

ESTHER & DANIEL

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Esther

For Esther Jourdan
and Martin Wells, Jeremy Hare, Robert Glenny,
James Geoghegan, Francis Butler, Freya Shilson-Thomas,
Melita Gostelow, and Kezia Walter.

Daniel

This commentary is dedicated to Dr. Charles Forman,
the Kenneth Latourette Professor of Mission emeritus at
Yale Divinity School and my mentor, who taught me,
by his words and his life, what a faithful and
hopeful *missio ad gentes* might look like.

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SERIES PREFACE

Near the beginning of his treatise against Gnostic interpretations of the Bible, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus observes that scripture is like a great mosaic depicting a handsome king. It is as if we were owners of a villa in Gaul who had ordered a mosaic from Rome. It arrives, and the beautifully colored tiles need to be taken out of their packaging and put into proper order according to the plan of the artist. The difficulty, of course, is that scripture provides us with the individual pieces, but the order and sequence of various elements are not obvious. The Bible does not come with instructions that would allow interpreters to simply place verses, episodes, images, and parables in order as a worker might follow a schematic drawing in assembling the pieces to depict the handsome king. The mosaic must be puzzled out. This is precisely the work of scriptural interpretation.

Origen has his own image to express the difficulty of working out the proper approach to reading the Bible. When preparing to offer a commentary on the Psalms he tells of a tradition handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher:

The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.¹

As is the case for Irenaeus, scriptural interpretation is not purely local. The key in Genesis may best fit the door of Isaiah, which in turn opens up the meaning of Matthew. The mosaic must be put together with an eye toward the overall plan.

1. Fragment from the preface to *Commentary on Psalms 1–25*, preserved in the *Philokalia*, trans. Joseph W. Trigg (London: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.

Irenaeus, Origen, and the great cloud of premodern biblical interpreters assumed that puzzling out the mosaic of scripture must be a communal project. The Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand. Only a fool would imagine that he or she could work out solutions alone. The way forward must rely upon a tradition of reading that Irenaeus reports has been passed on as the rule or canon of truth that functions as a confession of faith. “Anyone,” he says, “who keeps unchangeable in himself the rule of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables of the scriptures.”² Modern scholars debate the content of the rule on which Irenaeus relies and commends, not the least because the terms and formulations Irenaeus himself uses shift and slide. Nonetheless, Irenaeus assumes that there is a body of apostolic doctrine sustained by a tradition of teaching in the church. This doctrine provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of scripture as a unified witness. Doctrine, then, is the schematic drawing that will allow the reader to organize the vast heterogeneity of the words, images, and stories of the Bible into a readable, coherent whole. It is the rule that guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors.

If self-consciousness about the role of history in shaping human consciousness makes modern historical-critical study critical, then what makes modern study of the Bible modern is the consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding. Benjamin Jowett, the influential nineteenth-century English classical scholar, is representative. In his programmatic essay “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” he exhorts the biblical reader to disengage from doctrine and break its hold over the interpretive imagination. “The simple words of that book,” writes Jowett of the modern reader, “he tries to preserve absolutely pure from the refinements or distinctions of later times.” The modern interpreter wishes to “clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted upon” the words of scripture. The disciplines of close philological analysis “would enable us to separate the elements of doctrine and tradition with which the meaning of scripture is encumbered in our own day.”³ The lens of understanding must be wiped clear of the hazy and distorting film of doctrine.

Postmodernity, in turn, has encouraged us to criticize the critics. Jowett imagined that when he wiped away doctrine he would encounter the biblical text in its purity and uncover what he called “the original spirit and intention of the authors.”⁴ We are not now so sanguine, and the postmodern mind thinks interpretive frameworks inevitable. Nonetheless, we tend to remain modern in at least one sense. We read Athanasius and think him stage-managing the diversity of scripture to support his positions against the Arians. We read Bernard of Clairvaux and

2. *Against Heresies* 9.4.

3. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 338–39.

4. *Ibid.*, 340.

assume that his monastic ideals structure his reading of the Song of Songs. In the wake of the Reformation, we can see how the doctrinal divisions of the time shaped biblical interpretation. Luther famously described the Epistle of James as a “strawy letter,” for, as he said, “it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”⁵ In these and many other instances, often written in the heat of ecclesiastical controversy or out of the passion of ascetic commitment, we tend to think Jowett correct: doctrine is a distorting film on the lens of understanding.

However, is what we commonly think actually the case? Are readers naturally perceptive? Do we have an unblemished, reliable aptitude for the divine? Have we no need for disciplines of vision? Do our attention and judgment need to be trained, especially as we seek to read scripture as the living word of God? According to Augustine, we all struggle to journey toward God, who is our rest and peace. Yet our vision is darkened and the fetters of worldly habit corrupt our judgment. We need training and instruction in order to cleanse our minds so that we might find our way toward God.⁶ To this end, “the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation.”⁷ The covenant with Israel, the coming of Christ, the gathering of the nations into the church—all these things are gathered up into the rule of faith, and they guide the vision and form of the soul toward the end of fellowship with God. In Augustine’s view, the reading of scripture both contributes to and benefits from this divine pedagogy. With countless variations in both exegetical conclusions and theological frameworks, the same pedagogy of a doctrinally ruled reading of scripture characterizes the broad sweep of the Christian tradition from Gregory the Great through Bernard and Bonaventure, continuing across Reformation differences in both John Calvin and Cornelius Lapse, Patrick Henry and Bishop Bossuet, and on to more recent figures such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

Is doctrine, then, not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the Bible, but instead a clarifying agent, an enduring tradition of theological judgments that amplifies the living voice of scripture? And what of the scholarly dispassion advocated by Jowett? Is a noncommitted reading, an interpretation unprejudiced, the way toward objectivity, or does it simply invite the languid intellectual apathy that stands aside to make room for the false truism and easy answers of the age?

This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances upon the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian scripture. God the Father Almighty, who sends his only begotten Son to die for us and for our salvation and who raises the crucified Son in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the baptized may be joined in one body—faith in *this*

5. *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 362.

6. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.10.

7. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.

God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to view the heterogeneity and particularity of the biblical texts. Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of scripture.

For this reason, the commentators in this series have not been chosen because of their historical or philological expertise. In the main, they are not biblical scholars in the conventional, modern sense of the term. Instead, the commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to theologians and not biblical scholars that we have turned. “War is too important,” it has been said, “to leave to the generals.”

We do hope, however, that readers do not draw the wrong impression. The Nicene tradition does not provide a set formula for the solution of exegetical problems. The great tradition of Christian doctrine was not transcribed, bound in folio, and issued in an official, critical edition. We have the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, used for centuries in many traditions of Christian worship. We have ancient baptismal affirmations of faith. The Chalcedonian definition and the creeds and canons of other church councils have their places in official church documents. Yet the rule of faith cannot be limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect. As Augustine observed, commenting on Jer. 31:33, “The creed is learned by listening; it is written, not on stone tablets nor on any material, but on the heart.”⁸ This is why Irenaeus is able to appeal to the rule of faith more than a century before the first ecumenical council, and this is why we need not itemize the contents of the Nicene tradition in order to appeal to its potency and role in the work of interpretation.

