

SHARING IN THE LAUGHTER OF HEAVEN: THE HUMOR OF ESTHER

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1. INTRODUCTION

Forty-five years ago Elton Trueblood's *The Humor of Christ* presented an eye-opening look at an aspect of our Lord and of the Scriptures that brought a fresh challenge to the notion that Jesus is uninteresting and the Bible boring. As the title to his book suggests, Trueblood focused his attention on the Gospels (imagine someone straining to remove a speck of sawdust from another's eye with a tree trunk protruding from his own, or a camel trying to suck in its hump in order to squeeze through the eye of a needle!). But the Old Testament is full of humor as well, which must sound completely wacky to those who imagine that part of the Bible being dry and dreary. They obviously have not read Numbers 22 or Judges 3:15-30, 1 Kings 18, or lingered long in the Esther story—at once deadly serious and daringly hilarious.¹

Esther is a story about a vast empire with an incompetent king, a deposed queen and a Jewess who replaces her, an upright man of Judah who happens to be the new queen's cousin, an unhinged egomaniac in the king's court and his plot to exterminate the Jews which backfires, boozier banquets galore, a providential case of royal insomnia, and a festive holiday in the Jewish calendar. What could possibly be funny about this? Plenty!

Following are six humorous scenes from Esther, mostly of the irony, satire, and comedy or farce variety. These are not exhaustive by any means, nor will my comments on each scene unfold its full significance. I am assuming a general familiarity with the story line and strongly urge a careful reading of the book in its entirety.

1. A NOT-SO-MIGHTY MONARCH (1:1-22)

[Note: In standard Catholic Bibles, the format of the Book of Esther is complicated somewhat by the merging of elements from both the Hebrew and Greek versions. In this article I retain the chapter and verse structure of the Hebrew original.]

The Esther story begins with a pathetic portrait of a mighty monarch perched atop an immense empire that extends from India to Ethiopia—127 provinces in all. Given to wine, women, and wealth, the Persian king Ahasuerus (also known as Xerxes) throws two outrageously lavish drinking parties, one lasting a full six months, the other a week—both it appears with no other purpose in mind than to parade the profligacy of his pomp and power. Questions surrounding the king's competence emerge at once: A dazzling display of imperial grandeur is one thing, but what world ruler summons all his high-ranking officials to abandon their administrative posts for a half-year drink-feast, leaving a colossal empire unattended while they indulge the king's excesses?

Meanwhile, in a less rowdy corner of the imperial palace, Queen Vashti hosts a banquet for the women. So far, through verse 9, the king has received 126 Hebrew words of bombastic description, his wife only six. But not to worry. A comedy is about to transpire which will more than level the verbal disproportion. Suddenly, on the seventh and final day, when the mood is just right, the mighty monarch dispatches a bodyguard of seven personal servants charged with the affairs of the harem to fetch the

queen, decked in royal crown, so that she might parade her remarkable beauty before the “tipsy hoi polloi”² of the empire. Vashti refuses. For exactly what reason we shall never know, nor does it matter to the story whether she did so out of modesty and decency (so the rabbis), or out of stubbornness and strong-will, or with some other motive. What matters is that the mighty monarch, brazenly disobeyed by his wife, had a great deal of face to save before the watching eyes of all his cronies. Alas, “the king who rules the whole world cannot bend even his own wife to his will! Deprived by wine of all propriety, he blunders into a contest of wills with her and loses” (Bush, 354).

The king’s reaction is fully predictable. Deflated and disgraced before his noblemen, the pathetic potentate throws a fit; and having already displayed his inadequacy, we are hardly surprised when he summons his royal cabinet—seven experts in the laws of the Medes and Persians and in their timely application to matters of justice and order. In so doing, the monarch’s “ridiculous overreaction turn[s] a domestic squabble into an *affaire d’état* and a matter of explicit sexual politics” (Fox, 21). Forward steps Justice Memucan, whose considered opinion runs approximately as follows:

My concern, Your Honor, is with the power of precedence and the potentially far-reaching repercussions in all of our homes if your wife’s rebellion goes unchecked. Unless we deal decisively with this act of insubordination, we’ll all be in trouble and the imperial order will unravel. Why, in the future “whenever one of our womenfolk fails in duty towards her husband, she will have a ready answer, ‘I am only following the Queen’s example’” (Radday, 297). If it seems good to you, O King, let me introduce the following bill into the unalterable laws of the Medes and the Persians: (a) that Vashti be deposed and banished from the king’s presence forever, and (b) that the royal position she vacates be filled with a queen of more compliant disposition.

