

“Wonder Woman”

Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22

The book of Esther is a diaspora story, as is Daniel. But in Daniel, we see Daniel’s God. In Esther, God is nowhere to be found. No mention of religion. Why is Esther in the Bible at all?

Female stars, lead detectives or commanding officers on TV shows are not big news. But in 1974, when Angie Dickinson played the policewoman of the show “Police Woman,” the idea of a female police officer sounded bizarre. Weird or not, when Sgt. “Pepper” Anderson yelled, “Freeze, turkey!” at a perp — they froze.

More detective dramas with female leads appeared over the following decades. Like all TV series, some were good, and some were bad. You may remember a few of them: Kyra Sedgwick in “The Closer,” Helen Mirren in “Prime Suspect,” Tyne Daly and Sharon Gless in “Cagney & Lacey,” Robin Tunney in “The Mentalist,” Stana Katic in “Castle” — there are many others.

Strong female leads also appear in films like *The Devil Wears Prada*, *Kill Bill*, *Erin Brockovich*, *Miss Congeniality*, *Salt*, and *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*. The list goes on, and it’s a long one.

Wonder Woman leapt from 1940s comic book pages onto the small screen as a television series in 1975. The show starred Lynda Carter as a celebrated superhero alongside Lyle Waggoner. The role was reprised by Gal Gadot in *Wonder Woman: Rise of the Warrior* (2017). With a worldwide gross of more than \$840 million, it became “the highest-grossing superhero origin film of all time.” Gadot’s second round was *Wonder Woman 1984*, released in December 2020. It grossed less than \$170 million, although not many theaters were available because of the Covid pandemic.

Of course, every superhero needs super weapons, and Wonder Woman is no exception. Her arsenal of superpowers includes the Lasso of Truth, magic bracelets that can deflect objects including bullets, and a royal tiara that becomes a lethal projectile when needed.

It's relevant to discuss fictional female action figures who are well-known to the public because today's Old Testament reading is from Esther. It tells a fabulous story of a woman who, against all odds, saved her people from extinction. What about this Esther "wonder woman" character?

There are at least three interesting notes about Esther.

First: Esther's a woman. The story line of Esther has contemporary appeal for many reasons, not the least of which is that Esther is a female hero in an era of hardcore, staunchly male, patriarchal, and testosterone-driven good ole boys. She was a "Me Too" woman before the movement. Never did so much depend for so many upon one woman. Of the female biblical heroes, Deborah might also be included in a Wonder Woman category, but the scope of the salvation wrought by the daring of Esther is unmatched in Hebrew literature.

Yet, many have argued that Esther *is not an admirable role model*. Esther competed in a beauty contest of sorts, sponsored by the king of Persia around 450 B.C. She won the Miss Persia title and married the Gentile king. She apparently did not live as a Jew, was a part of the king's harem, and lived in a Persian court. This is not a girl Jewish mothers would ask their daughters to emulate. Yet, there she is in the Bible of both Jews and Christians.

Second: Where's God in all of this? The fact that the name of God is not mentioned in the narrative is a positive reason to exclude Esther from the Hebrew canon. That God is absent in Esther is unique to the Hebrew Bible and the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible.

The *name* of God is not only absent, but so too is the *presence* of God. All the action in this drama is human action. There is no God to rescue any of the participants in this story.

Third: The total absence of Jewish religious practices in Esther. One possible exception is the mention of fasting in 4:16, but the fasting here comes as a request from Esther before she appears before the king. It is more of a “wish me good luck” request than a reference to a Jewish religious practice.

So, we return now to the question: “Why include Esther in the biblical canon?” It’s an exciting story, to be sure. It’s Hollywood-worthy, and has made it to the silver screen, although not recently (*Esther and the King* [1960] starring Joan Collins as Esther and Richard Egan as Ahasuerus). But without a single reference to Yahweh or any mention of religious practices, why not move Esther to Jewish apocryphal literature which is between the Old and New Testament in very large Bibles that include it.

Here’s a possible reason Esther was included in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and within the answer, we will also find some resources for our lives today in the 21st century.

When Esther was written, Jews were not living in their homeland. They were dispersed and living in exile. So, Esther is a diaspora story, as is Daniel.

This being true, the question for the exiled Jew becomes: How do I live as a Jew away from the temple, my homeland, and my people?

Esther offers insight, and this is why Esther is in the Bible. *The purpose of Esther is to remind post-exilic Jews that one can prosper in a foreign land as an exile without giving up one’s identity as a Jew.*

In other words, if Esther can do it, so can you. After all, there were many forces positioned against her. She was a woman, and as such, essentially powerless and marginalized. As a female, even if she wanted to, she couldn't just seek power in a male-dominant culture.

