



THE ESTHER NARRATIVES AS REMINDERS – FOR JEWS AND FOR CHRISTIANS

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Retelling the Book of Esther

When someone asks us to describe the contents of the Book of Esther, the beginning is usually clear: depending on the version of the narrative that we know, we either begin with the episode that tells of the pompous banquet at the Persian court or with the description of Mordecai's dark and agitating dream. Starting with the festive banquet corresponds with the Hebrew Masoretic version, which for Jews and Protestants is the canonical version. Beginning with the dream corresponds with the Greek Septuagint version, which contains six additional sections as compared to the Masoretic version of the text. In Catholic circles, this version is usually the more familiar one. It is to be found, for example, when one looks for the Book of Esther in the German-language *Einheitsübersetzung*. However, the version presented there as the Book of Esther is strictly speaking a mixed one: in analogy to the Latin Vulgate, the basic text follows the Hebrew version while the Septuagint version is only given in the so-called “additions”.¹

At the latest when one turns to the end, it becomes clear that the task of retelling the Book of Esther is not at all easy. As is to be expected, here too the versions of the text vary: After chapter 9, which tells why and how the feast of Purim was introduced, the Hebrew version follows with a short closing note that leads the reader back to the Persian king and again emphasizes Mordecai's high position as the second in command after the king and his popularity “with his many kindred” (10:3). The Septuagint version also looks at the Persian king and Mordecai in chapter 10. Before ending with the so-called colophone, a note that says who transmitted the text that was translated into Greek, it presents a closing section in two parts, which is missing in the Hebrew version: On the one hand (F,1-6), the text leads back to the dream that was described in the beginning. Thus one also encounters Esther once again. Mordecai interprets the dream in the light of the events, and he tells of his insight that the things that happened “have come from God” (F,1) By means of the expression “God has done great signs and wonders” (F,6), which in the Bible usually refers to the Exodus narrative, the story of salvation as told in reflective retrospective in the Book of Esther is given the same rank as the story of the Exodus from Egypt. The allusion underlines that with Esther it is also a story of the *people* and of God's saving action for God's people. On the other hand, the interpretation of the dream is again followed by a comment introducing the feast of

1 A translation into English of the complete Septuagint version of the Book of Esther can be found, for example, in the NETS (*New English Translation of the Septuagint*), accessible in the internet: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/17-esther-nets.pdf>. A translation into German is contained in the *Septuaginta Deutsch* (cf. also the *Bibel in gerechter Sprache* and the *Gute Nachricht*; however, these are both freer translations than the *Septuaginta Deutsch*).

Purim (F,7-10). It gives another explanation for the name of the feast, and this explanation refers to the plural form of the name: according to this interpretation, the feast reminds one of the decisive moment when God had to judge between two lots or destinies, Israel's lot and the lot of the other nations.

I suspect that in orally retelling the Book of Esther, we hardly refer to these details just described. Perhaps – independently of the written version that we know better – we let the story end with the day when not the Judean men and women died but rather those who wanted to exterminate the Judean people. Perhaps we set the promulgation of the counter-decree already as the end (the collective danger thus seems to be banned), or we refer to the days of rest and feasting after the rescue from the enemies and to the fact that this is the foundation for the tradition of the feast of Purim.

Purim or the call to remember

In all versions of Esther, the theme introducing the feast of Purim takes up a considerable amount of space. In chapter 9, the verses 20-23, 27-28, 29 and 30-32 (LXX: 30-31) speak of the obligation to celebrate the feast every year. In the Septuagint version, there is in addition verse 10 of the final F section. When reading the call to make Purim an obligation, the way it is formulated seems laborious, but the repeated follow ups emphasize it all the more.

The attention given by the Book of Esther to introducing the feast in its final version makes it clear that the book wants something to be remembered or never to be forgotten. In looking at the concrete narratives of the Book of Esther, I believe that the task given us as readers is also to ask what the book wants to recall – independently of whether the annual celebration of the feast of Purim belongs to our own tradition or not.

By means of the Purim custom which was successfully established and which continues in Judaism to this day, an annual moment in time is given not only to celebrate but also to reflect on what is to be remembered. The text itself already speaks of many aspects. The most obvious is probably that the artfully composed entertaining narrative shows how the distress, menace and despair of individuals and of a whole community can be changed to salvation, joy and the courage to live. Over and beyond this, the text shows on the one hand how important it is to combine one's own initiative with cooperation – things don't just change by themselves! On the other hand, the readers are shown that not everything can be "made by humans": the rescue only succeeds through the interaction of human involvement and fateful turns of events. Those who are slandered and in danger must refer to something that lies beyond what can be humanly made and understood. Finally, the text optimistically promotes trust in the existence of order and of an authority over order² which guarantees that things go well for those who are good, who are slandered and persecuted through no fault of their own, and that on the other hand things go badly for those who are bad. In this context, remembering keeps hope alive.