Because doctrine is intrinsically fluid on the margins and most powerful as a habit of mind rather than a list of propositions, this commentary series cannot settle difficult questions of method and content at the outset. The editors of the series impose no particular method of doctrinal interpretation. We cannot say in advance how doctrine helps the Christian reader assemble the mosaic of scripture. We have no clear answer to the question of whether exegesis guided by doctrine is antithetical to or compatible with the now-old modern methods of historical-critical inquiry. Truth—historical, mathematical, or doctrinal—knows no contradiction. But method is a discipline of vision and judgment, and we cannot know in advance what aspects of historical-critical inquiry are functions

8. *Sermon 212.2.*

of modernism that shape the soul to be at odds with Christian discipline. Still further, the editors do not hold the commentators to any particular hermeneutical theory that specifies how to define the plain sense of scripture—or the role this plain sense should play in interpretation. Here the commentary series is tentative and exploratory.

Can we proceed in any other way? European and North American intellectual culture has been de-Christianized. The effect has not been a cessation of Christian activity. Theological work continues. Sermons are preached. Biblical scholars turn out monographs. Church leaders have meetings. But each dimension of a formerly unified Christian practice now tends to function independently. It is as if a weakened army had been fragmented, and various corps had retreated to isolated fortresses in order to survive. Theology has lost its competence in exegesis. Scripture scholars function with minimal theological training. Each decade finds new theories of preaching to cover the nakedness of seminary training that provides theology without exegesis and exegesis without theology.

Not the least of the causes of the fragmentation of Christian intellectual practice has been the divisions of the church. Since the Reformation, the role of the rule of faith in interpretation has been obscured by polemics and counterpolemics about *sola scriptura* and the necessity of a magisterial teaching authority. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is deliberately ecumenical in scope, because the editors are convinced that early church fathers were correct: church doctrine does not compete with scripture in a limited economy of epistemic authority. We wish to encourage unashamedly dogmatic interpretation of scripture, confident that the concrete consequences of such a reading will cast far more light on the great divisive questions of the Reformation than either reengaging in old theological polemics or chasing the fantasy of a pure exegesis that will somehow adjudicate between competing theological positions. You shall know the truth of doctrine by its interpretive fruits, and therefore in hopes of contributing to the unity of the church, we have deliberately chosen a wide range of theologians whose commitment to doctrine will allow readers to see real interpretive consequences rather than the shadow boxing of theological concepts.

The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible has no dog in the current translation fights, and we endorse a textual ecumenism that parallels our diversity of ecclesial backgrounds. We do not impose the thankfully modest inclusive-language agenda of the New Revised Standard Version, nor do we insist upon the glories of the Authorized Version, nor do we require our commentators to create a new translation. In our communal worship, in our private devotions, in our theological scholarship, we use a range of scriptural translations. Precisely as scripture—a living, functioning text in the present life of faith—the Bible is not semantically fixed. Only a modernist, literalist hermeneutic could imagine that this modest fluidity is a liability. Philological precision and stability is a consequence of, not a basis for, exegesis. Judgments about the meaning of a text fix its literal sense, not the other way around. As a result, readers should expect an eclectic use

of biblical translations, both across the different volumes of the series and within individual commentaries.

We cannot speak for contemporary biblical scholars, but as theologians we know that we have long been trained to defend our fortresses of theological concepts and formulations. And we have forgotten the skills of interpretation. Like stroke victims, we must rehabilitate our exegetical imaginations, and there are likely to be different strategies of recovery. Readers should expect this reconstructive—not reactionary—series to provide them with experiments in postcritical doctrinal interpretation, not commentaries written according to the settled principles of a well-functioning tradition. Some commentators will follow classical typological and allegorical readings from the premodern tradition; others will draw on contemporary historical study. Some will comment verse by verse; others will highlight passages, even single words that trigger theological analysis of scripture. No reading strategies are proscribed, no interpretive methods foresworn. The central premise in this commentary series is that doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation. We trust in this premise with the hope that the Nicene tradition can guide us, however imperfectly, diversely, and haltingly, toward a reading of scripture in which the right keys open the right doors.

R. R. Reno

ABBREVIATIONS

Biblical Books

Acts	Acts	Job	Job
Amos	Amos	Joel	Joel
1 Chr.	1 Chronicles	John	John
2 Chr.	2 Chronicles	1 John	1 John
Col.	Colossians	2 John	2 John
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	3 John	3 John
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Jonah	Jonah
Dan.	Daniel	Josh.	Joshua
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Jude	Jude
Eccl.	Ecclesiastes	Judg.	Judges
Eph.	Ephesians	1 Kgs.	1 Kings
Esth.	Esther	2 Kgs.	2 Kings
Exod.	Exodus	Lam.	Lamentations
Ezek.	Ezekiel	Lev.	Leviticus
Ezra	Ezra	Luke	Luke
Gal.	Galatians	Mal.	Malachi
Gen.	Genesis	Mark	Mark
Hab.	Habakkuk	Matt.	Matthew
Hag.	Haggai	Mic.	Micah
Heb.	Hebrews	Nah.	Nahum
Hos.	Hosea	Neh.	Nehemiah
Isa.	Isaiah	Num.	Numbers
Jas.	James	Obad.	Obadiah
Jer.	Jeremiah	1 Pet.	1 Peter

2 Pet.	2 Peter	2 Sam.	2 Samuel
Phil.	Philippians	Song	Song of Songs
Phlm.	Philemon	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians
Prov.	Proverbs	2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
Ps.	Psalms	1 Tim.	1 Timothy
Rev.	Revelation	2 Tim.	2 Timothy
Rom.	Romans	Titus	Titus
Ruth	Ruth	Zech.	Zechariah
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Zeph.	Zephaniah



ESTHER



by Samuel Wells

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I am grateful to Michael Beckett, whose *Gospel in Esther* first brought to my attention the theological significance of the book of Esther. I am honored to be among those asked to write for this commentary series. It is a better book than it would otherwise have been because of friends and colleagues who read the manuscript and offered perceptive and constructive comments, including Walter Brueggemann, Rebekah Eklund, Michael Goldman, Stanley Hauerwas, Abby Kocher, Ephraim Radner, Rusty Reno, and Jo Bailey Wells. I am grateful to Chad Pecknold and Randi Rashkover for their invitation to contribute a chapter on Esther to *Liturgy, Time, and the Politics of Redemption*, which gave me an opportunity to explore some of these themes in a shorter format.

I have a goddaughter named Esther, and this book is dedicated to her, along with my other godchildren. To her and her parents I am grateful for friendship through sunshine and rain. Through my godson Martin and his parents I have learned truthfulness and courage. Through my godson Jeremy and his family I have discovered faith and faithfulness. With my godson Robert and his parents I have sought discernment and wisdom. For my godson James and his family I am grateful for everything that family can be. With my godson Francis and his parents I have enjoyed study and persistence. Through my goddaughter Freya and her parents I have been given mercy and love. Through my goddaughter Melita and her family I have been given tenderness and gentleness. Through my goddaughter Kezia and her parents I have been offered friendship and understanding.

Mordecai is like a godparent to Esther. But where would Mordecai have been without Esther? And where would I have been without my godchildren and their families? Thank God for them, and for the book of Esther, which teaches us to play, to adapt, and to remember.

INTRODUCTION TO ESTHER

This is not the commentary I expected it would be. I thought Esther was a book about exile: about ingenuity, a dramatic escape, a subtle yet disarming providence. But writing a commentary disciplines the scholar to look at the text beyond the piety of the devotional reader or the eclectic appetite of the preacher. And at some point in the meditative attention that is the preparation of a theological commentary, I realized that this was a book not about exile, but about Diaspora. It included ingenuity, but it was more about the formation of a political imagination. It included a dramatic escape, but there was no whiff of miracle. And if it was about providence, it was of a kind largely unknown to the rest of the canon.

