suppose the first thing to say about the book of Esther is that Martin Luther hated it. He absolutely hated it. He called Esther “less worthy of being held canonical” than any other writing of the Old Testament, and he put it on a list with Maccabees for books that “Judaize too much and contain much pagan naughtiness.”

Luther may have been uniquely vocal and vitriolic on the matter, but he is far from alone among Esther’s critics, particularly her Christian ones. A robust treatment of Esther’s defects would surely include the book’s famed failure to mention the name of God or to recognize divine providence. It would harp on her lack of consideration for classic Old Testament doctrines such as covenant and circumcision and point out that ultimately she would never be quoted in the New Testament, either. Such a list might go on to detail the book’s apparent obliviousness to the practices of the Torah or the temple and her indifference to anticipating the Messiah, the gospel message, or the church.

All of these pose interpretive difficulties quite apart from the ethical conundrum we reach in the climactic account of the happy slaughter of the Jews’ enemies and the establishment of a festival, Purim, for this slaughter’s annual commemoration. Understandably reluctant to touch this annual invitation, Christians following the Revised Common Lectionary visit Esther just once in the three-year cycle, during the autumn of Year B—haphazardly at that, reading 7:1–6, 9–10 and 9:20–22. It’s no wonder; the book and its message just don’t play by our rules.

But then, the lesson of Esther’s opening chapter is that sometimes our demand for the presence of the queen and the easy display of her royal beauty is met with sullen recalcitrance and shocking refusal (1:12). This is not yet the eponymous queen but Vashti, her predecessor: all of the king’s horses and all of the king’s eunuchs cannot force Vashti to appear before him. Accordingly, she has been made into a “feminist heroine” by some, and perhaps rightly so. But the pressing question, given the narrator’s absolute lack of interest in Vashti after this scene, is: who is this new queen for whom Vashti’s dismissal makes way?

If Esther’s entrance into the royal Persian court is by divine providence, the text does not announce it openly. Likewise, if Esther’s entrance into the Christian canon occurs by the gracious and mightily purposeful will of God, the subtlety has been lost on many. Nevertheless, she arrives. So what are we to make of her? What do we make of the queen who shows up when at last we give up on dragging another forward to conform to our expectations? What does Esther have to reveal to us about our God, Who seems often content to remain hidden?

The tension between God’s hidden and revealed presence within the narrative of Esther is typified by the entrance of the story’s Jewish heroes in 2:5–7, an entrance that both reveals and hides their Jewishness.

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Saul and Agag, between the nations of Israel and Amalek.

Esther’s Jewishness, on the other hand, is concealed almost immediately. Her Hebrew name, Hadassah, is brought up only to be dismissed so that she can be referred to as Esther for the rest of the text—a curious emphasis given that a similar name change may have accompanied Mordecai’s assimilation to life in the Persian capital, but his Hebrew name is never mentioned.

Mordecai and Esther’s Persian names echo those of Marduk and Ishtar who Mesopotamian gods and, not insignificantly, cousins. Marduk gains power by destroying the gods’ dragon enemy Tiamat in a narrative that has nothing to do with the text of Esther, unless you are reading it in the Greek, where an addition opens the text with a vision of two great dragons doing battle (Addition a:5–12, or Esther 11:5–12 in translation from the Vulgate).

Ishtar may in fact have some bearing on this story: she is a goddess of beauty and fertility and fate. Her feast fell in the month of Tebeth, when Venus became visible in the Ninevite night sky—precisely when Esther was taken into Ahasuerus’s palace (2:16). In a world where lots were cast to obtain oracles relating the gods’ decisions regarding the fates, Ishtar could be petitioned to change them. Ancient prayers addressed to her confess: “It is in your power, O Ishtar, to make an unfavourable fate favourable,” and “You change fates so that evil becomes good.” This certainly evokes the successful reversal of events that Esther brings about against the lots that the wicked Haman will have cast for the destruction of the Jews (3:7), but it has also invited readers to wonder if God is not named in the text because Esther is really a barely veiled retelling of a pagan myth, reflecting no sort of faith in the God of Israel at all. Yet for all its pagan parallels, the reversal Esther orchestrates could also be spoken of in the resonant Hebrew words that Joseph has for his brothers: “Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as He is doing today” (Genesis 50:20, nrsv here and in the rest of the article). Is the God of Israel hidden here under layers of pagan myth or revealed in the echo of the patriarchs? Or is there a way for the all-powerful God of the universe to be both?

Whatever creation’s potential for telling the glory of God (even pagan myth’s potential for telling that glory), the subtle references to the Joseph cycle that abound within Esther’s text actively work against reading the narrative as a “merely” pagan tale. Her very status as a Jew passing as a Gentile in a foreign court—and further, a Jew who eventually invokes her status within the court to rescue Israel—echoes Joseph’s story.

