Studies in Esther

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Parallels Between Esther and Joseph: Hidden Identity, Providence, and Redemption 1

The Megillah is often read as a suspenseful court drama, a tale of unlikely salvation and national reversal. But many commentators and scholars, both traditional
and academic, have recognized deeper narrative and theological currents beneath the
surface. Among the most striking is the intertextual relationship between Esther and the
Joseph narratives in Genesis. The similarities go beyond passing resemblance—they
suggest a deliberate literary modeling that invites us to read Esther through the lens of
Joseph's story. These connections frame Esther not merely as a story of political survival,
but as a religious reflection on exile—mirroring Joseph's arc of hidden providence and
redemptive self-disclosure.

A Shared Arc: From Exile to Elevation

Joseph, Mordecai, and Esther rise to prominence in foreign courts after being swept into exile by circumstances beyond their control. Joseph is sold into Egypt by his brothers, and Esther is taken into Ahasuerus's palace. Neither seeks power, yet both achieve it, dramatically transformed through their ordeals. Like Joseph, Esther conceals her Israelite identity and adopts the external trappings of the host culture to thrive in the royal court.

Each character's transformation reaches its turning point with a moment of moral courage: Joseph refuses the advances of Potiphar's wife; Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman. Both acts, born of fidelity to Jewish principles, bring danger rather than reward.
Yet they also mark the beginning of the protagonists' ultimate vindication.

Both Joseph and Mordecai are connected to pivotal moments involving two court officials—Pharaoh's butler and baker in Joseph's case, and Bigtan and Teresh in Mordecai's. Their heroic interventions are initially forgotten, then later remembered at precisely the moment they are needed to change the course of history. Each story features a sleepless monarch whose introspection opens the path to the heroes' rise.

Even the details of their honors align. Both are publicly honored by a royal procession: Joseph by Pharaoh (Genesis 41:43), Mordecai by Ahasuerus (Esther 6:11).
Each is elevated to a position just beneath the throne. The drama in both stories climaxes when the hero's true identity is revealed—Joseph to his brothers, Esther to Ahasuerus.

Beyond Conceptual Echoes: Linguistic Parallels

The parallels are not only thematic. The author of Esther appears to weave linguistic allusions into the narrative structure with literary precision. 2 There are specific

(1 Many scholars have observed parallels between the two narratives. I found the work of
Gabriel H. Cohn (Textual Tapestries: Explorations of the Five Megillot [Jerusalem: Maggid, 2016], Yonatan Grossman (Esther: Megillat Setarim [Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013],
Moshe Sokolow (Ki En Lah Av VaEm: Essays on Purim and Megillat Esther Presented
on the Yahrzeits of Joseph and Hannah Sokolow, a”h [self-published, 2018], and the
material at alhatorah.org most helpful in summarizing the critical issues.)

linguistic echoes that strengthen the argument for intentional literary borrowing. Phrases
such as “day after day” (yom yom) appear in both stories to describe repeated moral tests
(Genesis 39:10; Esther 3:4). The king’s removal of his signet ring appears only in these
two narratives (Genesis 41:42; Esther 3:10; 8:2). The similarity in language and structure
suggests that the author of Esther was intentionally evoking the Joseph narrative, inviting
the reader to compare and contrast the two texts.

Midrashic literature was already sensitive to these connections. Esther Rabbah (7:7) links Mordecai’s steadfastness to Joseph’s, noting that both were descendants of
Rachel who resisted powerful adversaries on a daily basis. Gabriel H. Cohn and others
suggest that these parallels teach a moral lesson: that true deliverance emerges from

principled resistance to evil.

Providence Behind the Curtain

Joseph famously tells his brothers, “God sent me ahead of you to preserve life” (Genesis 45:5), acknowledging the hidden hand of Providence in his journey. Even in Joseph’s account, where God is explicitly mentioned, the divine plan is only gradually revealed; in Esther, God is not named at all. And yet, the sense of divine orchestration pervades the story. As Yonatan Grossman observes, this absence is itself a theological message: we are called to recognize God’s presence even when it is hidden.

A Rematch with Amalek

Another axis of interpretation places Esther within the biblical arc of Israel’s struggle with Amalek. On five occasions in the Megillah, Haman is called an “Agagite.” 3 Several early traditions consider this appellation a reference to Haman’s descent from King Agag of Amalek, whom Saul defeated (I Samuel 15). 4

Similarly, several midrashic traditions identify the Kish of Mordecai’s pedigree (2:5) with Saul’s father (I Samuel 9:1). 5 From this vantage point, Mordecai’s recorded pedigree spans some five centuries in order to connect him and Esther to Saul. If Haman is indeed of royal Amalekite stock, and Mordecai and Esther descend from King Saul, then the Purim story may be viewed as a dramatic rematch of the battle between Saul and Agag.

