



THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE PRETTY

Was Esther a Righteous Woman?



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Table of Contents

Introduction: The Problem.....	1
The Narrative in a Nutshell.....	2
The Issues.....	3
Righteous Justifications	6
An Argument for Righteousness: Pride	6
An Argument for Righteousness: Promiscuity	7
An Argument for Righteousness: Revenge.....	8
Critical Evaluations.....	10
An Argument for Unrighteousness: Pride.....	10
An Argument for Unrighteousness: Promiscuity.....	12
An Argument for Unrighteousness: Revenge	14
Other Considerations	15
An Absent Faith	15
Gentile Marriage	16
From Deceit to Denial.....	16
Conclusion: The Settlement.....	17
Bibliography	21

Introduction: The Problem

It has often been said, “The best of men are men at best.” The same is true for the fairer sex. Esther’s attempt to save her people was not only successful, it has been immortalized in the canon of Scripture. Most scholars agree (with few exceptions) that God’s invisible hand of providence can be clearly seen throughout the text.¹ However, not everyone agrees that Esther’s actions characterize a woman of faithful obedience. Looking to her as a role-model may certainly prove problematic for preachers who are inclined to promote holy living in their congregations. The question pleads to be answered: Was Esther a righteous woman?

The book itself has been the subject of much debate. There is no mention of God’s name, Palestine, Jerusalem, the Temple, the Law, or prayer. In fact, little direct reference to religious activity is found in the book at all.² The only allusion to potential religious adherence is found in Esther 4:16. She commands Mordecai:

Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.

¹ Frederic W. Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ruth, Esther, Volume 9* (Columbia: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 325.

² Gordon H Johnston, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Gallows: Irony, Humor, and Other Literary Features of the Book of Esther,” in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts*, ed. David M. Howard Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2003), 395.

Does this solitary statement, in and of itself, prove that Esther was a righteous woman? Does swearing on a Bible make the President of the United States a Christian upon his inauguration? Should a Madonna pop song that mentions prayer be played in a Christian book store? Likewise, the argument that Esther must have been a righteous woman because she once asked others to fast on her behalf is a ludicrous leap of hopeful thinking. One must ask: Where are the righteous actions of God's faithful men and women in the Esther narrative?

The Narrative in a Nutshell

The book of Esther contains a colorful chronicle of significant Jewish history. It also presents a candid account of intrigue, sex, and violence. It begins with the king of Persia (Ahasuerus) ejecting his wife (Vashti) from the throne after she refuses to show off her beauty at a drunken dinner party. Then, feeling lonely, the king turns to his attendants for advice. They suggest that he gather the nation's prettiest young virgins, doll them up, and sleep with them. The one he likes the most can take the place of the former queen. The king loves this idea and the stage is set.

Esther is one of the pretty young virgins that gets collected. Orphaned at a young age, she is raised by her older cousin and father figure, Mordecai. By his advice, she keeps her Jewish nationality a secret after joining the king's harem. She also does everything she can to win the king's favor and eventually becomes the new queen of Persia. Meanwhile, Mordecai overhears a treasonous plot by the king's gate. He tells Esther, she tells the king, and Mordecai's name is written into the book of the chronicles.

Mordecai makes a powerful enemy in Haman (the king's chief official) when he refuses to pay him homage. As a result, Haman declares war against the Jews by having the king sign an

edict that allows for their extinction on a certain day. Esther agrees to help the Jews by enticing the king to reverse his decision. She throws a banquet for Haman and the king. Unaware of Esther's intentions, Haman builds a gallows to have Mordecai impaled upon.

The king has trouble sleeping and remembers Mordecai. Haman shows up expecting to have Mordecai killed and ends up honoring him instead. Esther then provides a second banquet where she begs for her life and the life of her people. The king gets angry and Haman is impaled on his own gallows. He then gives Esther and Mordecai the right to draft a second edict in his name. They do so and the Jews are allowed to legally defend themselves on the day that was determined for their extinction.

In an ironic twist, the Jews not only survive the attack, they slaughter their enemies. Esther 9:1 states, "on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred." The feast of Purim is inaugurated to commemorate the event for the Jewish people. Esther approves and Mordecai is elevated to the king's second in command. The story itself contains more detailed descriptions of the narrative's incidents, but these are the basic events that drive the action.