Likewise, as conflict escalates between Mordecai and Haman, we find that the king’s servants “spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them” (3:4). The refusal to bow and do obeisance before Haman triggers a verbal echo of Joseph’s refusal to bend to the wishes of a Gentile: for although Potiphar’s wife “spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her” (Genesis 39:10). As Jon Levenson notes, both of these refusals result in a false accusation, and both bring about a catastrophic decree against an innocent party, but both eventually see the rescue and vindication of Israel.

Joseph is also recalled in the great risk Esther takes to save her people. Her mighty words, “and if I perish, I perish” (4:16) echo Joseph’s calling for and Jacob’s sending to Egypt his youngest son Benjamin as proof that the others were not spies in the land: “As for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved” (Genesis 43:14).

Once we begin to listen for the echoes that reveal the hidden activity of God, Esther becomes archetypal of divine action in a further way. She continues to echo the deliverance of Israel, but she also begins to call, just as the deliverance of Israel does, for God’s deliverance of all the world. Mordecai has suggested to Esther that she has come to her position “for just such a time as this” (4:14). It was likewise “when the fullness of time had come” that God’s Son would be revealed in his divine and human natures (Galatians 4:4). And Esther, as Christ, is “placed like no other Jew to intercede on their behalf because she has both the trappings of majesty and a body subject to decay and death.” She, too, inhabits “two natures” that give her the poignancy and power necessary to intercede with the great king, whose fellowship she shares, in order to secure the salvation of an accursed people, whose burden she shares. She, too, according to Midrash, prays against the hardness of the world the prayer of Psalm 22: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”

There is another significant aspect to the timing of Esther’s intercession, and that is the publication of Haman’s terrible decree, “giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar” (3:13). This decree was written and sealed and issued on the thirteenth day of Israel’s first month, Nisan (3:7, 12). Although the narrator never calls direct attention to it, the Jews have been brought into mortal peril precisely on the brink of the festival of their greatest deliverance: Passover. According to the word that
came to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, the lambs—whose blood would mark the doorposts of the Israelites and spare them from the execution of judgment—were to be slaughtered at twilight on the “fourteenth day of this month” (Exodus 12:6). If Esther’s conversation with Mordecai occurs immediately after the decree’s publication, which it seems to, then she fasts and approaches the king over the course of Passover week, “a most auspicious date for the Jews.”

It is a most auspicious date for Christians as well. The Gospel of John in particular takes care to present Christ as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29), who offers himself in the context of the Passover celebrations (18:28, 39; 19:14, 31). And as with Jesus’ perilous Passover, so with Esther’s: a great reversal is accomplished. A decree that means death (Esther 3:13) and that cannot be revoked (8:9) is answered with a decree that means life (8:11, 16) and that bears the same irrevocable authority (8:10). So, too, Christ answers the curse that hangs over all humanity through Adam’s trespass—“in the day that you eat of it shall die” (Genesis 2:17)—by becoming the new Adam, whose “act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all” (Romans 5:18). And, not insignificantly, over the entire process hangs the prospect of a great hanging.

For the Jews, Haman has written a general edict of death, but for his great enemy Mordecai he has a special ending in mind. His wife Zeresh has advised him to build a gallows and to petition the king to have Mordecai hanged on it (5:14). A Midrash on the closing verses of Esther 5 explains that Zeresh was especially shrewd as well as especially cruel: she knew Haman would never overcome Mordecai “unless he contrived a punishment no Jew had ever experienced.” It would have to surpass the fire escaped by the three young men, the lions’ den that Daniel survived, Joseph’s dungeon, Moses’s and Israel’s wilderness, and Samson’s dreaded haircut and eye-gouging by the Philistines. None of Mordecai’s people, however, had ever been delivered from the curse of being hanged on a tree (Deuteronomy 21:22–23). So, fifty-cubit gallows it is.

But then, in the most straightforwardly comedic chapter of the book, Haman goes on to ask Ahasuerus for Mordecai’s execution and hanging just as Ahasuerus belatedly decides to honor Mordecai for his role in thwarting an assassination attempt (2:21–23). Given his advisor’s fortuitous presence, the king decides to ask Haman how he should go about it. Except he rather cagily asks Haman, “What shall be done for the man whom the king wishes to honor?” (6:6)—which encourages Haman to list all the things he should like to see done for himself. Then, with dizzying and dismaying speed, Haman finds himself robing Mordecai and parading him throughout the city, another image that echoes Joseph’s treatment by Pharaoh and anticipates Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. But it is not until Esther comes into her glory, revealing who she truly is and what Haman has truly attempted against her, the king, and her people, that the gallows welcomes its true victim in the story. “Look,” a eunuch says from stage right, “the very gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, stands at Haman’s house, fifty cubits high” (7:9). And so ends the story of Mordecai’s enemy, of Saul’s Agag, and of Israel’s Amalek. Evil finally consumes itself on the tree intended for the death of righteousness.

