

How Can a Man Read Esther?¹

by Tim Bulkeley

The biblical book of Esther has provoked widely, and even wildly, differing responses. Esther was not found among the biblical texts from Qumran, nor is it mentioned in the New Testament. It does not appear in the canonical list of Melito of Sardis.² Martin Luther wished the book had not survived.³ Calvin only referenced it once in the *Institutes*.⁴ Yet a number of the Church Fathers mention the story with approval, and by the Middle Ages it had already become a Jewish favourite (there are more fragments of Esther from the Cairo Geniza than any other book outside the Torah).⁵

In more recent times (British Prime Minister) Margaret Thatcher was attracted to the book, but commented that it was “gory.”⁶ Most feminist readers have given this tale, told by men, about a woman, a more negative response. Alice Laffey’s evaluation of Esther, especially in contrast to Vashti, has often been cited and gives a good summary of this sort of reading:

She is the woman who plays the man’s game. Not only does she submit to the beauty contest, she actively participates (2:10, 2:15). Esther carefully follows Hegai’s advice on how to accentuate the positive and become the sex object par excellence. Body beautiful (2:2-3, 2:7) and successful sex (2:14) are her tickets to moving up in the world. Esther does not stand with her sister and protest the victimization to which Vashti had been subjected and that might lie in her future as well (2:14); rather, she accepts the rules of the dominant culture and works

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²Jack P. Lewis, “Esther.” In *Encyclopaedia of Early Christianity, Second Edition*, edited by Everett Ferguson, (London: Routledge, 2013), 387 cites Eusebius, HE. 4.26.13f.

³Martin Luther and Alexander Chalmers, *The Table Talk of Martin Luther* (London: H. G. Bohn, 1857), 11.

⁴4.12.17.

⁵Lewis, “Esther,” 387.

⁶Jo Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 1.

them to her advantage. She prepares her body for a full year (2:12) to win for it male approval.

This reading of the text suggests that Esther is not the heroine but a victim. She is the stereotypical female who exerts a great deal of effort to produce a beautiful body. She competes against other women for a man.⁷

I once supervised a PhD dissertation by a woman on Esther and it was particularly interesting as it allowed me to watch and listen as a woman read this book sympathetically. Usually the Hebrew textual tradition and the ancient Greek version of the Septuagint are the most significant witnesses to the text of Old Testament books. For Esther we have two ancient Greek versions that though similar to each other are also different in interesting ways. Fountain's conclusions recognise, among other things, that the Hebrew text of Esther treats its eponymous heroine differently, for example, highlighting her breaches of customary and conventional gender roles whereas the two Greek texts minimise them.⁸

To talk of Esther as the heroine of the book (as I did in a footnote above), however, is to jump ahead, as the book opens it is by no means clear that this will be so. Esther is not mentioned until 2:7, and then she is presented as dependent on Mordecai. What is even more striking, she does not speak until half way through the fourth chapter, by which stage Memucan (a minor character) has already spoken 78 words, and the king's servants 62. By then also, the villain, Haman, has spoken 33 words. Although Mordecai also does not speak until the middle of chapter 4, he has been mentioned 12 times in chapter 2, 5 times in chapter 3, and 11 times in chapter 4, before he does speak. While Esther has also been mentioned 12 times in chapter 2, she is not named at all in chapter 3 and only 4 times before she speaks in chapter 4. Thus, in terms of both speech and textual focus, in these early chapters the story seems, as Esther's feminist detractors believe, to be about the men.

A traditionally minded (especially male?) reader may therefore be lulled, at the start, into the assumption that this book, like so many others in Scripture, fails to question traditional gender roles. The feminist readers, who have focused on Vashti's rebellion against such a

⁷Alice Laffey, "The Influence of Feminism on Christianity," in *Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2001), 56.