The Issues

At least three primary issues of unrighteousness appear in the protagonists' actions. In an effort to reduce each element to a single word, these issues are: pride, promiscuity, and revenge. Their order of appearance also marks the order of intensity, with each subsequent issue harder to reason away than the last. A few notable figures in history have written the book off altogether,

including Martin Luther. He claimed the narrative was spoiled by too much “pagan impropriety.”³

The issue of pride begins with Esther’s mentor and puppet master, Mordecai (Esth 2:5-7). His actions are worth consideration because of the influence he has upon Esther throughout the entire account. Esther 3:2-3 states:

And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage. Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, “Why do you transgress the king's command?”

According to the following verse, Mordecai’s delayed response was simply that he was a Jew. Is this public act of civil disobedience to the king’s decree religious in nature, a matter of nationalistic pride, or otherwise motivated?

The issue of promiscuity is found in at least two places: 1) the circumstances surrounding Esther’s elevation to the pagan throne and 2) her method for acquiring an audience with the king to plead for her people. According to the text, she was an attractive woman who submitted sexually to a pagan king for sake of earning his favor. Her ascendancy via the king’s harem was not predicated with an inclination to save God’s people. The implications surrounding her semi-public enticement of the king for an audience are less than modest as well. At what point does sexually immoral and immodest behavior find acceptability among God’s chosen people?

³ Frederic W. Bush, “The Book of Esther: Opus non gratum in the Christian Canon.” In *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 8 (Fuller Theological Seminary: 1998), 39-54.

Finally, the issue of bloodthirsty revenge is highlighted in the narrative's climax. One author states, "Interpreters have traditionally defined the moral attitude of the book of Esther as one of hostility, vengefulness, and disrespect for the life of innocent people."⁴ This definition has been arguably drafted because of Esther's lack of mercy towards Haman (Esth 7:7-10), the drafting of a second edict that permitted the Jews to kill their enemies' women and children (Esth 8:10-12), her request for an extension of the massacre as well as having the ten sons of Haman impaled (Esth 9:13), and the joyful celebration of the Jewish people after the carnage (Esth 9:20-22). Needless to say, this vengeful conclusion has rarely made it to the Sunday school classroom's felt board.

These issues (pride, promiscuity, and revenge) litter the account with ethical questions. The author fails to provide insight into Esther and Mordecai's thought life or motivations as he does for Haman.⁵ Readers are left to evaluate the heroes' depth of character by the words they speak and actions they take. Some are convinced their actions are inexcusable. Others believe they are justifiable. The arguments for both views regarding each issue are worthy of contemplation.

⁴ Angel Manuel Rodriguez, *Esther: A Theological Approach* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1995), 12.

⁵ Frederic W. Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ruth, Esther, Volume 9* (Columbia: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 319.

Righteous Justifications

An Argument for Righteousness: Pride

Mordecai's refusal to obey the king and bow before Haman is not a reflection of Esther's righteousness. However, considering his titanic influence in Esther's life, a short evaluation of his actions are worth mentioning. It is difficult to pinpoint Mordecai's hidden motives because none are overtly provided. The Greek text contains one hundred extra verses that attempt to loosen the book's tension. Septuagintal Addition C records a prayer in which Mordecai tells God:

You know all. You know, O Lord, that not in arrogance or in haughtiness or in love of glory did I refrain from prostrating myself to the haughty Haman, for I would have agreed to kiss the soles of his feet for the sake of the safety of Israel. (C 5-6)⁶

Unfortunately, this is taken from one of the six supplements found in the LXX that are not present in the original Hebrew text.⁷ Virtually everyone agrees that these later embellishments are not God-breathed.⁸ Though uninspired, this addendum reveals an ancient Jewish position regarding the issue.

⁶ Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 43.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁸ Mark F. Rooker, "The Transmission and Textual Criticism of the Old Testament" in *The World and the Word: An Introduction to the Old Testament*, ed. Eugene Merrill, Mark E. Rooker and Michael A. Grisanti (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 112-113.

Another popular view holds that Mordecai's faith in God prevented him from bowing to an earthly ruler. This view is also strengthened by the continuation of the prayer found in Septuagintal Addition C:

Rather, I did this so as not to set the honor of man above the honor of God, and I will not prostrate myself to anyone other than you, my Lord, nor will I do this [refraining from prostration to man] in haughtiness. (C 7)⁹

This provides more uninspired proof that a Jewish tradition existed to establish the idea that obedience to the king would have been a violation of the first and second commandment.