My thoughts came to focus on the terrible date decided by lot for the extermination of the Jews. A date just a few weeks before Passover. But here is the bitter irony. If the Jews were to wait for Passover for their deliverance, it would be too late. The story of the God who had visited a people in slavery in Egypt and delivered them by his mighty hand and made a covenant with them and brought them into the promised land and given them the temple in which to be made holy for ever—this story was no longer enough. The book of Esther is a story of a people who found—were finding—that the Passover story, the story Christians tend to assume is *the* story of the Old Testament, was not enough. If they were to survive, the Jews had to make their own story.

Christians have also adapted the Passover story. Therein lies the poignancy in offering a theological commentary on Esther. In what ways does the Christian adaptation of the story resemble, and in what ways does it differ from, this Jewish one? In what sense is Purim *the* Jewish adaptation of Passover—a Passover the Jews make for themselves? Or is it simply one adaptation among many? And could Esther offer Christians a richer way of understanding the Jews, one beyond the stereotypes of rituals, laws, and Pharisees? These are among the emerging questions with which this commentary is concerned.

Two words are needed by way of introducing this commentary. First, form: a word on the distinctive judgments and specific choices I have made in going about this project. This I offer in the first subheading below. Second, content: an overview of the key theological themes that arise in addressing this vivacious book. This I offer in the remaining five subheadings.

Commenting on a Commentary

What I have tried to do is to offer a commentary whose form does justice to the content of the book of Esther. More precisely, I have worked to keep my prose poised between hilarity and horror. This poise is the unique characteristic of the story. The book of Esther is a narrative of the Jews' deliverance from the greatest peril they have ever faced; even Hitler did not have a plan for the complete extinction of the Jews quite as comprehensive as Haman's decree. Yet the combination of chance and resourcefulness that enables the Jews to escape this horrifying peril is narrated with a ready eye for farce, an appetite for slapstick, and a pervasive sense of the ridiculous. Such dimensions are invariably brought out in Jewish renditions of the story that mark the annual Feast of Purim. Thus the book resists solemn exegesis.

The mistake for the commentator is to concentrate so hard on one of these two themes—hilarity or horror—that the other one becomes obscured. On the contrary, the interplay and intersection of these two dimensions of the narrative constitute the book's most distinctive characteristic. A Christian commentator has three things to learn from this interplay of moods. First, faith is at once both deadly serious and hilariously funny. Second, the humor is not a relief from the seriousness, or a way to make the solemnity more digestible; it is at the heart of the serious character of faith. Third, while Christians may learn from Jews about the interplay of humor and horror and discover the importance of inhabiting both, and find resources to stay at such a point of intersection, Christians may appropriately and legitimately differ from Jews in their understanding of precisely what is so serious and what is so funny. The contribution of the book of Esther may lie as much in the way it keeps the reading community in the crossover between humor and horror as in the precise narrative details that embody that crossover. And the role of the commentator may be more to identify and stay with the crossover than to elucidate all the contributing circumstances.

So the style of this commentary is one that explicitly seeks to bring to the surface both the horror and the humor—and highlight the interplay between the two. Some readers may be less familiar with commentaries that pinpoint humor in the Bible. If so, this commentary may be a little different from some more conventional ones. The difference is designed not for self-indulgence or entertainment but to offer commentary that truly reflects the mood of the text.

Yet to read the story after the Nazi Holocaust is to read it differently from the way it might have been read before. There really was a Haman, an enemy of the

Jews. He really did exterminate one third of world Jewry. Not only did the kind of threat described in the book of Esther genuinely arise; it was to a significant degree carried out. This is no longer a figurative tale—and a challenge to the imagination. This is now an appeal to engage with contemporary realities—and a challenge to the memory. Is it still valid to speak of this story as lying on the intersection between hilarity and horror? Or is it more valid than ever, given that the horror is no fantasy? These questions have no clear answers, but remain at the forefront of post-Holocaust exegesis of this poignant book.

The book of Esther is a fast-paced and dynamic drama. This has dictated the way I have arranged the material for commentary. Because it is a drama I divided it into scenes and sought to allow the shape and pace of the action to dictate the interpretation. Thus I have not pursued a verse-by-verse exegesis, but interpreted each verse primarily within the context of its surrounding narrative.

Thus much for respecting the character of the story. Now, a brief word on my method of exegesis. Esther is a book of the Christian Bible. In *Introducing Christian Ethics*, Ben Quash and I outline three approaches to understanding the authority of scripture:¹

1. To look *behind* the text means to assume the text is less important than the insights and events the text describes and records. The Holy Spirit was at work in those moments, and the text is an account of the work of the Holy Spirit.
 - a. One view sees the true significance in the events the text describes and regards the Bible as an accurate account of those events.
 - b. Another view sees the true significance in the patterns of life represented in the scriptural record.
2. To look *within* the text means to locate authority in the sacred words themselves.
 - a. In one view the writing of the scriptures was done through the power of the Holy Spirit, and thus the text is genuinely holy and an incomparable source of truth. Thus the Bible is *perspicuous*—it has a single, plain meaning that is accessible to any reader in any context.
 - b. Another view arises in reaction to weight of research and speculation about the original text and the events and words behind the text and, in contrast, regards the form of the text *as the church now has it* as the principal object of study. This is sometimes connected to a move away from identifying the author's original intention and accept that a text may have several legitimate meanings and that it may take on a life of its own long after the author composed it.
3. To look *beyond* the text, into the world the text creates, means to concentrate interpretation on living the text faithfully by following in its steps and

1. Samuel Wells and Ben Quash, *Introducing Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

understands the Holy Spirit as acting primarily in the community reading the text. It means to pay more attention than the other approaches to where and why the text is being read.

This commentary does not give a lot of attention to the first approach. I include, for example, no discussion of the historicity of the story the book tells. The place of the story in the canon is not jeopardized by concerns about whether all (or some) of the events described actually happened, and happened in the precise way described in the story. Neither do misgivings about some elements of the story—for example, the degree of slaughter recorded in Esth. 9—mean the book should be regarded as of lesser status than other canonical books.

Instead my approach is a combination of 2b and 3. It does not regard the Bible as perspicuous. As already noted, the meaning of the book of Esther must be affected by reading it after the Holocaust. A person who reads the book today in ignorance of Nazi history would not be likely to read the story in the same way as a person who was familiar with this gruesome episode in European history. I take for granted that the text has no single, fixed meaning. But the journey from 2b to 3 is the move from saying there are many possible meanings to asserting that some meanings are more faithful than others—faithful, not necessarily to the text itself, since it is not entirely clear what that might mean, but faithful to the church that has sought to embody the text and faithful to the God whose Holy Spirit breathes through the text, and sensitive to the ways the text may mean different but overlapping things to Jews and Christians respectively.

Esther as Christian Scripture

Thus my attention focuses upon the form of the text as the church now has it, rather than as the principal object of study. The first question that then arises is, What *is* the form of the text as the church now has it? There is no simple answer to this question. The Hebrew text of Esther was the one translated by Jerome, and henceforth the six additional Greek “additions” found in the Septuagint not only became detached from the story, but their precise locations within the narrative were forgotten. Despite this they are considered integral to the Orthodox and Roman Catholic canon. In addition there are also the “A-Text,” which refers to four Greek manuscripts that date from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries that seem more comfortable with Esther’s Jewish identity and make more direct reference to Abraham and to God’s intervention, and Josephus’s account, included in his *Antiquities*, which in addition to telling the story offers reflections on its contemporary interpretation.