Fox captures the absurdity of it all:

The limpness of the king’s masculine authority sends his noblemen into a tizzy, for they believe that his failure will undermine their own status. These paper patriarchs need a royal decree to back them up in their quarrels with their wives. They, like the king, are desperate for honor, and they think they can achieve it by decree. What the decree actually achieves is to broadcast to the entire empire the very news they thought so threatening (p. 24).

True to his unfolding character as weak and unsteady and easily swayed by the opinions of his confidants, the impressionable Ahasuerus finds Memucan’s motion to his liking—as he will *every* proposal put forth in the book. Without further ado, he dispatches a knee-jerk imperial decree (in a land which made so much of legal precedent), sending it to the extremities of his vast empire, to each in its own language. The essence of the *ad hoc* edict was this: Every man is boss in his own house. Men rule, women do what they’re told. It was a case of legalized chauvinism, all because of the king’s dented pride in a palace full of partygoers. The dramatic irony consists, of course, in the fact that ruling his wife is precisely what the all-powerful emperor has proved himself unable to do.

At the end of chapter 1, readers are left wondering how male dominance will figure if at all in the story. Here stands a clumsy despot, mastered by wine, defied by his queen, ill-advised by his royal counsel, responsible for an unenforceable decree—a king desperately in need of a good wife. The further irony, as the plot unfolds, is that having removed one queen who seems to have a mind of her own, he gets another who will control him completely! Henpecking has been outlawed, but this king is about to get a wife who will dictate his every move to do exactly as she wishes. Moreover, having seen a “society fraught with danger, . . . ruled by the pride and pomposity of buffoons whose tender egos can marshal the state’s legislative and administrative machinery for the furtherance of selfish and childish causes,” we will hardly be surprised in due course “to find this same machinery of state mobilized to effect the

slaughter of one of its own minorities” (Bush, 355), or to find this fickle-minded, feasting king blissfully agreeable to outrageous plans he scarcely comprehends. If we are amused at the “bumptious machismo of the Persian noblemen,” we are soon to see “pride, egotism, and royal instability mutate into murderous hatred and sinister schemes against a people absent from the opening act” (Fox, 25).

2. A NEW QUEEN—A FEMALE KING? (2:1-18)

Eventually Ahasuerus calms down, and only then does he remember Vashti and her decreed fate. This wifeless king of a vast empire is now prisoner of his own ridiculous edict, although neither here nor anywhere else does he ever assume any responsibility for bad decisions. Seeing his majesty’s loneliness, certain young members of the king’s entourage humor his whims and play upon his weakness by proposing a piece of practical advice: Find yourself another queen—“a rather obvious idea, but Xerxes tends to rely on others to supply even his obvious thoughts” (Fox, 27). They suggest that all the beautiful young virgins from all over the empire be brought to Susa the capital and placed under the supervision of eunuch Hegai, “the keeper of the women.” Cosmetics will be ordered by the barrel, sufficient for a twelve-month beauty regimen for each contestant, leading to an overnight turn with the king who by this means will find himself a replacement for Vashti. Predictably, the proposal pleases the king.

How it is that the young, orphaned Jewess Esther, under the guardianship of her godly cousin Mordecai, is permitted, or permits herself, to participate in the contest (would Moses have approved?); what this and the concealing of her nationality tells us about “assimilationist tendencies among Persian Jewry” (Radday, 299); how she manages to outshine her competitors in the Miss Persia Pageant; and why finally the king finds her charming above all—these and other questions are left to the side as blanks in the story (but not in Jewish and Christian imagination, or commentary!). Alas, the king chooses Esther, crowns her with the royal diadem previously worn by Vashti, and makes her queen—that is, in a manner of speaking. Subtleties in the language here and elsewhere suggest that in fact Esther will be more than a mere queen; she will actually occupy a ruling position—almost a kingly queen. And with that, we recall the royal command of 1:22, which explicitly outlawed such a prospect by legislating that “every man be lord in his own house.” But who cares about the rule of law, especially when the national throne is occupied by a vacuum of virtue, by one completely lacking in kingly character and competency?

3. AN EGOCENTRIC AGAGITE AND A CLUELESS KING (3:1-15)

Humor lies embedded in subtle ways in this tragic chapter. The gullible king continues to show his deficiency. “[I]f one knows how to handle him, one has no difficulty in persuading him to do absolutely anything” (Radday, 301). No one really knows why Haman the Agagite suddenly appears out of nowhere and is promptly promoted to Prime Minister instead of the more deserving Mordecai who spared the king’s life by foiling an earlier conspiracy (see 2:19-23). And why, at the king’s behest, all the courtiers must fall on the pavement before Haman only shows the extent to which egomania will be tolerated in an empire where neither the virtue of humility nor the criterion of rationality matters much in leadership.