⁸Allison Kay Fountain, *Literary and Empirical Readings of the Books of Esther* (New York: P. Lang, 2002), 68, 112, 162. Another reason I was delighted to be involved in that project, the use of empirical investigations alongside "expert" readings, sadly is not reflected in my own essay.

traditional role, may also have been led into such an understanding by these early chapters.

However, the men's extraordinarily exaggerated response to Vashti's refusal of her husband's demand may suggest caution about this conclusion. Memucan's presumption that because the queen has denied the king's authority, all wives begin to "look with contempt on their husbands" (1:16-18), and his even more extreme assumption that once Vashti is put in her place then "all women will give honour to their husbands, high and low alike" (1:20), seem to be accepted with approval by all the men in the text, but seems strangely unrealistic in any real world context. Presumably the customary phallocracy of the Persian Empire had by then been more widely undermined, for by royal decree also, "every man shall be master in his own house" (1:22)! If women have been so widely "lacking" in respect to their husbands, will promulgating a law demanding obedience change their attitudes?

Supervising another woman reading Esther added a further dimension to my own reading. Angeline Song approached this book from the perspective of "realistic empathy." Song also engaged with the negative feminist readings of Esther though not primarily by closer reading of the text, but rather by engaging her own story with the biblical narrative. Among other things this perspective of "realistic empathy," her point of view as a colonised woman, sold by her biological parents, learning a mix of Confucian respect and "Asian" humility, lead Song to see how Esther's responses, often perceived as acquiescing to patriarchy, may be her only reasonable manner of resistance, or the "pragmatism of the powerless."⁹

Song's use of the term "empathy" to describe the connection between reader and character, through which the act of reading impacts the reader in deeper than cognitive ways, is in line with the preferences of a number of theorists and psychologists of reading.¹⁰ However, most real readers have preferred talking about their experiences in terms of "identification."¹¹ Through the process of reading, and the experience of "entering the world" of the characters in a narrative, a text's readers are changed. This is the primary power of the genre of narrative prose. Cognitive Psychologist Keith Oatley sums it up like this: "the process of entering imagined worlds of fiction builds empathy and improves your ability to take another person's point of view. It can even change your

⁹See an abbreviated version in Angeline Song, "Heartless Bimbo or Subversive Role Model? A Narrative (Self) Critical Reading of the Character of Esther," *Dialog* 49, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 56–69.

¹⁰Susanne Reichl, *Cognitive Principles, Critical Practice: Reading Literature at University* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 109.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 110.

personality. The seemingly solitary act of holing up with a book, then, is actually an exercise in human interaction.”¹²

Song’s approach predicated on “realistic empathy,” raised questions for me as a male member of the imperial colonising race, and endowed with the authority of teacher and the title of doctor. With whom could I identify while reading Esther? Readers’ identification with characters, and therefore their possibilities of empathy, or even merely sympathy with them, has been widely discussed, but for the most part the criteria remain frustratingly vague. I have been unable to find a discussion of the textual or poetic features in a narrative that might promote empathy or identification with one character or another. However, it seems *a priori* likely that textual prominence would be important (a less prominent character is presumably, all other things being equal, less likely to provoke such a response of empathy).

In their pioneering (and much discussed) *On Gendering Texts* Brenner and van Dijk Hemmes discuss the concept of “voice” in texts. Their interest is in uncovering echoes of the voices of women in texts written by men. However, their list of features that give a character “voice” is interesting as possible indicators of textual prominence. Among other characteristics they note:

A voice belongs to her/him who holds the primary subject position in a discourse (after that of the narrator but, quite often, as the embodiment of the narrator’s privileged albeit covert “voice”). The voice often belongs to and expresses the focalizer of the text. When all or most of the affirmative answers to the questions, Who speaks? Who focalizes the action? Whose viewpoint is dominant? - converge on one and the same textual figure, then that figure embodies the dominant voice of a passage, be it prose narrative or poetic.¹³

On this basis, I suggest that the characters most spoken about, who speak most, and who are more often the focus of textual interest, are more likely to be empathised (or identified) with. So, turning to the

¹²Keith Oatley, "In the Minds of Others," *Scientific American Mind* 22, no. 5 (November 2011): 62.