The six additions that take their place in the Apocrypha change the character of Jerome’s text considerably, in ways that make Esther similar to Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah: God is very much a character in the story, Purim is obscured,

and prayer and apocalyptic play a significant role. Reid offers a helpful summary of the roles these additions perform in the story.² They fill in gaps, such as the reason for Haman's antipathy to the Jews; they frame the story with a dream and its interpretation; they develop characterization; they attend to Hellenistic concerns, such as religious identity; and they add theatrical elements. The irony is that many of these features, whose absence from the Hebrew I highlight in the commentary and take to be vital to its interpretation, could well have been crucial for enabling Esther to be accepted as a canonical book.

Nonetheless I offer a commentary based on the NRSV as presented within the Protestant canon today. As this brief survey of the alternatives hints, to do otherwise would be to need to address a very different, and in some senses directly contradictory, set of theological issues. For example, any consideration of the Hebrew text as presented in the NRSV has to engage with the absence of God from the book's vocabulary. An examination of the Greek additions has no such engagement to make: on the contrary, it turns into a discussion of God's providential intervention in history. I take the additions and interpolations to be coming from a hand that regards the Hebrew text as theologically unacceptable or at best inadequate. Such a view has been shared by some in every century that has followed. Yet it is precisely those apparently unacceptable convictions that make the book so provocative for Christian interpretation today.

Of all the issues surrounding Esther's place in the canon, one stands out. The Hebrew text never explicitly refers to God. How significant is this omission? There are undoubtedly junctures at which God does not seem far away. Most notable are Mordecai's words to Esther: "For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (4:14). These words not only suggest that God has providentially arranged for Esther to become queen, but further argue that even if this providential orchestration is not met with Esther's active participation, God will find another way. The other most telling moment lies in Zeresh's words to Haman: "If Mordecai, before whom your downfall has begun, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him" (6:13). Here Zeresh prophesies on God's behalf against her own husband; it is not explicit that God will act on behalf of the Jewish people—only that the Jewish people are indestructible and sure to win out within Haman's lifetime.

The silence in relation to God may be read in a number of ways. It could be subtlety and understatement—although this is not a book in general given to understatement. It could build a community among readers who can read between the lines. It could come from an era when dramatic interventions and revelations and appearances were not the conventional style of Jewish literature as they came

2. Debra Reid, *Esther*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 13 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 156–59.

to be in the intertestamental period. Or it could be saying, positively, that God's action is at most hidden and that the Jews had best rely on their own wits rather than wait hopefully or passively for the intervention of God.

This lack of mention of God has led many to regard the book of Esther in its Hebrew form as theologically unacceptable; what is it then doing in the Christian canon of scripture? Hostility to the book in Christian circles is commonplace, aptly summarized as follows: "It contains no promise to the Church, makes no mention of the gospel, has no type or prophecy of the Messiah, does not once introduce the name of God or recognize his providence, reveals none of 'those precious and fundamental doctrines' found elsewhere in the Old Testament, and is not quoted in the New Testament."³ My question is not, however, Does Esther deserve a place in the Christian canon? That is not a question I see any value in addressing. It has been there for most of two millenniums, and Christian theology has taken shape assuming its presence there. I assume it is there through the gift and mercy of the Holy Spirit. Instead, my question is, rather, Given that Esther is a part of the canon, what does the church know that it would otherwise not know? Five answers stand out.

First, scripture may tell a story, but it is not a simple linear story where threads remain consistent throughout. Esther is written from a different perspective from those books that assume the promised land or exile. This is a Diaspora context, and not one that the book takes to be transitory: it is more or less permanent.⁴ Thus the emphasis shifts away from the conventional forms of authority and identity—monarchy, law, land, temple. Purim, as we shall see, is a very different festival from Passover and, I argue, a parody of the whole Passover tradition. The Old Testament is not a seamless robe, any more than it is an unambiguous anticipation of Christ. The point is not that Esther's theology and understanding of providence need to be brought in line with the Old Testament—indeed the Bible—as a whole. It is more that any biblical theology has to ask itself whether it has taken seriously the searing questions posed by the book of Esther.

The most searing of those questions is that of how the Jews are to survive when God seems so reluctant to come to their defense. Thus, second, Esther asks the church what is its understanding of the Jews. The existence of the Jews is a sign of God's promise and faithfulness; their suffering and vulnerability seem to be a sign of the opposite. The Old Testament is predicated on the covenant in which God calls Israel to "be holy as I am holy." It is not clear in the book of Esther that either party is genuinely keeping its side of the bargain. In the absence of the activity of a transcendent God, Esther tells the story of how the Jews rely on their own devices and find resources they never knew they had. There are resemblances to the way Israel survived adverse circumstances in the days of Joshua and the judges; but

3. Jo Carruthers, *Esther through the Centuries* (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 13.

4. Carruthers's definitions are helpful: "exile" signifies "a dispersed community in which identity is centered on a homeland" and "Diaspora" indicates "a coherent yet nonterritorial identity recognized by other characteristics such as religion or race" (*ibid.*, 33).

the differences are as striking as the similarities. Esther is a meditation on what it means to be a Jew, opposed by the world and apparently abandoned by God, and yet with fathomless ingenuity and indomitable spirit. The question for the church in relation to the Jews has to be, Has anything really changed?

What has changed for the church is, of course, Christ. And this offers a third area of canonical reflection. The narrative presents significant resonances and dissonances with the story of Jesus. Esther risks a great deal by going into the place of danger, being at intimate quarters with the enemy, facing a loss of her identity, and in the end laying down her life for her people's salvation. Most interestingly, she sets this story in motion *before* the crisis arises that makes her actions so necessary. These are all christological resonances. She does so, however, without any sense of God's prior activity, without any specific regard to the Jewish law, and with an outcome—the impaling of Haman and the slaughter of the enemies of the Jews—that contrasts with the one who died for the ransom of the many. Esther is a study in how salvation can be rendered very differently from the way it is embodied in Jesus—and yet still be called salvation and inform an understanding of what salvation in Jesus means.

Fourth, the inscrutability of God is a theme at the heart of scriptural interpretation. It is hard to imagine the book of Esther without the background of faith in God. The book is, after all, in the Jewish and Christian canon and not accessible anywhere else. It is like a footnote in which an author acknowledges without contradiction a profound criticism of her argument in a source that would otherwise not have been available. The setting is the aftermath of Jerusalem's fall (in the foreground) and Saul's failure (in the background). These details assume a theological frame of reference. Ahasuerus is a savage parody of God: but even in him we can still discern an assumption that God rules the world and can do pretty much as God pleases. The trouble is, what God pleases. Esther is a story of how a people profoundly hurt by the absence of their hitherto faithful God may end up believing in themselves.

Fifth, and finally, there is plenty for the church to consider about itself. The closing chapters of Esther are full of explicit and tacit guidelines on how a community may retain its integrity and identity in troubled times. One would like there always to be an intimacy between God and the church, a settled trajectory for the church to perceive its role in God's story from the coming of the Spirit on the disciples to the coming down of the new Jerusalem dressed as a bride. But it isn't always like that. Esther says it never was always like that. But do not despair. Make provision. Develop habits. Improvise. Use your enemies' foolishness and malevolence against themselves. Fall back on your traditions. Keep united. And salvation will come.

Esther and Israel: A Story of Survival

The key question the book of Esther addresses is this: How to navigate the dangerous waters of exile, between the two extremes of spineless assimilation and

fruitless resistance? This is the question at the heart of the book. It is as well by way of introduction to take account of the alternatives available.

