

THOMAS WETZEL

Violence and
Divine Victory
in the Book of Esther

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136*

Mohr Siebeck

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Mohr Siebeck

Thomas Wetzel, born 1967; 1990 BA philosophy; 1994 MA and 2000 PhD in English literature, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; 2006 MA in theology, Marquette University; 2015 ThD, Harvard Divinity School; currently assistant professor of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament at Loyola University Chicago.
orcid.org/ 0000-0003-1022-4406

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Preface

The argument in these pages began in a place very different from where it has ended. As a doctoral candidate working on my dissertation proposal at Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I saw my explorations of the Esther story as a way to understand how and why contemporary Christianity has so readily rejected the biblical portrayals of religious violence. I have been shaped as a scholar and a believer by theologies of Christian nonviolence, particularly the work of Stanley Hauerwas, and I was troubled by the tensions that emerge between the biblical understanding of God as a warrior and the Christian claim that Jesus of Nazareth, as the Second Person of the Trinity, is non-violent. Simply put, virtually all Christian attempts to describe God or the Church as nonviolent require the rejection of at least some major element of the biblical portrayal of God. Often, this rejection also involves the marginalization of the ongoing covenantal existence of the people Israel. Precisely because the Esther story is regularly seen by Christians as the most “Jewish” of all biblical books and as the violent extreme among biblical texts, I thought it would be the ideal place to seek a resolution to this problem.

The problem proved to be much larger than I had initially thought, and by the time that I had defended my dissertation, my argument (and my worldview) had shifted substantially. In my dissertation, I had established that the Jewish violence in the Esther story participates in a long line of biblical narratives in which the God of Israel uses or permits violence as a means to deliver Israel or to restore order to a broken world – and sometimes to accomplish both. More importantly, I had come to understand the great Jewish military victory at the story’s end as proof within the otherwise religiously opaque narrative world that the God of Israel was present and at work there.

I was not satisfied, however, that I had truly done justice to the story’s views on violence or its Jewish characters. As I began to revise my dissertation into a book manuscript, I was drawn increasingly to the question of Jewish identity in the Esther story and how it fits within the larger biblical understanding of the LORD’s relationship to the world. The key realization emerged through my conversations with my colleagues in the Theology Department at Loyola University Chicago, where I now serve as an assistant professor of Hebrew Bible. One of my colleagues in particular, Devorah Schoenfeld, pushed me on the point that my dissertation focused almost exclusively on Jewish *survival*, while

in fact, the larger biblical tradition and Judaism itself emphasize Jewish *flourishing*.

This was a powerful revelation to me, and it led me to realize that the Esther story understands the Jews to be more than just a sign of the divine presence in creation. More crucially, the Esther story distills to its most basic form the biblical stance that the people Israel are – and continue to be – the *definitive* witness and *necessary* partner to the divine work of cosmic creation and restoration. And so was born the radical revision and expansion of my dissertation that has become this book.



I finished the main work on this manuscript on the evening of Saturday, March 27th, 2021, on which began (perhaps not coincidentally) an unusual confluence within sacred time: it was the first night of the Jewish Passover, as well as the eve of Palm Sunday and Holy Week for the Church. It is my hope that this book might offer a similar opportunity and challenge for the Church: to walk with and to learn from the ongoing covenantal love shared between God and Israel. As I write the words of this preface, however, a wave of anti-Semitic attacks has unfolded across the United States and parts of Europe, reminding me that my hope is far from realized in the world today.

May 31, 2021
Park Ridge, Illinois

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I owe thanks to many people who directly or indirectly assisted with the development of this book. First, I must thank my dissertation committee at Harvard Divinity School. As readers and colleagues, Andrew Teeter and Paul Hanson offered insightful challenges and kind encouragements to continue this project beyond the dissertation stage. Jon Levenson served as my mentor, advisor, and dissertation director during my years at the Divinity School, and it would be difficult to overstate how much he has enriched and expanded my academic work and my religious practice. Kathryn Kunkel ably guided me through the labyrinthine bureaucratic process of completing a doctorate at Harvard University and did so with kindness and patience.