In this respect, she's like all Jewish people of her time. They are marginalized, disenfranchised and without power or the means of gaining power.

But Esther, by winning that beauty contest, and then by being smart and gutsy, saves her people and in doing so demonstrates to Jewish exiles that they, too, can not only survive but thrive if they play their cards right.

The exiles also learn from Esther that they don't need to be conspicuously religious to survive in a foreign country. God is not mentioned. Religious practices are absent from the story. So Jewish identity is essentially ethnic, not religious. Dr. Sidnie Crawford, president of the W.F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem, writes, "It is who Esther is that makes her Jewish, rather than what she practices or believes."

The message to the exiles who cannot worship in the temple and therefore cannot be religious Jews is that they can certainly retain their ethnicity and avoid assimilation in the "melting pot of the ancient Near East."

Esther is a diaspora story. It is in the Bible but not because it is overtly religious as is Daniel, another diaspora narrative. Esther is in the Bible because the title character and the story itself serve as reminders that Jews could live and survive in the diaspora and throughout decades, centuries and millennia without a temple and a homeland.

If there is any book in the Bible that elicits the question, "So what?" it's Esther. This is a great story, a riveting plot, fascinating characters, but what's in it for me today?

Most sermons about Esther insert God where God is absent or talk about the importance of taking a well-timed risk, or that God has a plan for our lives.

But doesn't it make more sense, and is it not truer to the text itself, to discuss the relevance of Esther to our contemporary lives *without* bringing God into the picture?

Here are a couple takeaways from Esther that are relevant to our own times.

Takeaway Number 1: Esther is an in-your-face reality check to our relationship with the world. *We are “resident aliens.”* We're not immigrants in the sense that we've traveled from our homeland and expect to make our new host country a permanent home. No, the biblical idea is that we're “passing through” this country, enroute “to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). Esther is a stark reminder of this. We don't forget where we came from, or where we're going.

Takeaway Number 2: Esther reminds us that *it is possible to live as a Christian in times that are completely unfavorable, even hostile, to us as believers and followers of Jesus.*

- Like Esther, we, too, were unable to attend worship in 2020. But the closing of church doors during the pandemic did not spell the end of the church as many thought it might. The gates of Covid-19 did not prevail against it.
- While many suffered economically, we quickly adapted with work-arounds by staying at home and turning on Zoom, for example.
- We helped our children with distance learning. We learned how to worship virtually and will continue live streaming.

- Even though there are more unchurched “Harrys and Marys” than ever before, the church survives and the needy and oppressed are lifted up. In the words of the liturgy, drawing on Isaiah: Our mission is “to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor, and . . . to comfort all who mourn; to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit” (Isaiah 61:1-3).
- Like Esther, we are encouraged to challenge authorities, speak truth to power and take risks.

We learn from Esther that we can live as exiles in a foreign land. Like Abraham, we are “strangers and foreigners on the earth” (Hebrews 11:13). In broad strokes, Esther exemplifies the “can-do” attitude of such prophetic advisors as Jeremiah, who counseled the aliens in Babylon: “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jeremiah 29:5-7).

Esther was truly a wonder woman at a time when the most powerful authorities of the world were against her. She dared to stand before the king and speak truth to power. Without the Lasso of Truth or magic bracelets, she found a way to get out the truth and dodge the bullets of her enemies. Although she no doubt had a royal tiara, she could not use it as a projectile, but she used what she had, and it brought down her enemies and saved her people. It would be well worth your time to sit down and read the short story of Esther in our Old Testament.

Throughout history, even U.S. history, she has inspired countless, especially those seeking freedom. Consider the case of Sojourner Truth, whose very name underscores one of the lessons we glean from Esther. Sojourner Truth was an American abolitionist and women’s rights activist. Truth was born into slavery in Swartekill, N.Y., but escaped with her infant daughter to freedom in 1826. After going to court to recover her son in 1828, she became the first black woman to win such a case against a white man (Wikipedia).

At a Women’s Rights Convention in New York City in 1853, Sojourner Truth was one of the speakers. Although she was illiterate, she knew her Bible stories. She told the conferees: “Queen Esther come forth, for she was oppressed, and felt there was a great wrong and she said I will die, or I will bring my complaint before the king. Should the king of the United States be greater, or crueller, or harder?”

Sojourner Truth and Esther are models for us to emulate regardless of our gender.

Like her, we can find a way to be victorious, whatever the pandemic, however nasty the culture wars or despite the economic fluctuations of our host country. Even when God appears to hide the divine presence from human view, we know, as did Esther and Sojourner, that God covers and protects us and is still very much a “hands-on” God.

May the peace of God . . .

#419 – For All the Faithful Women (vs: 1, 2, and 12)