Michael Fox believes it is unfair to cry "foul" because the account does not portray Mordecai to be an arrogant man. He argues, "It contradicts the book's image of Mordecai as wise, provident, unassuming, and never pursuing personal honor."¹⁰ H. A. Ironside adds, "He has proven himself a faithful man in the main, whatever failures he may also have had."¹¹ In other words, he may have made a few mistakes, but Mordecai was generally a good guy.

An Argument for Righteousness: Promiscuity

Fornication and semi-public sexual enticement are hard actions to polish clean with a rag of righteousness. However, given the canonical status of the book, many seek to validate

⁹ Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹¹ H. A. Ironside, *Notes on the Book of Esther* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers Publishers, 1951), 107.

Esther's actions by adding to them. Note the logical leap performed by Carl McIntire in this paragraph concerning the banquet mentioned in Esther 2:18:

Esther was given a feast. Releases were made to the provinces; the king gave gifts; her name was on the lips of every citizen in all the realms from India to Ethiopia. Her attire, her mannerisms, her appearance, her lotions, and her cosmetics were the talk of people everywhere. They all wanted to be like Esther. Young girls in every little community threw away their gaudy things and former manner of appearance; they wanted to be like Esther. It is human nature all over again, and yet it was Esther's tremendous influence. A godly woman who dresses with restraint, with attractiveness, has great influence.¹²

Rather than invent happy scenarios of modesty where none can be found in the text, others simply gloss over the difficulties altogether. After all, do the means really matter so long as the story's ending is justified?

An Argument for Righteousness: Revenge

Despite seemingly excessive bloodshed, the Jews might have been justified in their retaliation against the Gentiles. Few authors articulate this argument better than Angel Manuel Rodriguez. He argues, "The problem of revenge and bloodshed in the book of Esther is a real one, but a careful reading of the story suggests that it is not nearly so serious as many scholars

¹² Carl McIntire, *For Such a Time as This* (Collingswood, NJ: Christian Beacon Press, 1946), 40.

believe it to be.”¹³ To support this claim, he provides eight observations to recall while reading the narrative.

1. There is no evidence that the Jews hated the Gentiles.
2. Mordecai originally asked Esther to talk to the king on behalf of the Jews (Esth 4:8). Due to the pacifistic nature of this request, his intention was likely focused upon the preservation of his people and not a Gentile massacre.
3. Esther does not ask for a license to take vengeance when she makes her request to the king. She simply begs for her life and the life of her people to be spared (Esth 7:3).
4. Both decrees gave the Jews the legal power to defend themselves against those who sought to do them harm (Esth 9:2). There is no evidence that suggests they attacked the Gentiles of their own initiative.
5. The text implies that the bloodshed was unnecessary. This assumption is based on the demoralization of the Jews’ enemies (Esth 8:17).
6. Arguably, the Jews displayed restraint during the battles. They did not capitalize off the plunder of those they defeated (Esth 9:10, 15, 16) and only destroyed their enemies (Esth 9:2, 5, 10, 16).
7. The Jews are law abiding citizens who ask for legal permission to extend the edict for another day. They also limited the scope of the second edict to the city of Susa, implying there were still enemies in that city. If it were truly an act of bloodthirsty revenge, they could have easily included other cities.

¹³ Angel Manuel Rodriguez, *Esther: A Theological Approach* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1995), 13.

8. Finally, Esther's request to impale Haman's sons might have been an act of intimidation to deter future violence against the Jews. This argument is birthed from the placement of the request in conjunction with the edict's extension. Rodriguez says, "If that was the case, Esther was showing her concern for human life and a desire to prevent a larger conflict."¹⁴

Angel Rodriguez is not alone in his appraisal. Carol Bechtel believes the second edict is not unforgivably bloodthirsty, but wise.¹⁵ H. A. Ironside sees Esther's request as faithful obedience to Deuteronomy 21:22-23.¹⁶ Carl McIntire even goes so far as to say, "The world today needs this sense of judgment and justice that we see executed by the hands of Esther and Mordecai in the days of Ahasuerus."¹⁷

Critical Evaluations

An Argument for Unrighteousness: Pride

Were Mordecai's insubordinate actions religiously justifiable? John Whitcomb astutely points out, "Even though he was a Jew and by now had admitted it to the king's servants (Esth 3:4), it must be remembered that 'the custom of falling down to earth before an exalted personage, and especially before a king, was customary among Israelites; cf. 2 Sam. 14:4, 18:28,

¹⁴ Angel Manuel Rodriguez, *Esther: A Theological Approach* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1995), 13-15.