In the Theology Department at Loyola, I have benefited greatly from the friendship and wisdom of many wonderful colleagues, but several of them offered crucial support and assistance to the work of this manuscript: Devorah Schoenfeld, Bob Di Vito, Chris Skinner, Teresa Calpino, Bret Lewis, Joanne Brandstrader, and Randy Newman, each of whom freely gave their time and encouragement to my work, as well as many insights that made their way into these pages. I also must thank former dean Tom Regan and current associate dean Art Lurigio of the College of Arts and Sciences at Loyola for their generous grant of a mid-probationary sabbatical leave that permitted me to finish work on this manuscript. In my time working on my dissertation and its revision into a book manuscript, two librarians were invaluable in helping with my research: Kristy Raine at Mount Mercy University and Jane Currie at Loyola. I have learned much that has shaped this argument from these friends and associates, but all errors and mistakes that remain are my own.

No book is completed without the help of numerous generous workers at the various stages of publication, and I am grateful to all at Mohr Siebeck who have assisted me with kindness, especially Elena Müller, Tobias Stäbler, and Josephine Krönke. Rebekka Zech was most helpful as the production manager who guided my manuscript to its final form.

Several family members have been among my greatest supporters and encouraged me throughout my recent academic work. Don Damsteegt and Marsha Barta are relatives I first met by accident while teaching at Mount Mercy University, but over the intervening years, they have become among my most

treasured family and friends. My parents-in-law Max and Dorothy Ranft welcomed me into their lives as though I were their own son and have always encouraged me to reach further and higher because they saw only the greatest potential in me.

I save my deepest thanks for my wife and the love of my life, Kate Ranft, who has read, discussed, and edited this manuscript more often than either of us probably care to admit, and who has been my partner in all things that make this life a good one.

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Introduction

The Delicate Art of Esther

“Theology,” says Stanley Hauerwas, “is the delicate art necessary for the Christian community to keep its story straight.”¹ The “story” of the Church, according to Hauerwas, consists of the Church’s shared narratives, as well as the beliefs and practices that arise out of the Church’s reflection on those shared narratives. At its root, the story of the Church is the biblical canon. As a result, Hauerwas can also assert that “at least one of the tasks of theology ... is to provide a timeful reading of the scripture for our time.”² A “timeful” reading must bring the beliefs and practices of the Church today into meaningful contact with those shared narratives of the Church’s canonical Scriptures. Without such contact, the story of the Church falls apart; and without a coherent story, the life of the Church falls apart.

Regardless of his own skill as a biblical interpreter, Hauerwas here has touched upon the critical role that biblical exegesis must play in the Church. As the bishops of the Catholic Church expressed this at the Second Vatican Council, all the teaching of the Church rests ultimately on a coherent canon of the Bible:

Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation. By scrutinizing in the light of faith all truth stored up in the mystery of Christ, theology is most powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated by that word. For the Sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and[,] since they [all] are inspired, really are the word of God; and so the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology.³

A lack of attention to the canonical Scriptures undermines the Church’s self-understanding and its ability to proclaim what it believes it has been divinely called to be and to do in the world. “Therefore, like the Christian religion itself,” the fathers of the Second Vatican Council emphasize, “all the preaching [and teaching] of the Church must be nourished and *regulated* by Sacred Scripture. [...T]he force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 17.

² Hauerwas, 17.

³ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1965), para. 24.

the support and energy of the Church.”⁴ Hauerwas and the bishops of the Second Vatican Council would likely disagree as to what constitutes “a timeful reading of scripture for our time,” but neither Hauerwas nor the bishops would deny that the fullness of the canonical Scriptures is central to whatever such reading emerges.

This brings us to the problem that the book of Esther poses for the Church. It would seem self-evident that reading (and reading well) the book of Esther – or any book of the canonical Scriptures, for that matter – would constitute a required part of “keeping the Church’s story straight.” Yet from all appearances, the Church throughout much of its history has assiduously avoided this particular part of its central narrative. Alone among the works considered canonical in what today is often called the Hebrew Bible,⁵ the book of Esther remains for Christians a marginal story. The Church Fathers rarely mention the book, and no known Christian commentary on the book exists from the first seven centuries of the Common Era. Even as Christian commentaries on the book began to emerge in the later medieval period, they were exclusively homiletical or devotional in nature, emphasizing free allegorical readings that were heavy in Marian dogma and light in their attention to the literal meaning of the text.⁶ As Lewis Bayles Paton summarizes, “During the period when both the halakhic and the haggadic exegesis of Esther were having such an elaborate development among the Jews, the book received almost no attention from Christians. Dislike of its revengeful spirit and doubts in regard to its canonicity led the Fathers of the Eastern and of the Western Church for the most part to ignore it.”⁷

This exegetical silence was not a theological vacuum, however. By the time of the Protestant Reformation, the story’s supposed excessive violence, coupled with its seemingly overt Jewishness, stood as the primary reasons for Christian hesitance to embrace the book. This view continues for the most part into the present day. “Esther poses a particular problem,” as Timothy Beal puts it. “Christian theology has had a very difficult time knowing what to do with this text. Esther is treated as the most remote outpost in the Old Testament colony: exotic, savage, violent, difficult to reach, difficult to map, dangerous,

⁴ Second Vatican Council, para. 21, emphasis added.