¹³Athalyā Brenner and Fokkeliën van Dijk Hemmes. *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 7.

biblical¹⁴ text of Esther, which candidates propose themselves for a male reader with which to empathise or identify?

Ahasuerus is the first person to be mentioned. He speaks first, and speaks more words than anyone except Esther. He is introduced first, and presented as ruler of all he surveys and indeed of 127 provinces from India to Cush. Yet, Ahasuerus is a bumbling nonentity, although those 127 provinces must obey his every command (1:1). His counsellors and Esther successively, and easily, bend him to their opinions (1:21 cf. 2:1, 2:4; 3:10; 5:3). Actions that are (presumably) his are often described by the narrator using passive verbs, thus obscuring or diminishing his agency.¹⁵ He may speak more than the other characters; however, as Fountain has noted, almost all of his speech contains questions.¹⁶

Haman can be resisted as object of empathy, for despite being a melodramatic villain, he is also an evident fool. As villain, he is a desirable character for Jewish children to play, in Purim re-enactments of the story, but such a caricature of the blind idiocy of evil is hardly an appropriate role model for a reader's life.

Mordecai is a more promising candidate. He is a Jew, and thus ideologically and ethnically aligned with the narrator. He appears in the narration before Esther (Mordecai is introduced at 2:5 and Esther herself only at 2:7, as his dependent orphan cousin and ward). He is named 58 times (far more than the king, who is named only 30 times), indeed more than Esther, his ward (55 times), and at the end of the book he is elevated to second position in the empire, after king Ahasuerus (10:3), while Esther is not mentioned at all in the final chapter of the book that bears her name. At the start of the story, as we might expect of a dutiful ward, Esther follows Mordecai's advice (2:10), and he protects her (2:11). However, as the tension mounts his role becomes less significant. At the start, he uncovers a conspiracy and uses Esther as a channel to communicate this information to the king (2:21-23). In chapter three he bravely refuses to offer quasi-divine homage to Haman. But in chapter four, when the genocidal decree is promulgated, he is reduced to merely mourning in sackcloth. Only when Esther sends the king's eunuch Hathach to prod him is he moved to constructive action, and at the close of the chapter the roles of the two Jewish characters are reversed, and he goes and does "everything as Esther had ordered him" (4:17). It is true that in chapter six he is again extravagantly honoured, but this

¹⁴At this point I am only considering the Hebrew text on which most English translations are based considering this to be the "biblical" text of Esther (while realising that many Christians across time and space, notably members of Eastern Orthodox churches, will disagree), I will add some comments on the Greek versions of the story below.

¹⁵Fountain, *Literary and Empirical Readings of the Books of Esther*, 160.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 136.

pantomime serves more to humiliate the villain, Haman, than to present Mordecai himself as a role-model, and following Haman's hanging, Mordecai is honoured because of his family relation to Queen Esther, again a reversal of roles as she has become his protector and sponsor.

Recognising this relative dearth of male role models reminded me of my experience as a teenager on first reading Jane Austen's classic novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Like most readers I found myself experiencing events through the eyes of Elizabeth Bennet. Although she is not the narrator of the story, the narration usually follows her. The reader, in identifying with her, comes to share, and perhaps to understand, Elizabeth's frustration and sense of being stifled by the social roles expected of unmarried young women at that time and place. Seeing sympathetically (that is by experiencing them "with" her) the constraints on Elizabeth, a male reader is invited to consider how his own society's social expectations restrict and limit women.

Indeed, if Fountain and Song have correctly identified the features of the book of Esther, then the eponymous heroine both sometimes transgresses expected gender roles, and sometimes complies with the expectations placed upon her in order to achieve her goal (saving the Jewish nation from intended genocide). In this she always operates within a cultural setting that severely limited the behaviour expected of a "proper" woman. A reader who approaches the book identifying with Esther can hardly escape some sense of the confining and restrictive effects of these cultural expectations.

