

Navigating the Empire: Esther as a Model of Marginalisation¹

by Jacqueline Grey

Introducing Esther

The geographic displacement of segments of the Judean community as part of the Babylonian invasion is a disturbing yet pivotal episode in the Old Testament writings. The experience of the Judeans is captured in various expressions from narrative to poetry, including lament, historical testimony, autobiography, prophetic oracle, and prayers. These diverse writings each contribute to create a picture of exile and to frame what it might have looked like as part of the Judean experience. “Exile,” is a loaded term. It can refer to geographic displacement, psychological dislocation, religious separation, and/or political or social isolation. However, I would suggest that it is the character portrayal of Esther that captures most vividly the reality of exile with all of its diverse meaning. Esther is introduced in the narrative as an example of ultimate marginalisation. She is an orphan girl exiled from her homeland and into the harem of a Gentile king—thereby doubly exiled.² Yet despite her disadvantage, she utilises all her resources to reverse her situation. The narrative describes the movement of Esther from social marginalisation to being at the centre of the Empire.

This paper will explore how the character of Esther is a model for Jews living in the Diaspora as they attempted to navigate the Persian Empire. She is confronted with the challenge of either adopting or rejecting the Empire’s culture. Unlike other characters such as Daniel, she demonstrates a willingness to compromise (or adapt) to avoid persecution. This figure of Esther will be contrasted with the marginalisation of the Pentecostal community. Like Esther, the origins of Pentecostalism are a narrative of marginalisation. The minority communities, particularly the Assemblies of God in Australia and the United States, developed outside the boundaries of the broader and “respectable” religious and secular communities. Marginalisation or social exile was part of their identity as the faithful sought to separate from “the world” and from those opposed to the Gospel. However, like

¹This article was originally published in *The Old Testament in Theology and Teaching: Essays in Honor of Kay Fountain*. Edited by Teresa Chai and Dave Johnson, (Baguio City, Philippines: APTS Press, 2018) and is reprinted with permission.

²Carol Bechtel, *Esther*, Interpretation, (Louisville, KY: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2002), 30.

that noted in the narrative of Esther, there has been a shift in the narrative of Pentecostalism. In recent decades, it has been moving away from its psychological and cultural marginalisation and proactively seeking to be at the centre of the social and political community. In the light of this shift, what can the narrative of Esther offer the current Pentecostal community as it seeks to navigate the Empire?

Setting the Narrative

The narrative of Esther is set in the Diaspora, with all of its exotic descriptions of harem life and Persian bureaucracy. It presents a reflection on life for exiled Jews. Some of the peculiarities of life in this context include particular Jewish practices, such as fasting, as well as the conspicuous absence of God and the land of Israel in the narrative of the Masoretic text. While debate continues as to whether the Book of Esther was actually written in the location and period of the Diaspora (Stern, for example, presents a compelling argument for the Judean provenance of the Hebrew text), the actual setting of the narrative is clearly the Persian court.³ The narrative is part of the broader testimony of the people of Israel—a testimony that began in Babylon⁴ when Abraham was called to leave his homeland to become an exclusive worshipper of Yahweh. However, by the time of Esther, the journey had led the Israelites from living in the land of promise to being exiled back to Babylon.

The narrative of Esther is located in Susa, one of the capitals of the Empire. Yet while many characters of the Old Testament chose to return to the land of promise and help re-establish the Judean community, Mordecai and Esther chose not to return but to stay in the Persian capital. They remained in exile not only geographically, but also socially. Mordecai was of the house of Kish—a veiled reference to the strongly shamed and discredited house of Saul. One of the most disreputable acts of Saul was sparing Agag, king of the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15) in disobedience to the prophetic word. This reference is important in order to understand the enmity between Mordecai the Jew and Haman the Agagite because it reflects the ancient rivalry. According to Berger, the selection and function of Esther is to restore the reputation and honour of the line of Kish.⁵

³Elsie Stern, “Esther and the Politics of Diaspora.” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100, No. 1, (Winter 2010), 23-53.

⁴Specifically, Genesis 11:31 refers to Abram being originally located in “Ur of the Chaldeans.” This is generally identified as being located in the southern portion of Babylon or Mesopotamia. However, to emphasise the geographic connections in the narrative, he is referred to as being from more generally the region of Babylon.