⁵ For a careful discussion of what is at stake in how we name this collection of texts, see Jon D. Levenson, “The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament, and Historical Criticism,” in *The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 1–32.

⁶ See, for instance, Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908), 107; and Jo Carruthers, *Esther through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), esp. 192–95, 198–99.

⁷ Paton, *Esther*, 101.

perhaps irredeemable.”⁸ Beal argues that within the history of Christian interpretations of the book, there emerges a collective need to define the book as somehow different from the Christian self-understanding of the Church as peaceful and universal. Christian interpreters therefore “link what is asserted to be the *Jewishness* of the text ... with what is asserted to be its ungodly immorality, and then repudiate both as quintessentially not-us.”⁹ Scholarly comments from the early decades of the twentieth century are representative of this view: “From the moral point of view[,] the book has little to commend it to civilized persons,” notes one scholar.¹⁰ Another, asserting that the Esther story is nothing more than a portrayal of violent Jewish nationalism, contends that the book lacks any connection to the biblical God; based on this, the scholar concludes that, at the very least, “[t]he compilers of the Hebrew canon made a serious blunder when they took in this book.”¹¹

This exegetical resistance to the book of Esther appears to lie in the confluence of three narrative issues. First, there is the overt violence acknowledged in the book: more than seventy-five thousand deaths will be noted by the story’s end. Second is the seeming ethnic nature of the violence. The battle lines in the story – from the earliest moments of the conflict between Mordecai and Haman until the final battles on the thirteenth and fourteenth of Adar – are clearly marked as a conflict between Jews and a group of gentiles. While it is clear that not all the gentiles in the narrative are described as enemies of the Jews, many Christian readers nonetheless have missed that most of the empire’s gentiles do not engage in this battle. Last and perhaps most troubling to the typical Christian interpreter, the Hebrew version of the Esther story lacks any overt reference to the God of the Bible or even to an obviously coherent expression of religious practice.

These problems have only rarely bothered Jewish exegetes. The Jewish interpretive tradition not only has understood the story as one that is consonant with the religious tradition but has found in even the theologically circumspect Hebrew narrative one of the greatest stories of Jewish deliverance available in the canonical Scriptures. Indeed, the story was so remarkable to Second Temple Judaism that it exists in three major extant forms (along with numerous minor variants) that each appear aimed to serve different communities of listeners. First is the Hebrew version of the Masoretic Text (henceforth called *MT Esther*); it is the most cryptic version of the story, at least in terms of its religious intentions, and it remains the most frequently discussed version of the story throughout the histories of Jewish and Christian biblical scholarship.

⁸ Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 5.

⁹ Beal, 5.

¹⁰ Qtd. in Charles C. Torrey, “The Older Book of Esther,” *Harvard Theological Review* 37, no. 1 (January 1944): 10.

¹¹ Qtd. in Torrey, 10.

From the standpoint of a shared biblical tradition among the branches of Judaism and Christianity, MT Esther is *the* Esther story. There also exists the so-called Septuagint version of Esther (henceforth *LXX Esther*), which is a Greek text of the story that is notably longer than MT Esther and contains an overtly theological understanding that overlays a core version of the Esther story much in agreement with that of MT Esther. Lastly, there is the A-Text or Alpha Text (henceforth *AT Esther*), a variant Greek version of the story that appears in some LXX minuscules. AT Esther possesses a basic Esther story somewhat at odds with the details of MT Esther and likely preserves parts of an earlier proto-Esther narrative tradition. In its current form, however, AT Esther has been expanded or built out with aspects of LXX Esther's overt theological leanings.¹²

