Today’s Big Ideas: Esther

1. Esther is set during the Persian period, but it is a fictional story probably written during the late Persian period or Greek, to explain why the Jews celebrate Purim, which is Persian in origin. There is no mention of Esther in the Dead Sea scrolls or in first century BCE literature, but it is part of the Megillah by the 2nd century CE.
2. This story has lots of symmetrical reversals and “poetic justice.” All the plots by enemies of the Jewish people are revisited upon them.
3. God is not mentioned in Esther, which makes it okay to illustrate the scroll; however, during the Greek or Hellenistic period, additions were made to make the characters more acceptable to observant Jews. These additions include personal prayer by both Esther and Mordecai.
4. Esther may have been purposely hyperbolic or even humorous. King Ahasuerus is seen as easily duped or led; the numbers listed for feast days and slaughtered enemies seem improbable.
5. Martin Luther (the protestant leader, not the civil rights activist) wished it had never been written.
6. This story tells of a vassal people succeeding in a foreign empire and destroying their enemies by guile and sexuality. It celebrates the underdog. It does not advocate peaceful coexistence with other groups.

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Additions p. 53 (Apocrypha)

**Setting**: Persian Period 539-333 BCE. Xerxes I (“Ahasuerus”) 486-465 BCE. But though it has Persian names, it is a novella with clear historical inaccuracies.

* Background of Persian period: Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar exiled ruling class and skilled artisans in 586 BCE. Most working class Jews remained in Israel.
* Persian period begins with invitation for Jews to return and rebuild temple, incited by 2nd Isaiah
* Some Jews remain in Babylon under new Persian regime; first “Diaspora” community
* Little consistent historical information about this period: Ezra 1-6, Haggai refer to events, but aren’t internally consistent.
* Structure benevolent dictatorship; Jewish governors answer to Persian king; often in conflict with Hebrew High priests.
* At this time, the Pentateuch was probably reworked into its final form. –may have been sponsored by Persian govt.
* Chronicles written (alternate history) at this time; all according to Judean viewpoint
* Job, Ecclesiastes probably composed then; parts of Proverbs too.

**Composition:** Probably Hellenistic period pre Antiochus. Late 4th century, early 3rd. Clues—Style, Opening, factual errors (e.g. Mordecai’s brother listed among original Babylonian exiles (587); would make him at least 120 years old, and Esther at least 80. )

**Author** probably a Diaspora Jew in Persia; Esther (female) represents all marginalized and powerless. (analogous to an Islamic resident writing in the US—marginal citizens or those who must walk a careful line. Author carefully sets story about 180 years in past to avoid reprisals).

**Purpose**: argues that oppressed should act shrewdly to survive and flourish; Legitimates Purim, which came from Babylon or Persia and was adopted by Diaspora Jews.

**Canon Controversy**

* Some dislike it. Martin Luther wished it had never been written; it was only text not included among Dead Sea Scrolls
* No mentions of God; interest in Fate; no Jewish practices or Dietary laws
  + However, steeped in biblical references and traditions
* Uncritical account of violence (“symmetric pattern of reversals”)
* Salacious content—Esther is a concubine who succeeds through beauty and perhaps sexual prowess
* Arguably, whole purpose is to legitimize a pagan celebration; would have been unpopular with non-Diaspora Jews

**Esther: Text**

* Opening: problem of dating
* Opens and closes with a banquet
* Structural devices: banquets, edicts (ironic in relation to each other), reversals
* Women: Vashti vs. Esther
  + What is Vashti’s crime
  + National crisis: satirical. Imagine Bush consulting Karl Rove when his wife disobeys him.
  + emphasizes that king can be ruled by a woman
* Mordecai: implies he was exiled in 587 to Babylon (at least 150 years prior)
  + sits at gate—manages to overhear a great deal
  + good Jew-doesn’t bow down to Haman; asks Esther to risk everything
* Preparation for Harem
* Story of lots—spurious invention to explain Purim
* Sackcloth and Ashes—form of mourning—discuss present ways we show mourning
* Mordecai’s charge to Esther 4:9
  + Esther is not punished for breaking the law
* Reversal—happens because king happens to be reading his own annals.
  + Haman is vain, thinks to be honored; describes honors for Mordecai
* Esther’s banquet speech: 7:3.
  + Mordecai gets Haman’s power, reverses the PUR—destruction. Allows Jews to defend themselves against the Persians.
* Closing banquet, celebrates destruction of thousands.
* Esther orders the observation of Purim.

**How to read Esther:**

* Feminist argument or not? Or do women merely symbolize all marginalized Jews?

**Apocryphal additions**

* “improvements” skillfully woven into regular story
  + motivation and point of view for Esther (prayer to Yahweh)
  + dream vision of Mordecai authorizes and organizes content
  + more references to Yahweh
  + harsher views of gentiles
* Issue of Greek content—early Hellenistic document revised by later Hellenists, considered inauthentic