¹⁵ Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther: Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1959), 79.

¹⁶ H. A. Ironside, *Notes on the Book of Esther* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers Publishers, 1951), 105.

¹⁷ Carl McIntire, *For Such a Time as This* (Collingswood, NJ: Christian Beacon Press, 1946), 127.

1 Kings 1:16.”¹⁸ Michael Fox also notes that “nothing forbids a Jew to bow down to a mortal” and that Esther herself fell prostrate before the king in Esther 8:3.¹⁹

A religious conviction that honors God over man does not fit the theme of the book either. Another author observes that the text “makes no mention of idolatry” and that “such an overt emphasis on religion would be out of character for this book, which goes out of its way not even to mention the name of God.”²⁰ If Haman had erected a statue of himself, carted it through the capitol, and imposed the people to worship the image as a god... religious conviction would be a justifiable leap for the modern reader to make. As the text stands, Mordecai does not share a kindred experience with other faithful Jews such as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. It is unclear what his true motivation might have been, but it was unlikely religious in nature.

One potential motivation is a prideful disposition of stubborn jealousy. Carol Bechtel proposes that “maybe he, too, thought he deserved a promotion—or at least some recognition for saving the king’s life—and resents the fact that Haman is getting all the glory.”²¹ Similarly, Timothy Laniak observes, “When Mordecai refuses to comply, he diminishes the honor given by the promotion.”²² The decision to break the law might have been intentionally personal.

¹⁸ John C. Whitcomb, *Esther: Triumph of God’s Sovereignty* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1979), 63.

¹⁹ Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 44.

²⁰ Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther: Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1959), 37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

²² Timothy S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 79.

Another probable motivation is best referred to as “tribal feuding.” The only description that accompanies Haman’s introduction is “Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha” (Esth 3:1). Haman was a descendant of Agag, the pagan king that Samuel hacked to pieces after Saul’s disobedience in 1 Samuel 15. This information establishes Haman as an Amalekite and long-time antagonist to Israel. It is likely that Mordecai’s motivation stems from historical hatred. This view also best explains the responses from each man: Mordecai’s reply that he is a Jew and Haman’s reaction with attempted genocide.²³

An Argument for Unrighteousness: Promiscuity

Oddly enough, the only hint of modest virtue found in the text does not refer to the heroine. Frederic Bush observes, “Vashti evidences the only element of decorum and decency in this world of opulence and excess, and refuses.”²⁴ And yet, most commentators consider Vashti the antithesis to Esther’s righteous role as a wise and resourceful queen. How did Esther rise to her position in Persia? Was it through faithful trust in God’s provision and obedience to His Law?

Esther’s activities with the king’s harem have often been compared to an “innocent” beauty contest.²⁵ To reduce the experience to an evening gown competition and verbal essay is absurd. The text does not say how many virgins were gathered, but Josephus estimates about

²³ Timothy S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 73-75.

²⁴ Frederic W. Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ruth, Esther, Volume 9* (Columbia: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 315.

²⁵ Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther: Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1959), 31.

four hundred.²⁶ The Hebrew word used for “taken” in Esther 2:8 is the same verb used to describe Mordecai’s adoption of Esther in verse 15. Therefore, it should not be quickly assumed that her inclusion was involuntary either.²⁷ Needless to say, the entire ordeal was erotic in nature, outside the intended purposes of marriage, and laced with impressions of sexual deviance (Esther 2:13, 15). H. A. Ironside expresses the shock of the situation well when he cries, “How truly was she degraded in her very exaltation!”²⁸

Another issue of promiscuity comes into question with Esther’s enticement of the king for an invitation. Esther 5:1-2 says:

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, in front of the king's quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace. And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.

It is possible that the king might have missed her beautiful mind, but that is not what this section is likely referring to. The text fails to provide a visual description of Esther’s royal robes. However, it is safe to say the pattern of cloth was probably not what pleased the king’s sight that

²⁶ John C. Whitcomb, *Esther: Triumph of God’s Sovereignty* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1979), 50.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁸ H. A. Ironside, *Notes on the Book of Esther* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers Publishers, 1951), 28.

day. Esther 2:7 says she “had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at.” She knew she could not enter the king’s chambers without a formal invitation (Esth 4:11). Fearing for her life, she prettied herself up and struck a pose in the inner court near the palace entrance. The plan worked, but her semi-public enticement fails to fit the “modest is hottest” mantra that permeates the church today.