The points mentioned are just examples, possible points for remembrance. By looking at the lived traditions of Purim, other such points could be deduced, since the various festive traditions, such as the feast's carnival character, pick up narrative characteristics, bring them to a head or lead them further. We could even go another step, as does Amos Gitai for example in his 1985 Esther film: Gitai reads the Book of Esther above all based on Esth 9:1-15,³ the passage that speaks of the

2 In the Hebrew version, the reference is more to order; in both the Septuagint and the so-called A-Text (a Greek version similar to the Septuagint, but all together shorter), which both speak explicitly of God, the emphasis is more on the authority for order (in the Septuagint this is again especially underlined by contrasting the earthly king with the divine one).

3 In the Septuagint, Esth 9:1-16.

murder of the adversaries. For him, this passage makes the Scripture into a “warning sign against the excess of revenge”, as Reinhold Zwick paraphrases it, to a “literary memorial set up as a deterrent example of how easily in a fatal exchange of roles, those persecuted can themselves become persecutors, how quickly one barbarism can turn into the barbarism of the opposing side.”⁴ According to Gitai, the Book of Esther picks up a universal problematic. He reads and stage manages it as a metaphor – and through his choice of actresses and actors as well as of the shooting location, he consciously connects it with the modern conflict in the Middle East.⁵

The feast of Purim never became part of Christian tradition. Nor was the Book of Esther given a prominent place in the Christian liturgical order of readings. Thus Christianity not only lacks the frame for facing the call to remember every year, but also the impetus to struggle with the book’s significance in today’s context, perhaps in the way Amos Gitai does. Brought to a head, Christians might simply leave the Book of Esther unopened.

Christian looking away

Of course the book did not remain unopened. When we look at the way early Christian interpreters read the book, it becomes clear that there was a strong tendency to look away even when the book was open. I cannot and don’t want to give a comprehensive description of how the Christian ways of reading Esther developed, but in the following I specifically want to choose three interpretations of Esther that do deal with the text, but that – in my opinion – do not really face the task set us by the Book of Esther.

a) From Hrabanus Maurus back to Aphrahat

Hrabanus Maurus’ writing “*Expositio in librum Esther*” is thought to be the oldest Christian commentary on the Book of Esther.⁶ With Hrabanus and his writing, we are in the 9th cent. CE in the Eastern-Frankish area. He wrote his commentary on the Book of Esther during the time when he was abbot of the monastery in Fulda (822-842 CE). Hrabanus’ way of reading the Book of Esther⁷ is marked by the conviction that it contains “in varied ways the mysteries of Christ and the Church in a hidden manner”.⁸ Thus it is clear: With his commentary, Hrabanus presents an allegorical way of reading the book. He is less interested in the narrative’s movement as a whole and the so-called literal meaning than in individual figures or combinations of elements and the question, what these stand for symbolically (*sensus allegoricus*). In the first chapter of the Book of Esther, he interprets for example the Persian king who, in the third year of his reign, invites people to the great feast, as a type of Christ who gives those who believe spiritual nourishment. In analogy to the third year of reign, this is the third era in which Christ is active in this way. With the third era, Hrabanus means the “era of grace”, which followed the “era before the law” and the “era under the law”. The fact that his thinking is strongly marked by substitution theology, so by the idea that Christianity has replaced Judaism, becomes even more obvious in his interpretation of the Queens Vashti and Esther. In his interpretation, it is not Esther, the Judean woman, who stands for the

4 Reinhold Zwick, Mit „Esther“ für Versöhnung streiten. Zu Amos Gitais filmischer Aktualisierung der biblischen Erzählung, in: *Biblical Interpretation* 14 (2006), 54-75, here 63.

5 Thus for example the Arab actor and later director of the film “Jenin, Jenin”, Mohammed Bakri, plays the role of Mordecai. The shooting location is repeatedly the ruins in Haifa’s quarter Wadi Salib.

6 For an overview of the way in which early Christian theologians referred to the Book of Esther, cf. Agnethe Siquans, Esther in der Interpretation der Kirchenväter. Königin, Vorbild der Tapferkeit oder Typus der Kirche?, in: *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 12 (2008) 414-432. On Hrabanus and his commentary, cf. Jan Doehorn, Der Esther-Kommentar des Hrabanus Maurus, in: *LEQACH* 4 (2004) 159-170.

7 Hrabanus is commenting on the Latin Vulgate version without the so-called additions.

8 In the original: *multipliciter Christi et Ecclesiae sacramenta in mysterio continet*.

Jewish people, but rather the Persian woman Vashti. He teaches that Esther, who succeeds Vashti, represents the Church of the Nations, which has taken the place of Judaism.