There is nothing particularly funny about any of this until we observe the extent of the blinding effects of injured pride, both in the earlier case of the king and now in his premier—two dangerously tender egos which are beginning to look and sound like they deserve each other. Moreover, there is remarkable correspondence between Vashti’s earlier refusal to parade her beauty and Mordecai’s refusal to bow down to Haman. In both a mysterious refusal, whose cause can only be guessed, occasions a catastrophic rage in the one being refused as well as a crisis of state.³ In the one instance, an all-

consuming political issue results in an absurd imperial decree affecting not only the offender but all the women of the empire. In the other, Mordecai's failure to genuflect when Haman struts about the palace so offends the premier that he fabricates a genocidal proposal to rid the empire of *all* the Jews. His slanderous speech to the king is a rhetorical masterpiece consisting in two truths, a half-truth, and a whole lie; but amidst the devious rhetoric and trumped up charges, he manages to suppress both the identity of the alleged troublemakers and the real reason for his accusation.

By now it has become completely apparent that “[t]his is not a king with a good head for business or for politics [but] a weak king who is easily manipulated by his advisors.”⁴ Once again, he proves his incompetence on multiple counts, failing (a) to inquire into any of the omitted details in Haman's evil speech (e.g., the exact identity of the people he was consigning to destruction), (b) to raise any suspicions over its numerous red flags (e.g., the eleven-month delay to deal with such a dangerous element in the empire), or (c) to read any of the fine print in the proposed edict. Moreover, while the arbitrary mandate to be ready on such-and-such a day “to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, children and women”—people who had caused no disturbance at all except within Haman's fragile psyche—throws the citizens of Susa into confusion, aghast and dumbfounded, the blockheaded king and his swollen-headed henchman sit cool, calm, calloused, and, of course, carousing. And all the while, unbeknownst to either, “a member of this seemingly doomed race now occupies, incognito, the chair of the Queen of Persia” (Bush, 388). Blinded by revenge over a petty personal insult, hateful and hostile Haman has set a decree in motion, stamped and sealed by the king's own ring, calling for the extermination of Mordecai's people, including the king's beautiful and beloved new wife!

4. A BITTERSWEET CELEBRATION AND AN OUTRAGEOUS PLAN (5:9-14)

As the plot unfolds, Queen Esther learns of the decree through her cousin and foster father Mordecai, who urges her to act on behalf of her people. Bravely, though mysteriously, she does, first by inviting the king and Haman to dinner on two consecutive days. Following the first, Haman leaves the banquet hall, elated that he and the king had been invited to dine with the queen. Of course, both she and we know what Haman does not: her nationality; and both she and we know what the king does not: that he has just authorized a genocidal edict that will cost him his wife. While the delusional Haman celebrates Esther's presumed favor—surely her recent invitation must signal a new stage in his brilliant political career—we wonder when and where and by what means his sin will find him out, or when the king will wake up to his own stupidity.

Haman's pleasure is short-lived, however, ruined and replaced by morbid revenge when he encounters Mordecai, who neither rises nor trembles before him, as if no one of significance passed by. Fiercely irked, yet pulling himself together in marvelous self-restraint, Haman proceeds to his home, where he calls together friends and family and boasts of his promotions and privileges, none of which can counterpoise his rage at seeing Mordecai the Jew *sitting* in his accustomed place at the king's gate.

Zeresh, Haman's wife, has a solution. She proposes that her husband erect a hanging frame tall enough for everyone to see, and then simply go and tell the king to have Mordecai hanged on it first thing in the morning. Why wait a year when he can dispose of his nemesis tomorrow, with the added advantage that partying with the king and his queen would be the more enjoyable then.

Haman's response to his wife's suggestion is as predictable as the king's whenever anyone puts forth a proposal. He loves it, and readers enjoy the irony, despite its unpleasant prospect: “this feckless image of the grand vizier is a travesty of the masculine dominance that the king and his hysterical privy-council enacted into law (1:20-22)!” (Bush, 418). By now it is fully obvious who is taking orders from

whom. Neither Esther nor Zeresh is strictly minding her own business and staying out of her husband's affairs.