The scriptural alternatives are largely as follows: Joseph, Moses, Daniel, and Ezra. Within the portrayal of Ezra comes the more ambiguous figure of Nehemiah. In the background is the apocryphal figure of Judith. In addition there are the contexts and perspectives of Lamentations and Isaiah. Each requires some analysis.

Joseph, like Esther, is a kind of orphan. His presence in the Egyptian court is likewise one of some secrecy. His time in prison is not entirely unlike Esther's time in the harem. Like Esther, Joseph gets one shot at impressing the ruler—in his case, as a diviner. Surprise and coincidence play a role in both stories. Both Joseph and Esther become trusted advisers with formal roles. Neither of them makes plans for their people to return home. Neither is particularly concerned with the details of ritual observance. Each of them decisively intervenes to save their people. Yet in each case, successful as their intervention may be, they cannot ensure permanent safety for the Jews.

There are significant differences. Joseph is a lone Jew in Egypt. He is there because he has been rejected by his people. He does not know in advance that his people's destiny lies in his hands. He is not serving an arbitrary and careless despot. With the exception of Potiphar's wife, he has no archenemy to combat among Pharaoh's advisers. While not highly visible in the narrative, God emerges decisively as the author of the whole story, in a way not found in Esther: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (Gen. 50:20). And yet there is a shadow over Joseph's story—that of the way his policies opened the path for the Jews' subsequent enslavement. In general, however, the similarities far outweigh the differences. Joseph is undoubtedly a type of Esther. Both exhibit a confidence that the Jews can find a home away from home, provided they keep their wits, make the most of opportunities, and keep the ear of the ruler.

Moses is also a kind of orphan. Like Esther he finds a home at court that his people had lost elsewhere. Like Esther he comes to public visibility at a crucial time of danger for his people. Moses's ruler is much more of an arbitrary tyrant than Joseph's—if not quite so easily manipulated as Esther's. Moses is, even more explicitly than Esther, the deliverer of his people. Deliverance in each case involves large-scale casualties on the part of the enemy. In each case a festival commemorates the dramatic events.

But there are two overwhelming differences. For Moses, deliverance fundamentally means departure. There is a promised land to enter, and the dust of Egypt is good for no more than shaking off from the feet. Even more significantly, deliverance for Moses is God's doing. God's hand is on everything, from the plagues to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart—and the centerpiece of the story is an astonishing miracle, the parting of the sea. The climax of the narrative is the making and renewal of the covenant at Sinai: thus there is both the emphasis on specific ethical and ritual obedience and a divine promise of abiding security—two items

notably absent from Esther. The story of Moses is a celebration of what God has done; the story of Esther is a celebration of what the Jews can do.

Daniel resembles Esther more in era than in ethos. Whereas Joseph and Moses tell the story of the exodus (including its prologue), Daniel embodies the exile. While the setting of Daniel and Esther may be only a hundred years apart, their context is very different. Daniel is set in Chaldean, and later Persian, Babylon during the exile. Esther is set in Persian Susa, one of four capitals of the Persian Empire and one of countless locations of the Diaspora. Both Daniel and Esther embody the conviction that the Jews have much to offer their Gentile rulers and mean them no harm: what is good for the Jews is what is truly good for the empire.

But where Daniel and Esther differ is on what to do when there is a parting of the ways between the empire and the Jews. Daniel focuses on individual confrontations over expressions of Jewish piety and the upholding of the Jewish law; in each case God does remarkable things that show who is really in control of events. The message is that eventually God will restore Israel to its home just as Daniel and friends were delivered from fire and lions. Esther includes individual confrontations, but is a much more elaborate and cohesive tale concerning the well-being of the Jews as a whole. While Mordecai's defiance of Haman has certain echoes of Daniel, and the comeuppance of Haman echoes the fate of Daniel's detractors, Esther allows for no description of God's explicit intervention. Stealth and sleight of hand, rather than bullish spirit and unbending loyalty, are the politics of the day for the Jews. Esther is not apocalyptic literature: the revelation of God is precisely what is missing.

The book of Judith is set 150 years before Esther, and yet its theme addresses the Hellenistic context, rather than the Persian one. Like Deborah, Jael, and Esther, Judith stands out as a woman of initiative and public prominence who turns the tide of history through taking on a level of authority typically, in her era, assigned to men and acting in a crisis for which no normal guidelines seem to apply. Like Esther she adopts the penitential attitude of sackcloth and ashes before taking on a daunting assignment (Judith 9:1). Unlike Esther, however, she sees God as all powerful and prays to God regularly. God is on her side, the side of the oppressed; and this is the same God who created the world. She credits God, rather than herself, in her moment of triumph. Unlike Esther she has no male accomplice. She lives in a community where Jewish law is central, as is the worship of God in the temple under the authority of the high priest. Unlike Esther she has ready access to a military solution to her nation's problems. She can hope not just to avert her enemies among the population, but to defeat her enemy's army itself. This is beyond the imagination of the book of Esther. More personally, Judith is a model of chastity, a virtue hard to associate with Esther. And yet, for all these differences, the resonances with Esther—gender, palace politics, a lustful and drunken leader, banquets, and the Jews' postexilic vulnerability—are strong.

Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah collectively offer another counterpart to Esther. They too address the context of life under the Persians. They too see a

natural and healthy partnership between the king and the Jews, with beneficial outcomes for each party. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah may even consider events ostensibly contemporaneous with the drama described in the book of Esther. But these figures and their books are largely taken up with the following concerns: return from exile, ritual and ethical adherence to the law, the restoration of the walls and temple of Jerusalem, and the maintenance of the Jews' racial and religious purity and integrity. What is most striking about these concerns is that they are almost entirely absent from the book of Esther. In the event of a massacre like that plotted by Haman, Nehemiah would have been no safer behind the walls of Jerusalem than Esther would have been in the citadel of Susa. But their strategies, perceptions, and goals are remarkably different for figures located in similar contexts. It is ironic that Ezra held out against the taking of foreign wives when the book of Esther tells a story of how the Jewish people were saved from annihilation only by a woman who took a foreign husband, albeit the king himself.

Perhaps the best way to assess Esther's politics is to highlight the ways in which she both echoes and differs from these distinguished forebears. For Esther, the goal is not return to the promised land. The method is not confrontation with the ruling authorities. The assumption is not that God has a plan for deliverance. The heart of Jewish identity is not in close observance of the law. For Esther, the Jews need access to power. They need the willingness to do what it takes to attain that access. They need to be resourceful and alert, with one eye behind their backs watching for unscrupulous enemies, and one eye on how to consolidate their seat at the right hand of the power. The key lesson, embodied in the life of Esther herself, is that it *is* possible to live in two worlds simultaneously. It *is* possible to be called Esther and Hadassah. It *is* possible to be the object of others' desires and an obedient agent in someone else's game, and yet to be biding one's time and waiting one's moment to bring about exactly the outcome one seeks. In short, it *is* possible to survive and thrive as a Jew, yet have no land, no king, no temple, and not even a carefully practiced law to call one's own. The book of Esther is not a fairy story. It is a profound challenge to the dominant reading of the politics of exile.