⁵Yitzhak Berger, “Esther and Benjamite Royalty: A Study in Inner-Biblical Allusion.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129 (2010), 625-44.

Hidden Identities

The character of Esther is first introduced as the orphan cousin of Mordecai, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. It seems that Esther (or Hadassah) has lost her parents and her name. Hadassah means ‘myrtle’—a tree of restoration used in Isaiah 55 to picture the transformation of the desert from thorns to flourishing. Esther most probably means “star,” pointing to the Babylonian goddess Ishtar. As Betchel notes, it is almost as if a double identity is set up from the beginning, she being both grand Gentile goddess and humble Hebrew flower.⁶ This dualistic identity perhaps emphasises the Diaspora dream—to embody both the Gentile power and Jewish holiness. Throughout the narrative, the exiled girl is known as Esther. In fact, she not only is exiled from the land but also taken into the harem of the King. She is vulnerable to the circumstances around her.

Esther is the very picture of powerlessness—an orphaned female Jew living in Persia who is taken into the King’s possession. She accepts life in the harem, which the previous “star” Queen Vashti, had rejected with spirit. Yet it is this very lack of power that makes her a paradigm of the diaspora Jew. While Mordecai is identified as a Jew, for some reason knowledge of this ethnicity is dangerous, so Esther is advised by her guardian to keep this information quiet. She then exists in the harem as any other hostage. Nothing distinguishes her Jewishness except this secret known only to a few.

The Jewishness of Esther does not seem to have an effect upon her actions, behaviour, or worldview. Unlike Daniel, she does not follow the food laws, pray (in the Masoretic Text), or express interest in Jerusalem. She accepts her position in the king’s harem and docilely submits to sexual relations with a Gentile to whom she is not married. She is not distinguished from the other women in the harem, other than a sense of graciousness that endears her to others (2:15). Esther functions as a model citizen, demonstrating complete obedience to Persian law and customs. This is important in the narrative because later, Haman accuses the Jews of not keeping the King’s laws (3:8). Similarly, Mordecai, a royal courtier, progressively rises through the ranks of Persian court life despite his known identity as “Mordecai the Jew.” Being a Jew does not appear to be an obstacle to a successful life and position of influence. In fact, when Haman’s edict is announced in Susa, the city is described as being bewildered (3:15)—not hostile, simply confused.

However, is this lack of Jewishness presented in the Esther narrative a positive portrayal of Diaspora living or, as Stern suggests, a comic farce

⁶Bechtel, 30.

to ridicule this false utopian dream of dualistic living? Does Esther compromise too much? The context that prompts the revealing of Esther's ethnicity is the threat of extermination. Once faced with annihilation, she must choose either to identify with "her people" (8:6) or to reject her ethnicity. Calculated by the enemy of the Jews, Haman, the threat of annihilation develops as the key conflict in the story. As noted above, his hatred is not solely founded on the contemporary behaviour of a single Jew (Mordecai) but is based on an ancient tribal enmity. While Esther may think she can hide in the palace, as Mordecai boldly warns her, she will be found out eventually.

When Mordecai challenges Esther that perhaps she has "come to royal position for such a time as this," he presents her appointment as Queen positively. He challenges her that she, a Jew, will not be exempt from this extermination, even in the palace. Mordecai requests her help in this message passed on by her servants: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (4:13-14, NIV). As Saul shamefully lost his opportunity to reign, so Esther may lose the opportunity to redeem her family name. Perhaps another from the house of David might rise to take her place.⁷ To claim her opportunity, she must act boldly and decisively.

One of the great ironies in this section is that Haman's proposal to the king stated that the Jewish people were law-breakers, yet Esther is reluctant to help because it will mean breaking the law. However, to save her and her people from an edict based on them being alleged law-breakers, she must violate it. She rises to the challenge by ordering a three-day fast, after which she will go to the king unsummoned. By this action, she will potentially suffer the same fate as her predecessor, Vashti. Yet she determines to go to the king, even though it is against the law—"and if I perish, I perish" (4:15-16). By her actions, Esther associates with the Jewish people. In deciding to appeal to the king, she makes her and her people as one.