5. A STROKE OF (PROVIDENTIAL) COINCIDENCE (6:1-13)

In this scenic comedy of coincidence, misunderstanding, and reversal, we approach the climax of the story and the high point of its humor. It all begins with a case of divine insomnia ("sleepless in Susa," as one student titled it), when the restless king "whiled away the time listening to a reading of the royal annals" (Fox 75-76). Normally such a reading might put anyone to sleep, but this particular passage turns out to be anything but soporific. There "it was found," as if by coincidence, how Mordecai had earlier exposed a murderous conspiracy that spared the king's life, which benefaction the negligent and unmindful king had unsurprisingly failed to reward. Whether it was during the wee hours of the night while listening to an eerie passage about an assassination plot that the suspicious king heard a noise, or early that morning when his advisors had showed up for work, the king inquires, "Who is in the court?" It turns out that Haman had just entered the palace to seek an audience with the king. Completely unaware that his plot is about to run "head on into the providence of God" (Bush, 418), Haman has come intending to secure the king's signature on Mordecai's death warrant. From the king's perspective, who better to put in charge of honoring Mordecai than the prime minister of the empire!

Timing is critical now. It all turns on who will get in the first word: the king who wishes to honor his favorite Jew for saving his life, or Haman who wishes to hang his archenemy on a newly constructed gallows. Neither knows what the other is thinking. J. G. McConville captures the moment: "Each of the characters on stage is ignorant of the motives and plans of the other. The king knows as little of Haman's passion to be rid of Mordecai as Haman knows of the king's plan to elevate him. [We] savour the exquisite irony and suspense. Which of the two will speak first and disillusion the other?"⁵

The king speaks first, before Haman has a chance to utter his request. Dramatic irony flows at its finest now, as the innocent ambiguity of the king's question "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" sets a trap into which Haman unwittingly steps. Blinded by pride, Haman assumes that he himself must be the man the king wishes to honor. "There was a meeting of persons but not of minds."⁶ Presumption runs high, as eager Haman savors the moment to propose "a ceremony that will lavish near-royal dignity on the honoree in the most public of settings" (Fox, 76). One gets the impression that he had been meditating on it for days, preparing his response for just such an opportunity. Of course, this unimaginative monarch never turns down anyone's suggestion, certainly not Haman's, who thereby decides how the man he desired to hang would be honored! All the while, the king remains in total oblivion as to how his words are falling on Haman's insatiable ears as he commissions him to carry out in full detail precisely the dignities Haman had himself prescribed for the recipient of honor—*Mordecai the Jew!* And for the people standing around the city square later that day, "It must have been quite a spectacle to watch an old Jew on horseback, and funnier still to see great Haman serving as his herald" (Radday, 307). Readers can hardly help wondering what went through Haman's mind as the procession passed by his own house and the towering frame in his back yard, or what the townspeople, who knew that Mordecai was a Jew, must have thought in light of the decree just issued!

In the end, Mordecai returns to his post, where life continues on as before. Dejected Haman returns home to lick his wounded ego and to recuperate from a day that had gone in every miserable direction, only to receive this bit of untimely counsel from his friends and Zeresh his wife, wise beyond their knowing: "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him" [!]-definitely not the consolation he had hoped to receive from his nearest confidants.

6. THE TABLES TURNED AND A TRAGIC FALL (6:14–7:10)

The moment had finally arrived for Esther to disclose to the blissfully ignorant king and to his vile vizier what she has known all along, that she and her people had been “sold . . . to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated.” Whether for shortage of memory or for subtleties embedded deceptively in Haman’s original scheme, the king, still in the dark and unable to connect the dots, demands an identification of the person who has dared such a thing. Having stoked the king’s ire in a brilliantly crafted speech, Esther now gives it a target (Fox, 84). Her response is direct and unflinching: “A man hateful and hostile—this wicked Haman!” Shocked and now unmasked, Haman, understandably, quakes in terror. It had been a wretched day; it would get worse.

Exactly why the infuriated king stormed out to the palace garden, we can only imagine. Regardless, “the king’s absence sets the scene for the incident which seals Haman’s fate.”⁷ His only hope now of finding favor with the king would have to come by way of Esther’s intercession, whom, unknowingly, he had plotted to kill. “It is a satisfying irony that the proud Agagite, obsessed with a Jew’s refusal to bow, now falls groveling before a Jew to plead for his life” (Fox, 87). Falling on the queen’s couch in desperation, Haman is “caught in the act” upon the king’s return. The reader knows, even if the king does not, that Haman was begging for mercy, not making a move. But the appearance was bad enough; and not known for weighing all the sides on any matter, the king would draw his own conclusions.