(2 See Adele Berlin, The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xlv–lii, who discusses the literary artistry and intertextual
structure of the Megillah, including parallels with the Joseph narrative. See also Michael
V. Fox, Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 195–200, who explores narrative echoes and the intentional
crafting of Esther's plot in relation to earlier biblical models.)
(3) See Esther 3:1, 10; 8:3, 5; 9:24.
(4) Mishnah Megillah 3:4 requires that Parashat Zakhor (Deuteronomy 25:17–19) be read
the Shabbat preceding Purim. Mishnah 3:6 mandates that the narrative of Amalek's attack
on the Israelites in the wilderness (Exodus 17:9–17) be read as the Torah portion of
Purim. Josephus (Antiquities XI:209) similarly asserts that Haman was an Amalekite.
(5) See, for example, Megillah 13b.

However, neither assumption is rooted in the text of the Megillah. The etymology of "Agagite" is uncertain; while it could mean "from King Agag of Amalek," it may be a
Persian or Elamite name. 6 Had the author wanted to associate Haman with Amalek, he
could have dubbed him "the Amalekite." The same holds true for Mordecai and Esther's
descent from King Saul. If the Megillah wished to link them it could have named Saul
instead of Kish in 2:5 (Ibn Ezra). It is possible that the Kish mentioned in the Megillah is
Mordecai's great-grandfather rather than a distant ancestor. 7

Even if the textual grounding of these identifications is uncertain, the thematic resonance is undeniable. In this case, the association can be inferred from the text of the
Megillah itself. 8 Thus, the midrashic identification may provide narrative closure

to the
Saul-Agag encounter. The conflict between Mordecai and Haman as symbolic of a greater battle between Israel and Amalek is well taken conceptually, but it is tenuous to
contend that the biological connections are manifest in the text. As the rabbinic maxim
goes: ve-im kabbalah hi, nekabbel—if it is a received tradition, we accept it.

Sinai Revisited

A passage in the Talmud (Shabbat 88a) declares that at Sinai, the Israelites were compelled to accept the Torah—God suspended the mountain over them like a cask:

> And they stood under the mount (Exodus 19:17): Rabbi Avdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, 'If you accept the Torah, 'tis well; if not, there shall be your burial.' Rabbi Aha b. Yaakov observed: This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah. Said Rava, Yet even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, [the Jews] confirmed, and took upon them [etc.] (Esther 9:27): [i.e.,] they confirmed what they had accepted
> long before. (Shabbat 88a)

Only during the days of Ahasuerus, says Rava, did they accept the Torah willingly, with full freedom. In this reading, the Purim story is not only a national

(6 Yaakov Klein, Mikhael Heltzer, and Yitzhak Avishur et al. (Olam HaTanakh: Megillot
[Tel Aviv: Dodson-Iti, 1996, 217]) note that the names Haman, Hamedata, and Agag all
have Elamite and Persian roots.)
(7 Cf. Amos Hakham's comments to 2:5 in Da'at Mikra: Esther, in Five Megillot (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1973); Aaron Koller, "The Exile of Kish,"
Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 37:1 (2012), 45–56.)
(8 Hakham suggests that "Agagite" may be a typological name, intended to associate
Haman conceptually with "Amalek," i.e., he acts as one from Amalek (the same

way
many contemporary Jews refer to anti-Semites as “Amalek” regardless of their genetic
origins). Jon D. Levenson (Old Testament Library: Esther [Louisville, KY: Westminster
John Knox Press, 1997], 56–57) adds that Saul lost his kingdom to David as a result of
not killing Agag; now Mordecai will reclaim some of Saul’s glory by defeating Haman
the Agagite—although the Davidic kingdom stopped ten years after Jeconiah was exiled
(Esther 2:6).)

rescue—it is a spiritual completion of the covenant. What was imposed at Sinai is embraced during Purim, in the very absence of explicit divine command or overt miracle.
That message resonates powerfully today, in an age where our faith must often flourish
without supernatural proofs.

Esther and the Ethics of Self-Defense 9

Jews generally have interpreted the Megillah in terms of the ongoing problem of anti-Semitism, and on God’s role in helping the Jews behind the scenes. Jews need to be
faithful, unite, and help one another.

In stark contrast, several Christian interpreters condemned the book’s violence and lack of overt theology. Martin Luther declared that he wished Esther did not exist: “I
am so hostile to this book that I wish it should not exist, for it Judaizes too much and has
too much heathen naughtiness.”