Like the Book of Esther, the Book of Daniel also contains a narrative of court conflict. They both navigate successfully the traps of their enemies to become powerful and feared figures by the resolution of the narrative. The key problem by which both Esther and Daniel are exposed is their "Jewishness." While Esther remains initially hidden, it is only time, as Mordecai threatens, before her secret is revealed. It is this exposure that proves critical to her actions. The enemies within both

⁷Berger, 635.

narratives display a hostility to the national identity of the heroes. However, unlike Esther, it is Daniel's piety that his enemies use to propel the conflict, which is subsequently resolved by God's active intervention.⁸ Yet, through their clever navigation of the conflict, the situation is reversed so that both Esther and Daniel emerge with position and influence that is desired by Jew and non-Jew alike. They emerge to find their place in a Gentile world. This place is both part of the Gentile culture and yet not incompatible or untrue to their own national and cultural identity. Even when Esther reveals her Jewish identity to the King, he does not balk at promoting her political power.⁹ Instead, he continues to gift her political demands (8:3-4; 9:12-13).

Yet despite the persecution, both Daniel and Esther do not present a critical perspective of the foreign court. They continue to exhibit a level of fidelity to their Gentile kings. The loyalty of Esther and Daniel is dualistic—i.e., they support both the Jewish people and the Persian king. This paints a portrait that Diaspora life outside the land of Israel was both successful and meaningful.¹⁰ It is successful in that they rise to positions of influence; it is meaningful in that they, particularly Esther, use their influence for the benefit of the Jews living in the land. As Kay Fountain notes, "When a person comes into a leadership position, it is not merely for their own benefit, but for the fulfilment of God's purposes and the protection of God's people."¹¹

Esther's Transformation

The exchange between Esther and Mordecai in Chapter 4 marks a shift both in the story and in the character of Esther. The narrative at this point is now told from the perspective of Esther. She is sending clothes to him and sending messengers to him and having messages reported back. She is authoritatively making commands. In calling for the fast, she assumes the role of a national and religious leader. Through this exchange with Mordecai, we see Esther emerge as a leader and hero for the Diaspora community. Mordecai begins to treat her not as his adopted daughter who should be obeying him, but as a partner and equal. Rather than being passive, she acts as an initiator and planner. That once-passive, marginalised girl becomes transformed into an active and powerful

⁸W. Lee Humphries, "A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973), 219-220.

⁹Stern, 42.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 29. According to Stern, the message of Esther is not a defense of Diaspora living, but "a comic critique of it" (p. 31). Yet, this anti-reading still places the narrative in the setting of Diaspora.

¹¹A. Kay Fountain, "Canonical Messages in the Book of Esther," *Journal of Biblical and Pneumatological Research*, Vol. 2 (2010), 3-17.

woman who saves her people. Now a model of courage and self-sacrifice, she ruthlessly sacrifices her enemies.

The conclusion of the Book of Esther presents a complete reversal—i.e., those without power (Esther) emerge powerful. She emerges as the awesome Gentile goddess who annihilates her enemies in turn and completes the destruction that Saul refused. By the end of the story, we see her take her full role as “Esther the Queen.” She stands as a peer with Mordecai as they direct the wealth of Haman and execute unrelenting vengeance. Yet she maintains, in fact re-discovers or re-invents, her Jewish past, in Chapter 9 being referred to as “Queen Esther, daughter of Abihail . . .” At the conclusion of the story, after she has both acted and spoken for herself, we discover that her father's name is Abihail, “my father is Strong”¹² She retrieves her heritage, adding legitimacy to her royal lineage through the redeemed name of the house of Saul, and reverses her previous familial exile and orphan state. She is now daughter and queen, no longer marginal but standing at the centre of the community. Through the seeming coincidences of the narrative coincidences that many scholars emphasise as the providence of God, Esther is now a key influencer in the land. She is the Jewish Diaspora dream incarnate.

Pentecostals and Esther

Like Esther, the Pentecostal community has been in social exile. When Pentecostalism first emerged within, among others, the North American and Australian landscape in the early 20th century, it was marked by marginalisation and rejection from the “respectable” society, including most other established denominations. A movement led mainly by the poor, socially marginal, academically uneducated, and some women,¹³ it was not acceptable to the conservative Western society, both religious and general.¹⁴ It was exiled as “strange,” “emotional,” and

¹²My thanks to Dr. Lee Roy Martin for this insight.