With his Christian allegorical interpretation of the Book of Esther, Hrabanus picks up in the 9th cent. a tradition of interpretation that can already be found centuries earlier. That brings me to the second interpretation of the Book of Esther, to Aphrahat, whom I would like to introduce briefly.

Aphrahat is counted among the Syrian Fathers of the Church. He lived from around 270 until 350 CE in what was then the Persian Sassanide kingdom. His "Teachings" (*Demonstrationes*) contain an allegorical-typological interpretation of the Book of Esther.⁹ In concise and succinct language he formulates sentences such as the following:

Mordecai was persecuted, Jesus was persecuted.

Because Mordecai sat down and clothed himself in a sack, he freed Esther and his people from the sword; because Jesus clothed himself with the body and humbled himself, he freed the Church and her sons from death.

Because of Mordecai, Esther found favor with the king, came in and put herself in the place of Vashti, who had not done his will; because of Jesus, the Church found favor with God, came in and belonged to the king in place of the gathering (sc. Synagogue), which had not done his will.¹⁰

Here again, combinations are taken up or even bent into shape without any connection to the text: not in order to bring the story to the readers, but so as to remodel the story and to make it into a tool for teaching a Christian triumphalist doctrine. Already with Aphrahat, Vashti refers to the Jewish community and Esther to the Christian Church. In contrast to Hrabanus, Aphrahat links the Persian king with God and Mordecai with Jesus.

By choosing individual elements in the narrative without taking into consideration the whole literary context, both theologians manage to stand the content of what is narrated on its head: instead of speaking of the rescue of the Jewish people, the Book of Esther now underpins the idea that Judaism is a lost, misled or even obstinate people. When one places the described way of interpreting the story of Esther in correlation with the book's explicit contents, this interpretation hardly lags behind Haman's arrogant and slanderous deed through its self-righteous and eclectic access that bends the facts of the book's contents.

b) A way of reading in 16th cent. Zurich: Jos Murer's "Hester-Spyl"

With Jos Murer we shall take a big leap in time into the second half of the 16th century. Murer lived from 1530 to 1580 in the Zurich of the Reformation. He himself was not a trained theologian but a greatly talented and recognized craftsman and artist, a glass painter, a literary figure and an illustrator. As craftsman he belonged to a guild and he also attained a politically influential position.

Murer wrote several plays. Some of them are based on biblical material and in one he stage managed the Book of Esther.¹¹ Murer's plays and their performances came at a time in which plays were welcomed by people of the Reform movement. This was not always or everywhere the case:¹² Calvin, for example, downright bedeviled theater; he feared that it would offer the devil, the "master of all appearances", an ideal working area. Zwingli and his successors in Zurich seem rather to have followed Luther's positive attitude. There is evidence of their having themselves

9 *Demonstrationes* 21,20; cf. Siquans, 2008, 427-428.

10 Translation: *Fontes Christiani* 5/2, 493f. (P. Bruns).

11 For an overview of Murer's pieces, cf. André Jean Racine, *Jos Murer. Ein Zürcher Dramatiker aus der zweiten Hälfte des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Schriftenreihe der Stiftung von Schnyder von Wartensee 51), Zürich 1973.

12 For the situation in Zurich and the position taken by the various Reformers regarding plays cf. Thomas Brunnschweiler, Johann Jakob Breitingers „Bedencken von Comoedien oder Spilen“. *Die Theaterfeindlichkeit im Alten Zürich. Edition, Kommentar, Monographie* (Zürcher germanistische Studien 17), Bern and others, 1989.

written dramas and of having collaborated in performances. Luther esteemed the educative function of plays. He was convinced that certain people were more willing to accept the truth when it came “dressed up”. He demanded of biblical dramas that they serve the Gospel: their protagonists should be an example of a life justified by Christ.

With his “Hester-Spyl” Jos Murer created a play that fundamentally corresponds with these criteria. He probably already knew other plays about Esther marked by the Reformation¹³ – above all, the Hester comedy by Hans Sachs of 1536¹⁴ and the play “Hamanus” by Thomas Naogeorg of 1543 were very influential. Murer’s play is interesting because it stands for a tradition of reading the Book of Esther that does not interpret the story in the above-mentioned allegorical sense.¹⁵ Before speaking about the contents, I want to outline briefly the context of the performance: Murer wrote his Esther play for a wedding which took place on February 11, 1567. According to the printed edition, which was published shortly after the performance, the play was performed “by a gathering of young citizens”, so by a group of young men. This corresponded entirely with the practice of bourgeois plays at the time. Upon first sight it might be surprising to encounter Esther as material for a wedding. We shall see how Murer definitely managed to correlate the occasion and the material.