In later centuries, especially in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany,

these critiques were reshaped through scholarly discourse but often retained disturbing
anti-Semitic assumptions. Ignoring how the Jews' lives were threatened, these scholars
interpreted the book as a celebration of Jewish greed and bloodthirstiness. Elias Bickerman (Four Strange Books of the Bible, 1967) observed that these despicable types
of interpretation began in Germany, but eventually gained traction in the scholarship of
England and the United States as well.

To cite a couple of examples that reflect the disturbing biases of their time: In 1908, Lewis Paton published the International Critical Commentary, which has been
reprinted many times. Here is an excerpt of his evaluation of the Jews' behavior:

Esther…is relentless toward a fallen enemy, secures not merely that the Jews escape from danger, but that they fall upon their enemies, slay their wives and children, and plunder their property (8:11; 9:2–10). Not satisfied with the slaughter, she asks that Haman's ten sons may be hanged, and that the Jews may be allowed another day for killing their enemies in Susa (9:13–14)… Mordecai…displays wanton insolence in his refusal to bow to Haman, and helps Esther in carrying out her schemes of vengeance. All this the author narrates with interest and approval. He gloats over the wealth and the triumph of his heroes and
is oblivious to their moral shortcomings.

His commentary reveals the degree to which anti-Jewish prejudice distorted interpretive
judgment.

Another scholar named Max Haller wrote (in 1925): "Far more numerous are the despicable, negative character traits of this people, especially their unrestrained lust for
revenge." Elsewhere in his commentary, Haller argues that the Jews stirred hatred against
themselves by being socially isolated, stoking jealousy because of their wealth,

and
inviting violence because of their political weakness. According to Haller’s logic, the
Jews are to blame for anti-Semitism.

(See especially Gabriel H. Cohn, Textual Tapestries, 423–433. The quotations from
Christian commentators are cited by Cohn.)

Yet, these critiques often ignore the context: The Jews were marked for annihilation. The Megillah emphasizes repeatedly that they fought only those who attacked them, and they refrained from taking spoils (8:11, 13; 9:1–2)—subverting the
logic of vengeance. The parallel phrasing between Haman’s decree and the Jews’ counter-decree (3:13 vs. 8:11) reflects a deliberate undoing, not imitation, of the original
evil decree of Haman.

Post-Holocaust Christian scholarship has, in many quarters, recognized this misreading. Some now view Esther as a text about justified self-defense and resilience in
the face of genocidal hatred.

One German interpreter named A. Meinhold (1983) reflected on the viciously anti-Semitic pre-World War II scholars: “From here it follows that the Christian critique
of the use of force in the Megillah is liable to raise the suspicion—in light of what is
related in the book and against the backdrop of the atrocities committed against the Jews
in the twentieth century—that it supports those forces that attempt to destroy the Jewish
people.”

Sadly, and frighteningly, we still see the pre-World War II argument all too often

regarding Israel's right to self-defense, surrounded by people who publicly promote its destruction. Disturbingly, similar patterns persist today, as many still frame Jewish self-defense as aggression and shift blame for anti-Semitism onto its victims. The Purim story, tragically, remains relevant.

The View from Shushan

What did the broader Persian population think of the Jews? The text offers only hints. Esther conceals her identity at Mordecai's urging (2:10, 20), but it is unclear why Mordecai wanted Esther to retain this secrecy. A debate among our commentators stems from opposite assumptions about the feelings of the general Persian population toward the Jews. Perhaps Jews were despised and Mordecai wanted her to be chosen so that she could help the Jews later on (Kara, Ralbag). Alternatively, Mordecai feared Esther would be chosen and therefore wanted to conceal Esther's noble Jewish roots, which would be admired by Persians (Rashi, Ibn Ezra).

When Haman's genocidal decree was announced, the city of Shushan was "confounded" (3:15). Some, including Rashi and Ibn Ezra, read this as limited to Jewish anguish; others, including Ralbag and Rabbi Yosef Hayyun, as general civic shock.[10] When the Jews are vindicated, the city rejoices (8:15). Was this joy Jewish, or universal? Opinions vary. We are left unsure of the general feelings most Persians had toward the Jews.

Conclusion

The narrative of Esther is not simply a tale of palace intrigue. It is a layered meditation on exile, identity, moral courage, and divine providence. By consciously
drawing on the Joseph story, the author of the Megillah places Purim within a larger

(10 Barry Dov Walfish, Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of
Esther in the Middle Ages (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 127.)

biblical arc of survival and redemption. And by omitting God’s name entirely, the book
invites each reader to discover where God might be found—not in visible miracles, but in
the quiet courage to act with faith and moral resolve.