As one can see, confusions can quickly multiply in any attempt to work one's way through the Esther narrative tradition. In this respect, the book of Esther may be something of a barometer for Christian biblical exegesis: it indicates not only areas of Christian resistance to the canon but also what lies at the heart of that resistance. And in the case of the Esther story, this theological resistance is not what it may seem. While many exegetes emphasize what the story seemingly *lacks* in theological understanding, the underlying resistance to this part of the canon lies instead in what the story brings into theological contact with the story of the Church. Gentile readers have gone to great lengths throughout Christian history to demonstrate that the violence undertaken by the Jews in the Esther story is not and could not be accomplished "in the name of God." Such attempts to make sense of the Esther story frequently expose the Church's ambiguous relationship to the divine (and divinely mandated) violence present in the biblical canon. Perhaps most difficult for Christian readers, the narratives of the Esther tradition attest to the ongoing reality of a special place in history for the children of Israel, the Jews whose military victory in MT Esther is imbued with liturgical (one might even say *sacramental*) significance, even in the absence of any overt divine self-revelation. In the following pages, I will show that when read properly, the Esther story affirms a powerful theological assertion: religious violence legitimately exists, and when properly

¹² My citations of these three primary versions of the Esther story will use the following formats:

AT xx:xx (a passage from AT Esther)

MT xx:xx (a passage from MT Esther)

LXX xx:xx (a passage from LXX Esther)

For further details on the canonical forms of the Esther story common to Judaism, as well as various midrashic retellings and the history of later Christian translations, see the very helpful discussion in Jean-Daniel Macchi, *Esther*, ed. Walter Dietrich and David M. Carr, trans. Carmen Palmer, International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2018), 16–37.

exercised, it represents an at-times necessary expression of Israel's duty to survive as the LORD's covenant partner. In the book of Esther, violence and the survival of Israel are the definitive signs of God's active presence in the world.



In order to understand what the Esther story offers to the delicate art of Christian theology, the reader first must be able to see the story itself. This is not a simple task. Many Christian readers do not know the narrative well, and even fewer realize how they have been shaped by the lengthy tradition of misreading the story within the Church. Correcting these two problems is the work of my first chapter. There, I will summarize the story of MT Esther with careful attention to the narrative challenges it presents to the reader, and along the way, I will also draw attention to major movements and figures within the Christian exegetical tradition that have sought to marginalize the influence of the Esther story within the work of Christian theology.

My second chapter may at first seem to chart a contradictory course. In this chapter, I acknowledge that Christians have not been alone in their concerns about the seemingly "godless" nature of the Esther story. By the time that the Septuagint traditions were being established by and for Jews living in the midst of Greek-speaking cultures, redactors had already shaped more overtly religious versions of the Esther story that not only added substantial theological content to the narrative, but that in the case of AT Esther also *preserved* religious language that the redactors of MT Esther had intentionally removed. These versions came to represent the definitive meaning of the story among at least some ancient Jewish communities and have shaped the canonical Scriptures of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions. Our quest in this chapter will be to understand how these Greek textual traditions may reveal what lies hidden in MT Esther.

In chapter three, I turn back to MT Esther and explore the degree to which LXX and AT Esther have accurately preserved the religious views underlying the Hebrew version. Central to this discussion is the cryptic statement offered by Haman's wife and advisors after his humiliating failure to obtain royal permission to execute Mordecai: "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish seed, you will not overcome him; you will fall before him to your ruin" (Esth 6:13). Stated as a clear conditional statement in the Hebrew, this oracular warning seems to suggest that Mordecai's ethnicity is not yet clearly established at this point in the Esther story. Nothing could be further from the truth, as becomes clear when we explore the meaning of the Hebrew phrase מְזַרַע הַיְהוּדִים (*mizzera' hayyēhūdīm*, "from the seed of the Jews"), which underlies the English translation here. The Hebrew noun *zera'* is a word with rich theological significance throughout the Hebrew Bible. And as anyone familiar with basic gardening knows, every seed has hidden within it both its current identity and its future destiny. So too with the "seed" of the Jews: we

will find that the Esther story has left hidden within the “Jewish seed” a rich set of allusions that establish nothing less than the presence of God and Israel within even the circumspect narrative of MT Esther.

The “seed of the Jews” in MT Esther is defined not by theological statements or by divine manifestations. Because of this, it has not been clear to many readers over the centuries what exactly constitutes these enacted attributes within the narrative world. My argument in chapter four rests on a simple assumption: we can derive a working definition of how the narrative understands *Jewishness* by looking at those actions undertaken by Jewish characters that set them apart from the gentiles in the story. This investigation turns away from the figure of Esther, who is hiding her Jewishness in MT Esther, and instead focuses on characters overtly identified as Jews in the narrative world. Through this approach, we will see that Jewishness in the Hebrew Esther story is defined by a set of *liturgical* actions, three of which we will discuss in this chapter: penitential rites, fasting, and a commitment to practice a particular form of liturgical memory. All of these actions also fit well within the larger biblical understanding of Israel’s covenantal identity. “Acting Jewish,” in other words, is a particular form of liturgical action that proves efficacious in transforming the trajectory of history.