However, such a reading of Esther depends on an understanding that the Hebrew text itself offers such resistance to socially expected roles. As I noted in passing above, some feminist scholars believe that this book functions rather in support of such expectations. To my mind, one of the strongest evidences against their claims was presented in Fountain's thesis. The two Greek texts mentioned earlier,¹⁷ when compared with the Masoretic Text, offer consistently greater conventional religiosity (most notably by mentioning God, but also through characters praying to God), and they also present Esther as acting more in accordance with conventionally expected feminine roles (for example by showing less initiative). Even the differences in the order of presentation of information serve to highlight males in the Greek texts by comparison with the Hebrew.¹⁸

¹⁷For more information see e.g. Kristin De Troyer, "Esther in Text- and Literary-Critical Paradise," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, ed. Leonard Greenspoon and Sidnie White Crawford (London: A&C Black, 2003), 31. Both Greek texts present a number of additional sections, and well as other smaller adaptations of the traditional Hebrew text.

¹⁸Fountain, *Literary and Empirical Readings of the Books of Esther*, e.g., 31-34.

If we add to this the evidence of religious resistance to the inclusion of this book in the canons of Scripture, we can conclude that since early times the book has been perceived as too little religious. It is therefore no surprise that the Greek texts, if they are seen as secondary adaptations, as most scholars do see them, should take steps to “rectify” this omission. That these texts also take steps to rectify the narrative in the direction of having Esther behave in more conventionally acceptable ways, and by giving the men more prominent and dominant roles, therefore strongly suggests that the Hebrew Text was perceived, consciously or unconsciously, to go too far in presenting Esther as the focus character, and too much initiative.

Such a tendency to adapt the telling to conform the book to conventional gender roles is also evident in modern retellings aimed at children. *Veggie Tales* are a series of animated videos retelling Bible stories for children. Although owned by DreamWorks Animation (a secular company) the fact that the videos are marketed at Christian parents (particularly Evangelicals and Pentecostals) suggests that as well as entertainment value (note the references to pop culture for example) “faithfulness” to the Biblical text is likely to have been a consideration in the production, so any deviations from that text are of interest.¹⁹

The 14th *Veggie Tales* episode, “Esther . . . The Girl Who Became Queen,” adapts the story of the book of Esther.²⁰ The adaptations in the Greek versions make the religious elements more explicit. The adaptations in *Veggie Tales* do this even more strongly. These changes may not at first seem to function as a means of increasing Mordecai's role at the expense of Esther's, as the Greek changes did. However, looking more closely at the changes suggests a cumulative effect. The Hebrew text may suggest that Mordecai had a hand in instructing Esther, as his ward, about life and morals, but there his role as mentor is not made explicit. By contrast from the start of the video version we watch as Mordecai instructs Esther, thus his authority as guardian is highlighted, preparing for the later changes.

The biblical book (in the Hebrew text on which most English translations are based) highlights issues of gender relationships near the start of the book. Vashti's refusal to obey her husband and the men's fear of such “rebellion” (1:18) is the heart of the opening chapter. Indeed the extravagant response of the men to her disobedience is often noted and

¹⁹I assume the scriptwriters were working from memory of or access to common English Bibles, which render the Hebrew text, and not to either Greek text!

²⁰Already the title suggests the direction of the adaptations, for Esther becomes queen in the middle of the second chapter, while much of the remainder of the book presents her as saviour of her people. *Esther: the Girl Who Became the Saviour of Her People* might be thought a less gender biased title!

commented upon. In the *Veggie Tales* video version, the reason that Ahasuerus needs a new queen is left obscure, thus the issue of women refusing to obey men is removed from prominence in the story.