¹³By 1925, 11 of the 18 Pentecostal churches planted in Australia were founded by women. Even by 1930, 20 of the 37 churches (for which information is available) were initiated by women. Barry Chant, ‘The Spirit of Pentecost: Origins and Development of the Pentecostal Movement in Australia, 1870-1939.’ Thesis for Ph D, Macquarie University, 1999, 428.

¹⁴Unlike the Assemblies of God in America, which began among the urban and the working classes, the movement in Australia originated among middle-class and rural groups, who were not academically educated. According to Chant, “. . . in Australia, its origins were among people of relatively comfortable socio-economic status” (p.38). Chant demonstrates the middle-class beginnings of Pentecostalism by a comparative study of occupations, which “. . . shows that the percentage of Pentecostals involved in professional occupations in the 1930s was roughly double that of the community while the percentage of labourers was approximately half.”¹⁴ See Chant, 38.

lacking the correct objectivity expected by the religious community. This marginalisation was considered by the fledgling movement as a reflection of the depravity of the “world” and seen by the movement as a sign of the imminent return of Christ.

According to Grant Wacker, Pentecostals were certain they were riding the crest of the wave of history that would involve them directly in the intervention of God and be marked by an intensification of the divine presence and experience of the Holy Spirit for healing, global evangelism, and spiritual warfare.¹⁵ In this apocalyptic-type worldview, the faithful must endure “this present evil age” in expectation of future glory. Their worldview and sense of persecution was reflected in the eschatological and apocalyptic emphasis of their writings and limited literature. As Hanson notes, the experience of alienation or times of crisis is the sociological context from which many feel gives rise to apocalypticism.¹⁶ This worldview is not unlike that observed in the visions of Daniel. Like the Diaspora community, they were marginalised and expected to navigate that marginalisation.

These origins have profoundly affected the worldview and theology of contemporary Pentecostalism globally. Because of its orientation toward the supernatural, Pentecostalism has flourished predominantly in the non-Western context, such as South America and parts of Africa. However, as Pentecostalism has increased numerically over the last few decades,¹⁷ so also has its aspiration for increased social stature and political influence. This is observed particularly in the Australian context. The process of institutionalisation and adoption of wider cultural norms by a previously marginalised group in order to achieve social respectability has been the focus of various studies in Pentecostalism globally—a process from which the Pentecostal movement in Australia has not been immune.¹⁸

From the Margins to the Centre

The substantial numerical growth and subsequent process of institutionalisation in the Australian Pentecostal movement has been a

¹⁵Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (London: Harvard University Press, 2001), 251-65.

¹⁶Paul Hanson, *Old Testament Apocalyptic* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 75.

¹⁷According to Assemblies of God statistics (the largest Pentecostal movement in Australia), they currently consist of more than 1,000 churches with over 160,000 constituents.

¹⁸In particular, the study of Margaret Poloma on the A/G in the USA represents this attempt to capture the sociological changes within the global movement. M. Poloma, *Assemblies of God at the Crossroads: Charisma and Institutional Dilemmas* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1989).

double-edged sword. While it has meant the introduction of stabilising factors, such as training institutions and the formulation of doctrine, there has also been a loss of the earlier revival spirit linked to the immediacy of the *parousia*. As Hutchinson notes, “Bigger congregations meant bigger churches meant, quite often, that we stopped looking for the millennium and started building for it.”¹⁹ This growth and shift in ecclesiology has also impacted the wider mission of the Australian Pentecostal movement. Instead of identifying themselves as ‘Hadassah’ (the humble Hebrew flower), Pentecostals in Australia began to see themselves as agents of change and transformation within the structures of society and government—i.e., as “Esther” (the grand Gentile goddess). No longer waiting for the *parousia*, the victorious life could be experienced here and now. The Diaspora dream of Esther is active today, with Pentecostals too becoming a key influencer in the land as we navigate our way from the margins of society to the centre. The promise is that Pentecostals today can fulfil the Diaspora dream of functioning in positions of influence, which is to be desired by both Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal alike.