Moving from political and social strategy to theological ethos, points of comparison arise in relation to a number of figures and books. Ruth is another female character with a book named after her. Like Esther, Ruth is a story of redemption from a point of utter despair. The dynamic is somewhat different: Ruth's predicament is a personal one brought about by misfortune that seems, initially, to have no political dimensions. Esther's crisis is a political one that she had no hand in bringing about but holds the only possibility of averting. Both stories seem to be about redemption of a kind that depends on imagination and circumstance and excludes decisive intervention from God. But Ruth's story hints at a larger perspective in its concluding reference to the family from which came David. Both books are presented as historical but have a parabolic quality.

The most obvious character with whom to dialogue about the absence of God would seem to be Job. And yet Job and Esther differ in four significant regards. First, the book of Job is very much focused on the plight of one individual, rather than the jeopardy of the Jews as a whole. Second, the book is very much one of fable and poetry, rather than historylike narrative. Third, questions of theodicy, even if not conclusively answered, run through the book of Job; Esther is not concerned with justice as much as survival. Fourth, God is very much a character in the book of Job. Thus while both Job and Esther offer perspectives on the absence of God, that absence is very differently rendered in the two books.

Esther provides as strong a contrast to Lamentations as one can imagine. They are without doubt both set in the context of the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile—Lamentations being in the more immediate, Esther in the more remote aftermath. But there the similarity ends and the differences take over. Lamentations is a series of lyric poems focusing on the expression of grief, anger, despair, guilt, shame, and also hope and forgiveness, addressed in personal terms but without narrative shape. The book of Esther is entirely narrative, is almost without personal perspective—most speech is reported—and has little or no interest in a cosmic perspective that places the plight of the Jews in relation to the overall purposes of God. Esther is not concerned with theodicy, but with active steps to set things straight. It takes no time to linger over personal sins and shortcomings that invited punishment or repentance, but instead takes a pragmatic if sometimes playful view that even in dire straits, imaginative interventions can save the day. Most of all, Lamentations longs for God to restore what has been lost: it concludes with these words: “Restore us to yourself, O LORD, / that we may be restored; / renew our days as of old— / unless you have utterly rejected us, / and are angry with us beyond measure” (Lam. 5:21–22). Esther, by contrast, has no hint that destiny lies in returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding walls and temple and restoring law and kingly rule—and no hint that God has such things in store.

More subtle is the relationship between Esther herself and the Suffering Servant of Second Isaiah. In general the scope of Isa. 40–55 is way beyond that of the book of Esther: it places Israel’s dereliction in the light of God’s primordial, historical, and eschatological purpose. It has a much more nuanced and constructive view of foreign rulers: its Cyrus is capable of taking some of the dignity of a king of Israel—and is thus a very different figure to Esther’s puffed-up and clumsy Ahasuerus. But more particular interest lies in the comparison between the way Esther allows herself to be put through hardship and virtual captivity in order to come into the king’s chamber and later faces extreme danger in coming before the king to entreat for the Jews’ protection. The initial experience in the harem can largely be ruled out, since Esther enters it before there is any genuine jeopardy for the Jews, and thus it seems an unlikely point of comparison to the notion of the Suffering Servant, whose vocation is specifically tied to a time of hardship and distress. But the connection between Esther’s kenosis before Ahasuerus and the submission of the Suffering Servant is a genuine counterpoint. In both cases the

subjection has a profoundly redemptive intention and effect. If one is going to consider Esther as a potential Christ figure, as I do in this commentary, then one may also reflect on the resonances with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah.

Esther and Jesus: A Story of Salvation

The correspondences between the narrative of the book of Esther and the economy of salvation are on the face of it so slim that many, perhaps most, theologians and preachers ignore or dismiss the book for the purposes of crafting an overview of God's purposes. But is this too hasty?

The christological dimensions of the story may be examined in three dimensions. First, Esther takes upon herself the plight of her people, faces ultimate danger on their behalf, places herself in the lion's jaw, as it were, and brings about not only her own restoration but the salvation of her people. This broad outline makes a formidable case for seeing the parallels between Jesus's story and Esther's. The conversation with Mordecai in Esth. 4 is crucial in this reading. Esther knowingly takes on all these responsibilities. She wavers at first, but her wavering only highlights the risk and the sacrifice involved. There is of course no question of Esther herself having anything like the associations that surround the second member of the Trinity; the point is not that Esther is like Jesus ontologically, but that the narrative shape of her story has strong resemblances with the story of salvation as seen in Jesus. This commentary seeks to take these resonances seriously and pursue their details in the text.

Why have these resonances not drawn further attention? It may be that only in recent times have resistances to seeing a woman as a Christ figure began in many places to be overcome. The nature of Esther's life in the harem and subsequently in marriage to a Gentile may be seen as expressing her suffering, but may in many quarters have seemed unsavory in a Christ figure. It may be that the salvation Esther procures is too this-worldly for many Christian appetites. And besides being this-worldly, it has a bloodthirsty character that is not generally associated with Christ's salvation—although the history of the Crusades and many imperial ventures might suggest otherwise.

What these resonances should do is draw further attention to the character of Esther as it develops through the book, from passive pawn of others' designs through ambivalence to active, imaginative, brilliant, and decisive actor on the world political stage. In the space of a few short chapters the story presents a compelling figure and invites as much scrutiny toward her humble beginnings as her vaunted conclusion.

Second, the sequence of chapters in the book of Esther discloses an interesting illumination of Christ's incarnation. The conventional pattern of theological analysis assumes a sequence that begins creation-fall-covenant-incarnation. But in the book of Esther the incarnation precedes the fall. I take the fall to be the

moment when Haman becomes first minister and Mordecai's refusal to acknowledge Haman triggers the momentous decree. One of the most fascinating aspects of the book's plot is that by the time all this happens Esther is *already* queen. She did not become queen as a strategy to offset catastrophe. She was already queen by the time catastrophe dawned.

The christological illumination of this is to give weight to the conviction that the incarnation is not simply God's response to humanity's fall, but is a part of the overflowing and manifestation of God's very nature; in other words, there would have been an incarnation had there been no fall. This is a venerable debate in Christian theology, and perhaps the most illuminating one of them all—for it defines the nature of God as much as if not more than any other question. We are given no reason why Esther sought to become queen. Indeed Mordecai's words in 4:14, "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this," indicate that even Mordecai had no particular understanding of why Esther should enter the king's circle. In entering the harem she embodies her people's condition of exile, much as Jesus embodies Israel's sojourn in Egypt when he is taken there after his birth in Bethlehem.

Third, a number of other typological inferences offer themselves and may be given greater or lesser weight depending on one's judgment about the central connection between Esther and Christ. I begin the commentary by noting Ahasuerus's portrayal as God, albeit a very different God from the God of Jesus Christ. Perceiving Ahasuerus as a parody of the first person of the Trinity enhances the resonance of Esther pleading at his right hand later in the story. Haman is as an explicit an embodiment of evil as takes human form in the pages of the Bible. While Satan appears in Job and in the Gospels, he is not flesh and blood in the way Haman is. Mordecai is perhaps the most complex figure of all. He seems to be the astute operator set to become the wise statesman, but it is his refusal to bow before Haman that provokes the terrifying decree. He is perhaps as complex as Israel.

Esther and the Church: An Invitation to Faithful Witness

While my interest as a pastor, preacher, and theologian alerts me to the questions of scripture, Israel, and Christ, my background as a scholar in Christian ethics and a leader of a Christian community directs my attention particularly to the setting and nature of the church and its perception of its relationship to the world. This latter encounter has been portrayed in a host of different ways, ranging from the hostile to the congenial.