The fourth liturgical action undertaken by the Jews of the Esther story is the most troubling and the most difficult to discuss in the modern world: a form of sacred warfare. I will need to use the next two chapters of my argument to help the reader understand the connection between holiness and warfare in the Bible and in the Esther story. In chapter five, I will take us back to the very earliest biblical narratives to uncover a recurring portrayal of God common to almost the entirety of the Bible and known to biblical scholars as the Divine Combat myth. At its root, this myth equates the creation of the cosmos with the defeat of a primordial chaos deity by the storm god. The Divine Combat myth was not limited to the Hebrew Bible or to portrayals of the God of Israel. Instead, it was common throughout the Ancient Near East and forms the basis for many of Israel’s portrayals of God’s involvement in violence and warfare. This Divine Combat mythology ultimately shaped how ancient Israel understood its participation with God in certain types of warfare.

Creation in the Ancient Near East and in the Hebrew Bible, however, was not a singular event but rather an ongoing process – or better, an ongoing *conflict* between the chaotic forces that underlie creation and the forceful imposition of divine order upon creation. The Divine Combat myth leaves little room for disorder in the realm under divine control; chaos may submit to the divine order or it must be eradicated. In the case of chaotic material that refuses (intentionally or unintentionally) to be brought into harmony with the divine plan, the divine order of creation demands its utter elimination. In chapter six, we will define perhaps the single most troubling form of this concept found in the Bible: *hērem*, the divinely mandated warfare that specifically requires the end

of the enemy's existence as a continuing people. By contemporary standards, it is hard to view this type of warfare – whether practiced in fact or as only a form of theo-political ideology – as anything other than religiously motivated genocide. *Hērem*, however, is a very carefully defined and extremely limited expression of the Divine Combat myth that rests on a fundamental commitment to restoration of divine order. Our job in this chapter will not be to endorse, but simply to understand the concept and to see its presence in the Esther narrative. If *hērem* is present in the Esther story, it is powerful evidence that the divine presence is hidden in the narrative world.

Lastly, in my conclusion I will bring all these ideas together. The Greek versions of the Esther story contain six additional chapters that place the story's events within an ongoing cosmic and eschatological battle waged to restore divine order over creation. The Esther story, in all three of its major versions, affirms that Israel lives as the LORD's covenantal partner in this work of cosmic restoration, and in fact, the survival of Israel serves as the defining sign of the LORD's continuing covenantal relationship with Israel. When Israel is faced with annihilation, the divine warrior not only engages in combat to preserve Israel, but also at times demands that Israel rise up to fight alongside him or even in his place. The victory of the Jews in the Esther story is proof in the biblical worldview that the LORD is present in the narrative and that Israel must survive as the LORD's covenantal partner. If so, the story of the Church must acknowledge this continuing and irrevocable reality of the Jews as the chosen people of God.



The Esther story creates a disturbing problem for the Christian understanding of Scripture. If the story is an ethnocentric, irreligious tale of nationalism “gone mad,” then the compilers of the biblical canon truly did blunder. Such an admission of defect in the structural integrity of the canon undermines the stabilizing parameters that the canon offers to the Christian story. To label any version of the Esther story as a canonical “blunder” challenges the coherence and integrity of the canonization process and that of the canonical Scriptures of Christianity themselves. An equally disturbing problem emerges, however, if Christian theology accepts the Esther story as necessary to make sense of the Church's story: because the Church has intentionally avoided theological engagement with the book of Esther, the Church then has misread its canon and so in some manner has broken the Church's story. In so doing, it has likewise damaged the life of the Church.

Esther remains, as Timothy Beal put it, “a particular problem” for Christian theology. It remains my work throughout the coming chapters to demonstrate where precisely that problem is located and what its resolution means for Christian thought about Scripture and, ultimately, about the Church's relationship to Israel as well. If the Jewish and Christian understanding of Scripture is

correct, we cannot today change the Scriptures to fit our personal needs. We instead must learn to submit our theological tools to the hard discipline of reading (and being read by) the Scriptures handed to us by the tradition. The delicate art of Christian theology lies in this place in which an ancient text can breathe new life into a modern tradition. We must learn to let the Esther story breathe in the Church and in our generation anew.