An Argument for Unrighteousness: Revenge

The Jewish people act as a passive entity until the final resolution of the crisis is realized.²⁹ Once they are activated, their passivity is eclipsed with violent self-defense. Traditionally, many have found this finale excessive. The inclusion of women and children in the slaughter is certainly disturbing. Hopeful scholars are quick to point out that the text does not explicitly record the Jews’ obedience to the full extent of the edict.³⁰ However, an argument from silence should never silence what the text *does* say. Mordecai and Esther still drafted an allowance for brutal aggression that extends beyond the boundaries of self-defense. Silence tells us nothing about the Jewish people and fails to justify Esther’s choices when drafting the edict.

Self-defense is excusable. The question arises with the extent to which each aforementioned action was taken and what motivated the hearts behind them. Michael Fox observes, “It is doubtful that the conduct of war, even on the part of the defender, is (if the power

²⁹ Frederic W. Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ruth, Esther, Volume 9* (Columbia: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 321.

³⁰ Angel Manuel Rodriguez, *Esther: A Theological Approach*, 13-15.

balance allows) ever free of vengeance, brutality, and overkill.” He then concludes, “The battles of Adar certainly were not.”³¹

Other Considerations

An Absent Faith

Issues of pride, promiscuity, and revenge are but three concerns that stem from a deeper issue: faithlessness. Commentators have injected much hope and confidence into two of Mordecai’s statements. The first initiates Esther 4:14, “For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish.” However, not all scholars agree that the “another place” mentioned has inherent allusions of deity.³² It is likely for Mordecai (who was not a prophet) to have spoken with a human agent in mind instead of God.

The second statement that potentially rings the bell of faith is Mordecai’s follow-up question in the same verse, “And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” But what does the question prove apart from Mordecai’s possible belief in a providence that may or may not have divine origins? He also desperately wanted Esther to do something about their current predicament. The entire record of their speech and actions in the book as a whole should be carefully considered before impulsively establishing their sainthood. The text alludes to more than a mere absence of faith. As a whole, Esther and Mordecai’s

³¹ Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 226.

³² Gordon H Johnston, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Gallows: Irony, Humor, and Other Literary Features of the Book of Esther,” in *Giving the Sense: Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical Texts*, ed. David M. Howard Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2003), 397.

activities demonstrate disobedient acts of faithlessness. This is clearly seen in the following considerations.

Gentile Marriage

In the first chapter, Ahasuerus is portrayed as a “proud and ostentatious despot who is obsessed with honor, acts upon whim, and is dependent upon his privy council even to decide how to deal with an affair of family honor.”³³ He maintains this reputation as an indulgent representative of low character throughout the narrative. Esther’s marriage to a Gentile would stand as an unfavorable offense, but to ascend the throne of a Zoroastrian monarch is an unthinkable departure from God’s expressed intention for Israel.

From Deceit to Denial

Her ascent was not only steeped in promiscuity, but dishonesty and denial. According to Esther 2:10, “Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known.” Again, it is unclear what their motivations might have been for keeping her ethnicity a secret. Fear for personal or political safety may have been factors.³⁴ Although, the incident between Mordecai and Haman occurred after Esther had already become queen. Regardless, her silence creates a greater issue than omission.

The beautification process of the king’s harem lasted one year (Esther 2:12). During that time, Esther concealed her heritage. In other words, she had to eat the king’s unclean food,

³³ Frederic W. Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ruth, Esther, Volume 9* (Columbia: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 315.

³⁴ John C. Whitcomb, *Esther: Triumph of God’s Sovereignty* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1979), 51.

disregard the Sabbath, and participate in the pagan frivolities of the Persian court. In doing so, she not only compartmentalized her faith, she failed to obey God's laws as a witness and member of His chosen people. Mordecai's instruction necessitated more than discrete selectivity, but the essential abandonment of her Jewishness.

H. A. Ironside states, "There can be no question that her position was entirely opposed to the word of God." He adds, "Providence might seem to favor her, but faith would assuredly have led her at once to declare herself as a despised Jewess, one of the afflicted people of Jehovah."³⁵ Often, the line between spiritual discernment and wise discretion fades into obscurity when self-preservation and fear motivate the decision. In this regard, Mordecai and Esther exhibited a shocking lack of faith and indifference for God's commands.