My book *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* offers an understanding of the church's relationship to the world.⁵ It endorses Hans Urs von Balthasar's notion of a dramatic reading of the Christian story, synthesizing a lyric reading tied up with

5. Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Brazos / London: SPCK, 2004).

personal poignancy and feeling with an epic reading too detached from incarnational involvement to be truly embodied. It locates the church as the fourth act of a five-act drama, whose sequence is creation-Israel-Jesus-church-eschaton. Living in act 4 means recognizing that the decisive moment in God's story has already happened and therefore having the courage and patience to live knowing that God's eschatological consummation (act 5) will complete all that faithful witness leaves unresolved. The mistakes the church makes can in many respects be traced to misunderstanding which act it is in and assuming that no definitive sign of God's will has been seen (and thus living in act 2), or assuming that it must make the decisive intervention (living in act 3), or assuming that it must conclude the story correctly (act 5).

Improvisation is a helpful way of thinking about ethics because Christians cannot simply replicate the story they find in scripture. Improvisers in the theater are schooled in a tradition so thoroughly that they learn to act from habit in circumstances that spontaneously arise. This is what I take the practice of Christian ethics to be: forming habits that ensure responding to novelty, crisis, or challenge is not a dilemma requiring anxious effort but a stimulus to apply old wisdom and familiar practices in new settings. There are three key elements of the improvisatory imagination.

First is the understanding of status, a mode of interaction chosen rather than imposed, and referring not to social class or conventional aggregations of power but to the ways people maneuver interactions and conversations into forms that reaffirm the mode of relationship that suits them best. Status, in this sense, is not something you are or have; it is the way you choose to interact. High status and low status are not inherently good or bad ways of operating: they are simply ways that reflect a person's estimation of themselves and their facility in adopting styles that achieve their desired outcomes. If one has a gun pointed at one's head, a low-status response might be, "Please don't shoot! I have a family and I am no threat to you!" A high-status response might be, "Go on. Make my day." Expert status players can alter their status at will. When this is done well, and their interlocutors enjoy it, observers call it charm; when it is done less well, and their interlocutors dislike its outcomes, observers call it manipulation. The significance for ethics is that the church understands how status works and the status it may be called to play in differing circumstances.

In the book of Esther, Haman is the classic obsessive high-status player. His clash with Mordecai is all about demanding that Mordecai respond in low-status terms and then overreacting when Mordecai refuses to do so. It demonstrates how high-status players frequently get into conflict with one another and often lack facility in negotiating such conflict. Esther is a status expert, able to be subservient and ever pleasing in the harem, able to alter her status frequently as she leads Ahasuerus on, and then able to be utterly high status when her honor is impugned by Haman while Ahasuerus is momentarily absent.

Second is the practice of overaccepting. Anything an interlocutor says or does, whether friendly, hostile, or neutral, is considered an offer. The respondent has

three options in return. The first is to accept; this means to work with the grain of the offer, even at great disadvantage to oneself. The second is to block the offer; this means to reject the premise of the offer. The third is to overaccept the offer; this means to accept the premise of the offer but fit the offer into a much larger narrative than had been in the imagination of the person making the offer. A friend was approached by a sex worker who said, “Would you like a good time?” To accept would be to say, “Yes, how much?” To block would be to say, “No, thank you.” Instead my friend overaccepted and said, “I’d like to talk to you. I don’t think what you’re offering me right now is what I’d call a good time. If I can buy you a drink I’d like to talk to you about what I would call a *really* good time.” Sometimes accepting all offers is a scary commitment. But blocking is not always an option. It sometimes requires violence and sometimes is futile. Overaccepting is especially significant for those who lack sufficient power simply to block threatening offers.

The key scene in the book of Esther comes in Esth. 4 where Esther, having accepted her role in the harem, initially blocks Mordecai’s counsel to use her royal influence to save the Jews. However, after some deliberation, during which Mordecai persuades her that blocking will be futile and she will die with all her race, she overaccepts the offer and not only brings about salvation for the Jews but contrives to put Mordecai in a position of considerable power. This small story of overaccepting portrays the larger wisdom of the book—that the Jews must overaccept their Diaspora existence, rather than spinelessly accept or uselessly block.

Third is the practice of reincorporation. This is when discarded elements from earlier in the narrative begin to reappear, especially at moments when redeeming these discarded elements offers the resolution to what seemed insurmountable problems. Children are often highly attuned to reincorporation and refuse to believe they have reached the end of the story until elements and characters earlier set aside finally reappear. Charles Dickens’s novels are notable for immense and rapid reincorporation in their closing chapters, where it sometimes seems almost every character in a sprawling narrative comes back into the story in a new way. One influential writer describes improvisation as like walking backward.⁶ Instead of walking *forward* to face the daunting emptiness of an unknown future, the improviser walks *backward*, seeing discarded material, near or far, as a host of gifts enabling the continuance and resolution of troubling narratives.

Reincorporation is not quite so significant in the book of Esther as the previous two motifs, but like both of them it figures at 4:14. When Mordecai says, “Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this,” he is saying that a collection of events whose true meaning had remained for some time elusive were now coming back into the story in a crucial way. This is a dramatic reincorporating move.

The significance of introducing these themes from the practice of improvisation in the theater is not simply to amplify the dramatic qualities of the book

6. Keith Johnstone, *Impro: Improvisation in the Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1981), 116.

of Esther. It is to highlight the ways the text may inform and instruct debates in Christian ethics. Status is a perpetual feature of every human interaction and a constant theme in the relation of the church to the surrounding society. Faithfulness is not about settling on one kind of status as appropriate, but about becoming expert status players who can embody servant ministry at the same time as resurrected glory. Sometimes it means speaking truth to power, a high-status activity; sometimes it means being all things to all people, that by all means one may save some, a low-status approach.

Status may illuminate the debate between ecclesial ethicists, notably Stanley Hauerwas, and some of their antagonists, such as Jeffrey Stout.⁷ When Hauerwas calls on the church to have a greater sense of its identity and to locate that identity in the narrative of Israel and Jesus and in practices such as baptism and Eucharist that seek to embody that narrative, he is making a high-status demand to the church to have a greater esteem for, and confidence in, its distinctive qualities and sources of truth. However, many beyond the church hear such a demand as a call for the church to flex its muscles and assert its authority all the louder, in the face of the apparently prevailing tide of secularism. Meanwhile when the call sounds like a plea for Christians to withdraw to a sectarian citadel—a high-status proclamation that Christians are better than the world and do not need their contemporaries of other faith persuasions or none—then antagonism quickly flares up, as invariably happens when extreme high-status positions are adopted. But the high-status claim *within the church*—that Christians have a distinctive understanding of truth and the possibilities of life and should base their philosophy and ethics on that understanding—does not automatically invoke a high-status claim addressed *by the church to the world*. Quite the contrary: Hauerwas's work constantly criticizes the assumption that it is the church's birthright or responsibility to run the world. The irony is that many of Hauerwas's critics regard his argument for the distinctiveness of the church as wrong precisely because it makes it *harder* for the church then to run the world, where he has the more modest proposal that Christians should allow themselves to be run by the Holy Spirit. This is where Hauerwas's critics often misunderstand him.