Chapter 1

There's Something about Esther

The typical Christian reader faces two major impediments when he or she attempts to unpack the theological implications of the Esther story. First and foremost, most Christians have not regularly encountered the story. In the Jewish tradition, the Esther story anchors the annual celebration of Purim and has a rich legacy of popular retellings that extends into the modern day through books, movies, art, and graphic novels, to say nothing of the centuries-old tradition of the Purim Spiels in which local Jewish communities perform versions of the story as interpreted through local customs or even tropes from popular culture. In contrast, the Christian tradition has not connected the Esther story to any regular holiday or feast day, and the narrative appears rarely, if at all, among the regular liturgical readings of the various Christian lectionaries. A Christian reader often will encounter the Esther story only by accident and almost always outside the regular liturgical structures of the Church.

The second problem facing the Christian reader lies in the surprisingly consistent stance toward the story held by the dominant Christian interpretive tradition. As we will see in the coming pages, the Church has consistently held an ambivalent view of the Esther story. Across virtually all Christian denominations and congregations, this interpretive tradition has strained to keep the Esther story at some distance from shaping Christian theology. When the story is discussed at all, the tradition has almost uniformly offered interpretations that feel more closely related to anti-Jewish polemic than to careful exegetical engagement with the narrative or its textual traditions.

These two problems are related: a tradition of often intentional misreading of the Esther story has shaped the larger Christian liturgical tradition, which in turn has limited the community's encounter with the narrative. This has become a vicious circle. Readers shaped by the Christian tradition cannot truly see the story's value (in its own right or to the Church's self-understanding) unless they are able to see the story in the first place. Once the Christian reader has encountered the story, however, he or she must be introduced almost simultaneously to the theological confusion and the tradition of misreading that the Christian interpretive tradition has layered upon it. Unpacking all of this is the work of the present chapter.



The Esther story poses a number of exegetical problems from its start, not least of which is the question of its genre: does the story claim to be a historical text along the lines of the biblical books of Samuel and Kings; or is it a didactic or homiletical fiction and so more similar to biblical books like Jonah or the deuterocanonical books of Tobit and Judith? This is not simply a theological question or one concerned with historical accuracy. Instead, it is a question that helps us decide *how* we should read the story.

Most modern scholars agree that the Esther narrative tradition is rooted in an intentionally fictional narrative.¹ The story is a very carefully structured narrative. As Jean-Daniel Macchi notes,

[T]he “novelesque” character of the narrative invites one to see it as a literary fiction. The plot is perfectly coherent, the sequences are well prepared, and one finds new developments, caricature, exaggeration, and humor. One does not find ruptures in events, the presence of unrelated episodes, and the necessarily complex and little-structured narration that characterizes descriptions of what happens in reality and what one generally finds in historiographic narratives, such as Ezra-Nehemiah or 2 Maccabees.²

Macchi overstates this distinction to some degree, but the general point remains: the Esther story bears the marks of a literary fiction.

The historical narrative underlying the various extant Esther stories is deeply problematic and unlikely, yet there is a clear sense of Persian historical data within the text. The vexing part of this historical problem is not the historical inaccuracies themselves; rather, it is that so many scholars seem to need to force the text into some sort of historical accuracy in order to discuss the theology of the text.³ This is an erroneous assumption. Recognizing narrative fiction *as fiction* enables the reader to see that the world of the given story is fully circumscribed by the written text.

The construction and purpose of a fictional narrative require of the reader different exegetical and interpretive decisions than those associated with a historical document. In broad terms, a theological reading of fiction is much easier than a theological reading of history. With the messy, murky circumstances of history and our inability to see clearly the full range of historical influences that shaped either an event or the perspective of the historian, the theological

¹ For further discussion of the text's historicity and the general position (advocated here) that Esther is something close to the modern short story, see Frederic Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 297–309; Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd ed (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 131–39; Jon D. Levenson, *Esther*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1997), 23–27. For an approach that considers the story a historicized wisdom book, see Shmaryahu Talmon, “‘Wisdom’ in the Book of Esther,” *Vetus Testamentum* 13 (1963): 419–55.

² Macchi, *Esther*, 40.

³ One well-respected example of this is Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New Haven, CT: Anchor/Yale University Press, 1971), xxxiv–xlvi.

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