While this aspiration to move from exile to being strategically located in the centre has led to some positive outcomes, such as the planning and development of institutional structures, it has come packaged in the wrapping of “triumphalism.” This feeling is reflected in an official statement, published in 2009, outlining the values of the Assemblies of God in Australia (AGA); it includes this assertion:

Life is meant to be lived as an increasing adventure in prosperity. God’s intention is to prosper the righteous so that they can demonstrate the power of His Kingdom on earth. Prosperity is not an option but a mandate and responsibility given to all who believe in the authority of the name of Jesus. We are called to show forth the wonders of His increasing Kingdom, and this clearly requires an increasing measure of affluence so that we can have an increasing measure of influence.²⁰

The sense of expectation, triumph, and focus on economic prosperity expressed in this statement captures the feeling of contemporary Pentecostalism in Australia as it drives to make God’s

¹⁹Hutchinson, Mark, ‘The New Thing God Is Doing: The Charismatic Renewal and Classical Pentecostalism,’ *Australasian Pentecostal Studies*, Vol. 1, March 1998, 5-21.

²⁰<http://www.aog.org.au/AboutUs/KeyValues/LovePeople/tabid/142/Default.aspx> (accessed March 11, 2011).

kingdom established here on earth—not just in heaven! This paints a portrait of Diaspora life for the contemporary Pentecostal community—i.e., that living inside the margins is both successful and meaningful.²¹ Part of this shift towards respectability, like Esther, has been the re-discovering or retrieval of our Wesleyan and Anabaptist heritage.²² The surge of interest in the antecedents of Pentecostalism highlights that Pentecostals are no longer orphans. By retrieving our heritage, it adds legitimacy to our aspiration of influence and social inclusion. Like Esther, we are no longer marginal but stand at the centre of the community. Yet the question must be asked—What is the “cost” of this shift of Pentecostalism from the margins to the centre?

The Transformation of Pentecostalism

Like Esther, Pentecostals in Australia see themselves as agents of change and transformation by functioning within the centre of the “world” or earthly kingdom in which we exist. We see opportunities to shine as “stars” like Queen Esther (and perhaps even like Ishtar) as being a God-given opportunity. In this approach, we consider every type of work, whether secular or religious, to be both successful and meaningful. Like Queen Esther and Mordecai, each has a calling and vocation, even if that vocation is in the court of the Gentile king. But what if that calling is to be placed in the philosophical harem of our contemporary academy? Or what if that vocation is to write edicts that promote the welfare of one group over another? The lines between the secular and the sacred have blurred. This is not necessarily negative, as Pentecostals begin to engage with the broader issues of the culture and politics of our societies and leave behind the siege mentality. However, as we navigate the “Empire,” this blurring has the potential for us to lose our way and forget our mission. As Volf notes, “If one can describe with Luther the ‘lifting of a single straw’ as a ‘completely divine’ work, there is no reason why one should not be able to ascribe the same attribute to the most degrading types of work in industrial societies in which the human person is reduced to ‘a mere automaton, a wooden man.’”²³

²¹Stern, 29. According to Stern, the message of Esther is not a defense of Diaspora living but rather “a comic critique of it” (p.31). Yet, this anti-reading still places the narrative in the setting of Diaspora.

²²See for example, Matthew Clark, “An Investigation into the Nature of a Viable Pentecostal Hermeneutic,” Thesis for D Th, Pretoria: Unisa; (1997) and Walter J. Hollenweger, “The Critical Tradition of Pentecostalism,” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, vol. 1, (1992), 7-17.

²³Miroslav Volf, “Human Work, Divine Spirit, and New Creation: Towards a Pneumatological Understanding of Work,” *Pneuma*, Fall 1987, 173-193.

Using the position of influence to further our own group, ideologies, or even theologies at the expense of others is contrary to the wisdom of the Gospel. It can lead us to endorse callings and vocations that undermine the dignity of humanity created in the image of God for the goal of influence. In this sense, there is potential for the vehicle to become the goal—i.e., that Pentecostals become so mesmerised with our power and leadership that influence becomes the end goal. Thereby we forget this influence should have been merely a vehicle for justice and truth. For the contemporary Pentecostal community navigating life in the Empire of secular humanism (and thus embracing the “star” of Esther), we should not forget that we are also the “myrtle” of Hadassah—a branch of the tree of Christ that should bring restoration and transformation of the desert (or place of exile) from thorns to flourishing.

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