When Esther is in the palace, the telling in the Hebrew highlights her common sense and her initiative. These things show her wisdom as well as gaining her favour.²¹ In the video, her rise to favour seems to be attributed solely to her ability to sing well.²² During her early days in the royal harem, Mordecai's role as her mentor and advisor is much increased in the *Veggie Tales* version, by comparison with the biblical telling. Here the "boys" side with each other, as Mordecai tells her that Ahasuerus is "sharp, real sharp." They do this although, as in the Bible, in this telling he manifestly is not at all "sharp!" In the video, Esther speaks no more than Haman and Mordecai do.²³ In this version, the male villain Haman is given a solo like the heroine Esther. The Hebrew Bible telling of the story where Esther speaks more than any male character stands in stark contrast to this. There the most loquacious male is Ahasuerus with 148 words, Haman the villain speaks 121, and Mordecai a mere 25 words, while Esther speaks 182 words!

In *Veggie Tales*, once Haman's plot is revealed, Mordecai takes the initiative by informing Esther of what is going on, by contrast in the Bible at the start of chapter four he sits in mourning, and tells Esther nothing. There she must take the initiative by sending messengers to inquire about the meaning of his behaviour when it is reported to her. Mordecai again speaks more than Esther in the video version, and offers to call for prayer on her behalf. In the Bible version, it is Esther who uses her own authority to command prayer and fasting from the Jewish community. This religious intercession is not mentioned as being for her own needs, indeed it is implied that the people request divine aid for the community. In many ways the video retelling of this scene makes Esther an obedient ward to Mordecai, as traditional roles might suggest, instead of the reverse, as the Bible recounts, and also presents her as concerned primarily for her own needs.

In sometimes small, but in often obvious ways, this modern adaptation of the story of Esther presents its central character as more submissive than the Bible does. It also seems to avoid picturing the occasions where she takes the initiative, or frankly ascribes such initiating to a more suitable, namely a male, character—usually

²¹ Song, "Heartless Bimbo or Subversive Role Model? A Narrative (Self) Critical Reading of the Character of Esther," 60-1.

²²Perhaps a de-sexualised version of the Esther of many feminist readers, who rises merely because of her appearance.

²³I did not attempt to count the words, but the effect seems obvious.

Mordecai. These changes are not as strong and clear as the adaptations that were made because the telling is aimed at young children. Examples of these include replacing execution by banishment to the “Isle of Perpetual Tickling,” and removing all sexual tension from the story. Yet despite not being the biggest adaptations, by removing Esther's initiative and by minimising her breaches of conventional roles, a pronounced cumulative effect results in domesticating this biblical heroine. The book is made safe for male readers expected to live out conventionally gendered roles.

The book of Esther has often been the subject of controversy. Rabbis who mistrusted its failure to speak of God questioned its holiness. Luther by contrast distrusted its partisan Jewish character. Once one recognises the ways in which this book gently highlights Esther's initiative and her authority, especially since this follows after Vashti's more overt challenge to male dominance, one may discover another reason to suspect this “dubious” biblical book. Most retellings of the book, by both ancient and modern storytellers, tend to reduce the power of elements of the book's message that seem “difficult” to make it more palatable.

Some diminish Esther to a conventional girl called by her beauty and grace to assist Mordecai in saving the Jewish nation. They may make the book easier for male readers, but they diminish its power as they diminish its challenge. As well as providing a good tale for Purim pantomimes, this book also questions the assumptions made by patriarchal cultures about the respective roles of women and men.

A true though masculine reading of Esther then, will empathise with the young queen's struggles, wisdom, and courage. It will recognise how she operates within constraints set by convention even as she stretches the boundaries those constraints impose. It will be aware that her need to be effective forces her to comply with some demands of convention. Above all, such a reading will need be more supple in its own gender stereotypes and expectations than either *Veggie Tales* or the Greek translators were. Indeed, it will need to allow these stereotypes to be bent. In this process we male readers of Esther can learn to see the world as others see it, and recognising the limits on her actions we will see queen Esther, as the girl who became the saviour of her people.

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