverance to be sure, a mighty victory of God against the kingdoms of this world, but any deliverance that rests on the influence of a single individual who must inevitably grow old and die, in an empire that has not been radically transformed, was at best only partial and temporary. The Book of Esther demonstrates the need for a greater reversal yet, one which would result in the coming of the true king, the Prince of Peace, whose reign will never end!⁷⁴

The solution in Esther points forward to something even greater: the prophesied Son of David who will rule, second to none, eternally, on God's very throne. If this reading is deemed legitimate, it places the story of Esther within the most significant religious context of all: the biblical story of the coming Messiah.

Conclusion

Intertextuality in Esther, especially as an intentional narrative device, has far reaching interpretive implications. Since it sets the narrative squarely in a canonical context, it suggests that Esther be read as a religious text. Once this framework is established, it allows for the possibility that the characters speak more truly than they know. In addition to the few examples cited above, this can help the reader understand characters' various actions in the story and the overarching series of seemingly bizarre coincidences as providential. Finally, it may explain the conspicuous absence of God and religion at key moments in the narrative—e.g., Mordecai's

⁷⁴ Ibid., 95–96.

statement in 4:14, Esther's fast, whether or not the fighting is to be understood as Holy War, etc. In short, Esther's intertextuality is not merely about interesting parallels, but about the literary artistry to write a book that points to God and religion without ever mentioning God or religion. Once Esther is seen among her peers, she fits very well into the Hebrew canon.