Attuned to what has been going on, an advisor steps forward with some guidance for the infuriated king. Every detail in Harbonah’s speech cuts, bleeds, and stings. Ahasuerus is informed that Haman had built an absurdly tall hanging scaffold intended for Mordecai, who in earlier days had spared the king’s life. It stands ready—all fifty cubits of it—at Haman’s house. “In addition to suggesting an appropriate way to execute Haman, Harbonah’s observation also had the effect of introducing a second accusation against him, namely, that he had knowingly tried to kill a benefactor of the king. If there had been any uncertainty in the king’s mind concerning Haman’s fate, this ended it” (Moore, 72). The curtain closes on this dramatic scene with Haman executed, for crimes he never actually committed,⁸ on the very device he had erected for Mordecai. And with that, the king’s wrath is assuaged.

7. CONCLUSION

Without question there is more to the Esther story and its function in the Bible than simply making us laugh, but clearly there is at least this. Refusing to put laughter and the Lord in the same sentence, when the Bible itself does (Pss 2:4); or refraining from rejoicing that the likes of hateful Haman and the serpent in whose employ he worked will not finally undo the Lord’s righteous rule; or failing to celebrate deliverance, which might not have been, with “feasting and gladness . . . giving gifts to one another and gifts to the poor” (9:22), and yes, with laughter⁹—these are among the chief sins readers can commit against the Book of Esther. If we cannot enjoy the manner in which the Bible unfolds its story of salvation, wedding deadly seriousness with exuberant exultation, then we fail to hear the scriptural story the way God has chosen to tell it.

But readers must be careful here. If “the book of Esther continues to evoke laughter which is not to be denigrated in the interests of a higher Christian morality,” as Barry Webb insists, it is also true that “the book seems deliberately intended to purge [its humor of any vindictiveness] and to bring out its true character as the laughter of pure astonishment at a deliverance that came about unexpectedly, like a gift.”¹⁰ The laughter Esther evokes, in other words, is not the laughter of gloating but of wonderment, rather like that of Psalm 126:1-3:

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
 we were like those who dream.
 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
 and our tongue with shouts of joy;
 then they said among the nations,
 “The LORD has done great things for them.”
 The LORD has done great things for us;
 we are glad.

And to conclude with Webb:

The book of Esther is indeed a festive garment, a garment to put on when we are astonished, once again, at some unexpected way God has rescued us, and when we are ready to celebrate. But it is also a garment to put on when the forces arrayed against us seem all-powerful, when to laugh may be the only way to stay sane. To put this garment on, however, is not to whistle in the dark, or to pretend that things are other than they are. It is to clothe ourselves with the truth that God is sovereign, and to be reminded that he is always with us, even when he seems most absent, and that nothing can ultimately thwart his purposes. To put on Esther is to affirm that God is our deliverer, and to share in the laughter of heaven (132-33).



1. In addition to the commentary literature, see especially D. J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (JSOTSS 30; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987); S. Goldman, “Narrative and Ethical Ironies in Esther,” *JSOT* 47 (1990): 15-31; Y. T. Radday, “Esther with Humour,” in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Y. T. Radday & A. Brenner; Sheffield: Almond, 1990), 295-313; E. L. Greenstein, “Humor and Wit, Old Testament,” *ABD* 3:330-33; M. V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (2d. ed; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); M. D. Simon, “‘Many Thoughts in the Heart of Man . . .’: Irony and Theology in the *Book of Esther*,” *Tradition* 31 (4) (Winter 1997); online: http://www.lookstein.org/articles/irony_and_theology.htm; and K. M. O’Connor, “Humour, Turnabouts and Survival in the Book of Esther,” in *Are We Amused? Humor about Women in the Biblical Worlds* (ed. A. Brenner; JSOTSS 383; London: T & T Clark, 2003), 52-64.
2. F. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (WBC 9; Dallas: Word, 1996), 354.
3. J. D. Levenson, *Esther* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 68.
4. A. Berlin, *Esther* (JPSBC; Philadelphia: JPS, 2001), 42.
5. J. G. McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (DSB; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 179.
6. J. G. Baldwin, *Esther: An Introduction & Commentary* (TOTC 12; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984), 90.
7. C. A. Moore, *Esther* (AB 7B; New York: Doubleday, 1971), 71.
8. “Haman did not try to rape Esther, and he did not try to kill the queen as such, for he did not know that the queen was Jewish. Once again, ignorance, misapprehension, and bungling move events forward in the right direction” (Fox, 88).
9. Exodus 15, “The Song of the Sea,” provides another example, on which see Vernon J. Steiner, “Celebration in Song and Dance: Reflections on Exodus 15:1-21,” *MIQRA* 12.1 (Winter 2013), available in PDF on request.
10. B. G. Webb, *Five Festive Garments: Christian Reflections on The Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther* (NSBT; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 132.