Except this is not quite where Esther’s story ends. The enemy of the Jews is dead, but the irrevocable edict of death still stands. So Esther pleads again with the king, and authority is given to Mordecai to write a new edict. This one is promulgated on the twenty-third day of Sivan, the third month of the year (8:9). The seventy intervening days since Haman’s edict echo the number of the house of Jacob who came into Egypt under Joseph’s protection (Genesis 46:27) and the number of years to be completed under Babylon before the Lord brings Israel back to its promised land (Jeremiah 29:10). And when Adar comes at last, a great reversal occurs again. The enemies of the Jews still attack, but the Jews are permitted to assemble and defend themselves (8:11). The Jews prevail: they “did as they pleased to those who hated them” (9:5), and, in a triumphal coda to Saul’s failure against Agag, the narrator notes...
three times that “they did not touch the plunder” (9:9, 15, 16). So “for the Jews there was light and gladness, joy and honor” (8:15), and the festival of Purim was established to observe “the days on which the Jews gained relief from their enemies” (9:22).

And yet God remains hidden in the text. At least, God continues to go unnamed, and the providence of God unmentioned. Even the triumph of the Jews leads to “the fear of the Jews” (8:17) and “the fear of Mordecai” (9:3), but there is no mention of the fear of the Lord. As to the naming of God, this has proved no challenge.

Esther stands in a world that cannot see God and at the head of a nation that instills in its neighbors “the fear of the Jews.” But she also knows how to throw a good party. for readers “who understand the book to demonstrate divine omnipresence from a specifically earthly perspective.” These have found God in the mysterious “other quarter” alluded to in 4:16, or illuminated in the beautiful script of the word hamelek (the king), which begins each Hebrew column in order to signify the text’s allegorical import. Greek readers resolve things more neatly still by writing God’s name directly into the text of the Septuagint: thus, where the Hebrew reads, “On that night the king could not sleep,” the Greek corrects it to, “That night the Lord took sleep from the king” (6:1).

The absence of the divine name in the Hebrew (and therefore Protestant) text has been explained in a number of ways. The best explanation is the traditional Jewish injunction against saying the divine name aloud. Given that the Esther scroll is to be read at a drinking fest so grand that the Talmud advises one should not be able to tell the difference between the phrases “Blessed be Mordecai” and “Cursed be Haman,” one doesn’t want to risk a sloppy drunk accidentally voicing the Tetragrammaton.

But perhaps there is something more going on here. Perhaps there is something to the rabbis’ observation that “the miracle of Purim happened at the end of the Babylonian Exile, a time when God was behind myriad veils of concealment.” Perhaps there is something to this text being set in a world where God simply is hidden, whether by the tragedy of a burnt temple that caused the Jews to wonder how they could be the chosen people of God anymore, or by the simple reality that that’s what the world (olam in Hebrew) does: it conceals (alam in Hebrew). Esther is a text that stands in this difficult place. Esther stands in a world that cannot see God, and she stands at the head of a nation that cannot do better than to intimidate its neighbors and instill in them “the fear of the Jews.” But she also knows how to throw a good party, and if we listen carefully, we might hear echoes of the great eternal celebration where God is revealed and where Christ reveals himself in the breaking of the bread. Esther’s is a fellowship that resonates, forward and backward, even in the hidden darkness. And however much her message might be lost on Luther, she comfortably addresses the darkness just the way that he did: “Sometimes it is necessary to drink a little more, play, jest, or even commit some sin in defiance and contempt of the devil.”

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Notes
1. The first quotation is from Luther’s Bondage of the Will and the second is a comment drawn from the Table Talk, quoted here in translation from Heinrich Bornkamm, Luther and the Old Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969), 188–9.
2. The interpretation of Esther that follows originated in a generous invitation to lead Bible study at Holden Village during the summer of 2014. My joyful and fruitful interaction with this text owes as much to that community as it does to the sources in the notes.
4. “Addition” is a loaded word here, assuming that the lxx comes after the Hebrew Mesoretic text and “adds” to it. The differences among the various received versions of Esther, both extant and hypothesized, are absolutely fascinating, but I should not be drawn upon as any sort of expert. As the Polish expression goes, Nie moj cyrk, nie moje malpy; that is not my circus and not my monkey. Readers interested in sorting out the mystery of the relation between the Masoretic text, the Alpha text, and the lxx versions of Esther might rather consult a scholar whose control of the monkey is impressive indeed: David J. A. Clines, Esther: A Trilogy: The Story of the Story (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984).
6. Ibid., 158–60.
7. Levenson, 61.
8. Ibid., 68.
9. Sam Wells and George Sumner, Esther & Daniel (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013), 61.
11. Levenson, 89.
13. Levenson, 110.
15. Ibid., 22.
17. Megillah, xxxvi.