Already the title of the printed edition makes clear that in Murer’s way of reading, entertainment and teaching go together:

HESTER
A NEW PLAY / IN WHICH
IS TOLD / HOW GOD SAVES HIS PEOPLE
THROUGH HESTER / FROM THE DEADLY
UPRISING OF HAMAN / AN[D]
BROUGHT HIM DOWN AND PUNISHED HIM / TO TEACH / THAT
NO ONE MUST ABUSE HIS POWER OR WELL-BEING /
BUT BE HUMBLE

The title also already presupposes that Haman as the bad guy is at the center. His malice and uncouth behavior are underlined in the text by means of several elements that are freely added: For example, Haman annoys the king by coming too late to Esther’s second reception. In addition, a couple of devils appear twice and rejoice over Haman’s behavior. After Haman is led away, one of them expresses his joy to the other saying: “Come here, my companion, the matter has succeeded / We have gotten us a roast.” Haman turns out to be the real devil’s roast.

Where Esther is concerned, Murer places an odd emphasis compared to the biblical model: She appears as the virtuous, obedient wife of the king. The latter, rejoicing over this “gift”, assures her that he will love her all his life. Murer contrasts Esther’s obedience and modesty with Vashti’s disobedience and arrogance. She embodies the bad wife, who deserves to be rejected.

In particular, the way the female figures are presented transforms the Book of Esther into a good bourgeois wedding play that corresponds with the values of the time. But neither the order of genders nor the order of society as a whole is shaken up. In the final monologue there is again a reference to Haman, whose fate shows what happens when someone takes it upon himself to leave the place that God has determined for him or her in the order as a whole. Although Murer reads the text without bringing in an allegorical interpretation, one can also accuse his presenta-

13 For the characteristics of the Esther dramas during the period of the Reformation and the possible reasons why they were widespread, cf. Wolfram Washof, *Die Bibel auf der Bühne. Exempelfiguren und protestantische Theologie im lateinischen und deutschen Bibeldrama der Reformationszeit (Symbolische Kommunikation und gesellschaftliche Wertesysteme 14)*, Münster 2007, 114-139.

14 The original title: *Comedia. Die gantze hystori der Hester*.

15 Valten Voith’s Esther play of 1537 testifies to the fact that a way of reading marked by ideas of the Reformation could also be combined with an allegorical interpretation as described above (on this, cf. Washof, 2007, 135-138).

tion of having bypassed an essential point in the biblical version of the narrative: it unrestrainedly bypasses the potential for a critique of power that is present both in the Hebrew and in the Greek versions of the story. In the Hebrew version, this potential can be felt above all in the first chapter: the way in which the text describes the “Vashti affair” and the royal crisis management introduce the readers to a king who covers up his lack of sovereignty by means of his exaggerated implementation of power. The Septuagint version on the other hand, which in contrast to the Hebrew version mentions God explicitly, draws the Persian court as a negative backdrop in order to underline the true kingship of God. Both versions relativize human power behavior and give rise to the question, what good ruling and a good life together could mean.

Back to the text – but how?

How can the Book of Esther be read by Christians without their looking away again all too quickly? There are certainly examples of ways of reading the book from a Christian perspective that deal with the material in the Book of Esther in a more serious manner than the ones just mentioned, and there are ever more such examples. In the last decades, individual Christian exegetes and above all women exegetes have begun to give more weight to the Book of Esther and to the issue of a credible reception of it by Christians. Among these are for example Klara Butting and Marie-Theres Wacker. It can also be seen that efforts are being made to pay more attention to the book in the liturgical order of readings. Within the framework of the Ecumenical Order of Readings, which over eight years leads through the entire Christian Bible, it will be the turn of the Book of Esther next year from October 6 to 18. If one follows this order of readings, the result is that the Book of Esther is read at least every eight years. Also, the so-called “Alternative Plan of Reading Women’s Pericopes”, which was published by the Women’s Commission of the Linz diocese, takes up the Book of Esther. There, individual passages from the book are at the center of a Roman-Catholic Sunday liturgy every three years.

Of course, the Book of Esther can also be brought to mind independently of liturgical reading plans. Even if there is no tradition of the feast of Purim, the call to remember is nevertheless to be kept in mind in a special way. With my contribution, I have tried to show that this can never be just a matter of “that” (*that* we remember the contents of the book). Directly linked to the “that” is the question, *how* we want to remember material in the Book of Esther – which of the story’s narrative versions do we want to follow and which not. *What* we ultimately choose as being worthy of being remembered can certainly change: conditioned by the context or because reading the text has let us discover a new facet of the rich story.

Translation: Sr. Katherine Wolff