The book of Esther can bring clarity to this dispute about status. Withdrawal for the Jews is out of the question. There is simply no place to which the Jews could possibly withdraw. Sectarianism is taken out of the debate altogether. But in her moment of crisis, Esther calls upon the Jews to reassert their identity and practices by fasting for three days. Esther plays different status roles depending on her different contexts: she makes no virtue of stubborn inflexibility. Hers is a teleological ethic: she fits her whole form of life around what will bring salvation for the Jews. By contrast Mordecai's insistence on playing high status gets the Jews in trouble. His high-status behavior from Jew to Gentile triggers antagonism. Esther

7. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989); Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

saves her high-status moments for the occasions when they flatter Ahasuerus and facilitate the right results. The obsession of Ahasuerus and especially Haman with status leaves them open to manipulation and downfall. Esther never falls into such a mistake. Unlike Haman, Esther never makes her desire for a particular status an end in itself: it is always something she employs to a greater end. To invoke the language of Augustine, Haman “enjoys” being high status—ridiculously so.⁸ Haman thus enjoys what should only ever be used. Esther, by contrast, enjoys only the salvation of the Jews: everything else, most of all her status, she uses to that end. Hence Hauerwas’s exasperation with his critics: status is simply something one uses for the sake of what alone should be enjoyed: bringing the church into faithful imitation of Christ through the Holy Spirit. To be overly concerned about how one social form best equips the church to influence the world—something that will inevitably vary over time—is to enjoy what should be used.

Another issue highlighted by status that is raised by Hauerwas’s work is that of the language of exile. Hauerwas and others, notably Walter Brueggemann, often employ the language of exile to point out to Christians, particularly members of the Protestant churches in the United States, that their country is not their home. This has significant strengths. It distinguishes between the United States and the church, emphasizing that the United States is not the church, however much many American Christians have treated it as if it were. It sharpens the sense Christians have that they are and should expect to be in tension with key assumptions of their social and political culture. But the book of Esther again clarifies what is lacking in this portrayal. The book of Esther is not about exile. It is about life in the Diaspora. There is no question of going home in this book. One can only hope to find peaceful coexistence in foreign territory. Once one invokes the language of exile one has to be explicit about where precisely home is. And while home has to be heaven, in eschatological terms, there remains a sneaking suspicion that there was a time when American Christians really did get Christianity right—be it the 1950s, or the 1930s, or the 1820s—and that becomes an unspoken template for all thoughts of return. (Hauerwas, Brueggemann, and others do not endorse these suspicions, but neither do they provide a detailed alternative to them, so the force of them remains.) The language of Diaspora has no such thoughts of return. It does not risk the nostalgic overtones of the term “exile” to quite the same degree. It is provisional, but more or less permanent. And it requires constant adaptive tactics for survival, rather than shrewd strategies for eventual dominance. The book of Esther illuminates why the language of Diaspora would suit the rhetoric of such figures as Hauerwas and Brueggemann rather better than the language of exile.

The practice of overaccepting has similar resonances with Esther and with the contemporary church. People’s first reaction to the notion of overaccepting is frequently, But surely there are some things one *must* block? In these cases the

8. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1892), 9.

significance of overaccepting sinks in only when it is made explicit that there are many circumstances where one simply cannot block. The situation of the Jews in Esth. 4, after Haman's decree, is a perfect example of such a circumstance. The poignancy of Esth. 4 is that one might assume—most people at most times do—that the only options are passive acquiescence (acceptance) or futile defiance (blocking). But Esther finds a way to overaccept. That is the heart of her story. And that is the heart of Christian social ethics. Ethics are often conceived as a contest between principles—which invariably require blocking—or outcomes—which invariably assume a level of accepting. But the ability to make a block effective assumes the employment of, or complicity with, a level of force or coercion that ought to invite further scrutiny. (For example, one might say abortion is wrong; but if that therefore implies that abortions must be stopped, then it means working through legislation and encouraging coercive enforcement of legislation. Thus a principled stand ends up having a consequential approach to law enforcement.) By contrast Esther has no power to block. She has to find a way to renarrate Ahasuerus's story in such a way that Haman emerges as his enemy, not his friend. She has to find a way to persuade him not to erase Haman's decree—Persian law does not allow legislation to be blocked—but to overaccept Haman's decree with a subsequent decree. Thus while status puts its finger on some of the more controversial debates in contemporary Christian ethics, overaccepting offers the key to how the church may, while remaining faithful to its tradition, witness in challenging circumstances without assuming that its role is to seize control.

Reincorporation is central to the church's understanding of the reign of God. Reincorporation describes how people discarded earlier in the story reappear as gifts. This is how the church sees the least of these as the key to unlocking the door of God's future. Act 5 of the divine drama is made up of the reincorporated discarded material of the previous acts. Thus living eschatologically in act 4 means spending time with those discarded from the drama—the downtrodden, oppressed, and of no account—who will inevitably be present in act 5. Reincorporation identifies why the conclusion of the book of Esther is troubling to Christians. The issue is not primarily whether the slaughter is excusable because of the extreme circumstances or whether it is exaggerated in keeping with much other hyperbole in the narrative. The issue is that, if God works by drawing the discarded events and people back into the drama at the end in new and reviving ways, this does not look like the way God works. Of course the book never says that this is how God works. Which might lead Christians to the wry conclusion that, while the church has a great deal to learn from the book of Esther about status and overaccepting, the language of reincorporation may clarify a decisive parting of the ways between the Jews' resourceful dependence on their own devices and the true reincorporating politics made possible by the God of Jesus Christ. Not that, of course, the church has often been such a shining example of such a politics.

The Challenge of Esther

The foregoing reflections have yielded the following conclusions. The intersection of existential threat and hyperbolic humor is not incidental to Esther but inseparable from its meaning. The book of Esther has significant precedents and parallels in Old Testament literature both in terms of its political ethics and its spiritual disposition. The book of Esther has illumination to shed on Christ's incarnation and passion, death and resurrection. The book of Esther has important things to say about the church's political and social ethic, and these may be highlighted using the categories of theatrical improvisation.

The most specific challenge of Esther lies in the way it offers a story of salvation, but one different in marked respects from the way salvation is depicted in the Old and New Testament texts more central to the tradition. There is no directly identified action of God that brings salvation about. There is no dialogue with God in which God's people wrestle with God's purposes and their appropriate role in bringing those purposes about. There is no sense of a promised land, in Canaan or in heaven, that lies in the near, middle, or far distance as the home of God and/or the destiny of those involved in the struggle to realize God's purposes. There is no sense of a temple, constructed or embodied, to focus God's reconciling word to God's people or the people's imprecatory word to God.

More than that, there seems to be a degree of criticism of such convictions. These convictions—that Israel's heritage and destiny lie in God's holiness, manifested in liberating action, coded in covenant, represented by land, maintained by king, restored in temple—are what we might think of as the spine of the scriptures. It is not that the scriptures exclude countertestimony, searching inquiry, profound lament. But such countertestimony presupposes the core testimony. And Esther's countertestimony challenges that core testimony in a unique way, by presenting an ethic more or less shorn of God. If the Jews wait for Passover to come it will be too late: that is how the lot falls. There is a hint of piety in Mordecai's sackcloth and ashes and in Esther's fast—but besides these glimpses, the Jews are left very much to their own devices. Meanwhile there is an element of parody in the portrayal of Ahasuerus, the unpredictable ruler with cumbersome and sometimes ridiculous but nonetheless irrevocable laws. If one were in any degree given to lament God's absence or silence, such a portrayal gives exaggerated vigor to such protest. In this commentary I use the term "Passover" to indicate the spine of the scriptures and the word "Purim" to indicate the alternative vision offered by the book of Esther.

Thus fundamentally the book of Esther is a challenge to Israel to discern when to take its destiny into its own hands; a challenge to the church to learn how to balance refusal with compliance and find a faithful way between the two; and a challenge to God to show a face, different from that of Ahasuerus, that the Jews desperately need in their constant search for salvation.