Conclusion: The Settlement

Lewis Paton concludes, "There is not one noble character in this book."³⁶ The issues exist. It is the reader's responsibility to wrestle with them, especially preachers and teachers. F. B. Huey Jr. submits three options for approaching the text in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*. He writes:

Exegetes approach the moral problems of Esther in several ways: (1) defense of the actions of Esther and Mordecai (e.g., Keil), implying that because they are in the Bible,

³⁵ H. A. Ironside, *Notes on the Book of Esther* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers Publishers, 1951), 24.

³⁶ Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Esther* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1908), 96.

*they cannot be wrong; (2) an extremely critical and condemning attitude toward the book because of its morality; (3) neither blind defense nor blanket condemnation. The third attitude has the greatest merit.*³⁷

But there is a fourth option: Acknowledge the shortcomings of a fallen mankind in light of the overwhelming faithfulness of a sovereign God. This is the most faithful reading of the text as it stands.

The first approach is often marked by simple-minded foolishness in the name of faith. The second is fueled by hatred for the messiness of life that characterizes a fallen world. The third conclusion seems prudent and biblical, but creates a void where revealed truth belongs. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” Our approach to such profitable equipment should never be passive or dismissive.

A lengthier study would transition into the moral application and positional standing that characterizes righteousness in the Bible, followed by a concentration on the nature of salvation in the Old Testament. The actions of those immortalized in the Hall of Faith (Hebrews 11) should be assessed in light of passages such as Isaiah 64:6 and Romans 3:9-10. Further examination into Samson’s lifestyle (Judg 14-16), David’s adultery (2 Sam 11), and what motivated Abraham to pass his wife off as his sister (Gen 12:10-20) would prove fruitful. Once a biblical lens for

³⁷ F. B. Huey, Jr., “Esther,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job. Vol. 4*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 786.

righteousness has been established, that standard should be applied to Esther without adding to or taking away from the text.

In the meantime, it is most helpful to identify and hold firmly to the main purpose of the book. Thomas M’Crie captures the heart of the matter well when he writes, “After all, it is not the conduct of Esther, or the Jews, which should occupy our chief attention; it is the hand of God, in the moral government of the world, watching over his chosen people, defeating the plots hatched for their ruin, and executing signal vengeance on their implacable adversaries.”³⁸ The hero of the book of Esther is not Esther, but God.

Ruth and Esther are two Old Testament books that showcase the invisible hand of God’s providence. Together, they tell a complete and complimentary story of God’s faithfulness to His covenant promises. In Ruth, God employs faithful men and women who are characterized by obedience to accomplish His purposes (i.e. establish the line of David). In Esther, He uses the self-serving actions of faithless men and women to preserve His people in accordance with the covenant promises He made to both Abraham and David. Romans 3:4 says, “Let God be true though every one were a liar.” What God has promised, He will accomplish.

So what about the woman who was used by God to preserve His people and satisfy His promises? The biblical record provides a brief glimpse into the Jewish Queen of Persia’s life. If 2 Samuel 11 stood as the only record of King David in Scripture, his godly character would be the topic of much debate today. Esther might have possessed a saving faith, but there is nothing in the Hebrew text to indicate she did. Unfortunately, the events recorded in the book of Esther are all anyone has to go on.

³⁸ Thomas M’Crie, *Lectures on the Book of Esther* (Lynchburg, VA: James Family Christian Publishers, 1979), 271.

It is a dangerous thing for preachers and teachers to eisegetically inject humbleness, loyalty, religious faithfulness, modesty, and forgiveness into the personality of a biblical account where none of those attributes are present. By making Esther the hero, well-intentioned men issue the conflicting message that a life characterized by pride, self-reliance, promiscuity, fornication, unequal yoking, worldly living, a lack of mercy, and carelessness towards God's Word is okay. None of those attributes were acceptable character traits for God's people in the past. The same is true today. Mishandling God's Word to forcibly turn Esther into a role-model provides little benefit, but opens the door to a world of hurt.

Therefore, ascertaining solely from the limited evidence provided in Scripture, Esther was not a woman who was characterized by righteousness. Did she possess a saving faith in the God of Israel? She might have. Her presence (or absence) in the millennial kingdom will surely put that matter to rest. Until then, a healthy concentration on the real Hero of the book of Esther should eclipse the church's proclivity for dressing up the good, the bad, and the pretty.

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All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.