

*"That night, sleep deserted the king."  
(Esth. 6:1)*

**45<sup>th</sup> International Jewish-Christian Bible Week**  
**The Book of Esther**  
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## SHABBAT SERMON

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By the end of this Bible Week, almost everything that could be said about the Book of Esther will have been said. But there remains a fundamental issue that has been touched on but perhaps not sufficiently addressed. Despite all we have learnt about the additions to the Hebrew Book of Esther in the Septuagint, in the various Aramaic targumim and midrashim, perhaps we have not fully accepted the central assumption that they all point to: that the Book of Esther is deliberately and consciously a completely secular work of fiction. Why else would the authors of the Septuagint, and the targumim and the midrashim feel the need to overlay it with their religious apologetics and pious insertions? If we actually respect their judgment, it is actually a serious mistake to introduce a religious undertone into the original book itself where none was ever intended. But rather than find such an idea disturbing, instead we might want to ask how an utterly secular book could find a place in the Biblical canon. Indeed the very possibility that there is a place for precisely such a book, is actually further proof of the extraordinary wisdom of those who created and sealed the canon. Because if God is everywhere else in the Hebrew Bible, there has to be somewhere where God is not, if only to be true to the totality of our human experience. Therefore to read God into the book itself is either a radical misunderstanding of the text we are actually reading, or even an act of spiritual cowardice.

If we accept this premise, however briefly and uncomfortably, it does set us free to raise questions about the creativity and interests of the author.

For example, who is the author's favourite character? I think it is a toss-up between Haman and Ahasuerus. In purely literary terms, Haman gets the best chapter in the book, chapter six. Look at the pleasure the author has in describing the arrogance with which Haman assumes he is the one whom the king wishes to honour, the grandiose suggestions he makes about the parade, incidentally revealing his secret ambition to wear the king's crown, and then the clenched teeth through which he has to proclaim the same statement as he leads Mordechai the Jew through the streets. The refrain, 'the man whom the king wishes to honour', five times repeated, each time in a different tone, in Haman's mind or on his lips, is probably the highpoint of the writing. The author truly loves his Haman at that moment.

If Haman is the author's favourite, Ahasuerus is his masterpiece, because he remains ambiguous from beginning to end. The rabbis were right to ask: 'Was he wise or was he a fool?' But maybe he was both at different times. At the beginning of the book he has various kinds of advisers in groups of seven, perhaps a rather cumbersome arrangement but seemingly effective. Moreover the head of an autocratic regime can only survive by providing checks and balances, to prevent any other single individual becoming a threat. But for some unknown reason the king has elevated Haman to a unique position of power. A foolish move, and one that may have fuelled Mor-

dechai's own ambitions. Why else risk breaking a command of the king in refusing to bow to Haman?

If Ahasuerus has made a mistake in promoting Haman, when Haman seems to be getting too important or dangerous, the king knows exactly how to handle him. When he tells Haman to lead Mordechai through the streets, the latter expressly named as Mordechai the Jew, it is clearly a slap in the face to any ambition Haman may have had, and a challenge to his plot against the Jews. Haman has been put in his place, and Mordechai acknowledged as an appropriate rival and counterbalancing force. This could have been the end of the story, if the book had been called 'megillat achashverosh'. No wonder Esther's accusation of Haman makes the king angry, because now he has to take further action against his former advisor and drinking companion, thus upsetting the new balance of power that has been so cleverly established. So is he angry with Haman for what he has done, or with Esther for adding this complication to a neat political balancing act? Perhaps that is why he leaves to walk in the garden, faced with this annoying problem. When he returns to find Haman lying at the feet of the queen, the decision is made for him, whether he likes it or not. So Haman has to go, but that means the king now has to deal with all those forces throughout the realm that would have supported Haman. That makes Esther and Mordechai, while seemingly acting in their own interest, essentially collaborators in the king's attempt at damage control. No wonder Ahasuerus keeps an exact tally of those who have been killed, and he is the one who invites Esther, by now a willing accomplice, to finish the job with another day of slaughter. From the beginning to the end of the book Ahasuerus remains the central figure around whom the entire story ultimately revolves.

But what of Esther and Mordechai? Of course they get the respect due to their important roles as saviours of the Jewish people. Moreover they share that other great literary scene in the book, the conversation conducted through intermediaries when Esther is forced to learn about Haman's decree, and is challenged to take action herself to prevent it. But if Esther is heroic, Mordechai is portrayed as a different kind of buffoon, trying hard to undo the catastrophe that he himself created by refusing to bow to Haman, whatever his motive might have been. So he multiplies his arguments to bully Esther into acting: threatening her with the possibility of her own death, suggesting that her situation at the palace was somehow 'ordained' for just such an eventuality. His desperation is revealed in his hope that 'help will come from another place', but in the Palace of Ahasuerus, there is no other place. The arguments work, and the new Esther is unleashed: intelligent, cunning, seductive and ultimately ruthless. She is another great literary creation, and an essential figure in the story, but does the author love her or even like her?

With Haman dead, the author seems to have lost interest. The story rumbles on, some battles are fought off stage, some bureaucratic tidying up takes place and we come to an ironic happy end: the king gets to order new taxes, and Mordechai replaces Haman, with due pomp, for as long as it suits the king. And Esther disappears back into the harem and obscurity, where according to the culture that lies behind the book, she actually belongs. Ironically, Haman fell because he underestimated what a determined woman could achieve.

So if this is even a plausible reading of the author's perspective on the characters, what was the purpose in writing it and why is it in the canon?

One possible answer is that the book is a celebration of Diaspora, a dream about all that could be achieved on one's own in a land of exile. For in exile one might actually be free from the burden of God's eternal plans for the Jewish people. Like a Joseph of old, a Mordechai could reach the highest ranks in this new society, save the lives of his people, and gain great respect amongst them. The occasional Haman could be defeated by one's own foresight, cunning and political astuteness. It is a triumphal dream, but ultimately a naïve fantasy. Perhaps we need such escapist dreams to offer some hope, given the bitter realities of history. But if we are uncomfortable with Esther as a secular book, there are many other books in the Hebrew Bible where God can be found and to which we can turn, so that relief and rescue can indeed come to us, 'from another place'.