

# The subtle hand of god and the female archetype in the book of esther



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Introduction: The Multi-Faceted Appeal of the Book of Esther

The book of Esther is one of the greatest pieces of literature in the Hebrew Bible. Its narrative is intricate, inventive, and colored with complex characters. It is the basis for the celebration of Purim and is highly popular, well loved by the devout, the scholarly, and the literate alike. But Esther is also one of the most contested books in the Hebrew Bible because of the two norms from which it deviates: the absence of God as a defined, active presence and the portrayal of a clever, industrious woman as the savior of the Jewish people. The additions in the Septuagint, which rescind or lessen aspects of these deviations, reveal interesting aspects of the anxiety the Hebrew Esther created among some Jewish (and, later, some Christian) readers. Here, in this beautiful and unique book, we see the most clear representation of God as truly an unconscious presence-never mentioned, but always there, guiding the actions of individuals and the Jewish people as a whole. We are given a female heroine, one who is an archetype of her own as she bends and challenges the female characters who have come before her. But even more profound than the book itself, perhaps, is the anxiety it causes. In the Greek book of Esther, God is added at every turn, and the role of Mordecai is conflated, revealing a certain discomfort by the revisers with the indistinct presence of God and a strong female heroine. However, these qualities make Esther one of the most intriguing texts for a psychoanalytic study of Jewish mythology.

I. The Hidden God of Esther

From a strictly narrative point of view, one of the driving forces of action in the Hebrew Esther is chance, or coincidence. If one reads Esther from a religious perspective, however, it is assumed that all of these coincidences are the work of divine providence and part of God's ultimate plan, even though he is never mentioned in the

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Hebrew. At the crucial turning point of the narrative, Mordecai suggests to Esther, “ Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just a time as this” (Esth 4. 14). Later, his life is spared when the king’s insomnia leads him to happen, by chance, upon the mention of Mordecai saving his life he had forgotten (also by chance). Furthermore, it is implied that, even under the threat of the king’s decree, the Jewish people will be delivered: Haman’s wife warns him that his downfall is connected to the reward of Mordecai “ the Jew” (Esth 6: 13), and the lots Haman casts give him the month of Adar, the month in which Moses died. Haman takes this as a sign of favor on his part, while not realizing that it is also the month in which Moses was born. Finally, the conflict between Haman and Mordecai, while it begins as a clash of wills, can be traced back to Mordecai’s ancestor Kish and Haman’s ancestor Agag, symbolic of the statement that “ the Lord will have war with Amalekites from generation to generation” (Ex 17. 16). In fact, there are very few instances of deliberate action at all in the first half of the story. Everything is assumed, implicitly, to be guided by the hand of God. The presentation of these events wholly without mention of God himself, however, is what has made Esther so troubling to Jewish, and later Christian, readers: the Greek Esther that appears in the Septuagint, which will be discussed in-depth in the third section, attempts to modify the apparent absence of God. However, reading Esther through the lens of psychoanalysis, it becomes the primary book in the Hebrew Bible in which the nature of God as the unconscious is most explicit. Mordecai cryptically refers to an “ other quarter,” interpreted by readers as God, but in highly peculiar language suggestive of a power waiting to be discovered and connected to (Esth 4. 14). If one concedes to the idea that all coincidental occurrences and ironic rewards or punishments

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are the work of a divine plan, then, assuming the divine is a metaphor for the unconscious, the book of Esther shows how the characters therein are guided, redeemed, and destroyed by what Freud would consider their unconscious drives. Haman overestimates his own worth and his importance to the king, and for it, meets a bitter end of his own design. The king is almost comically forgetful, oblivious, and fickle, allowing himself to be manipulated by both Haman and Esther. And Esther, who is assumed in legend to be a symbol of the “*hester panim*” (the hiding of the divine’s face), can be seen both as the ego of the narrative, but also as the persona of God/the unconscious mind. Assuming Esther as the ego of the book, one could begin to attempt to construct an idea of her subconscious. Her self-image is that of a modest but beautiful young woman who begins the story as a mostly obedient and pious Jew (despite her neglect of Jewish Law, which is never addressed). Her Jewish identity would seem primarily secular or ethnic, except that one would assume that the religiosity of her “*Jewishness*” is the presence of God as her unconscious mind. In her subconscious, one might also find the king (her husband) and Haman, an adversary (and therefore, perhaps, a complex). There is also the shadow figure of Vashti, the openly rebellious queen whom Esther has replaced, and, of course, her uncle Mordecai. Esther and Mordecai can also be seen as anima and animus to each other. This is most obvious in the reverse of gender roles that occurs in the fourth chapter. Until this point, Esther had been subservient to her guardian and relied on him for aid and assistance, but when it becomes obvious that Esther is the only person who can sway the mind of the king, it is Mordecai who must depend on her and follow her orders. Esther’s transformation in this occurrence is only one of the

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intriguing shifts in gender distinct to the book of Esther. II. Esther and the Female Archetype Esther finds herself in a peculiar position in the Biblical cannon. Neither a clear-cut example of the “ temptress” archetype of Eve, Delilah and Jezebel, nor the “ good wife” of Sarah, Rebecca, and Ruth, she is a unique figure. Only the characterization of Judith—another stunningly beautiful, pious woman who delivers her people with her cunning intellect—owes much to Esther, and it is not surprising that both books have been challenged (the book of Judith is also considered apocrypha outside of Catholic traditions). Technically, Esther is primarily a symbol herself—an iconic heroine to the Jewish people—and her status as a person is secondary to this, but her character is still rich and well rounded, incorporating many different aspects of the women who have come before her. While Esther is the heroine of the story, the influence of the Eve archetype is still evident. Like Judith, Esther’s power lies in her beauty and her ability to manipulate the king through, it is implied, sexual tension. She wins her place as his wife, and later an important conference with him, through her remarkable beauty (unaided by cosmetic treatment, which highlights her exceptional temptress potential, but also her pious modesty) and instigates the defeat of Haman by arousing the King’s suspicion and jealousy. It is also important to note the relationship between Esther and the exiled queen, Vashti. Vashti is also assumed to be beautiful and dignified. However, it is her modesty (if one interprets Esth 1. 11 as only the “ royal crown”), or her pride, that cause her to fall out of favor with the king. While Esther’s manipulation is, like the workings of God, subtle and cunning, Vashti’s open rebellion ruins her.

Esther’s cleverness also shows how very different she is from Eve, who is easily led, though makes her surprisingly like Delilah, who is also able to

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manipulate her husband but for sinister ends. It is most likely this quality of Esther's heroism, combined with her gender and the ambiguity of the presence of God, that made the book so frightening to some, and therefore made the later additions seem necessary. III. The Underlying Anxiety in the Greek Esther

In addition to avoiding discussion of God directly, the Hebrew version of Esther also causes some distress by neglecting discussion of Jewish Law. Mordecai and Esther especially are portrayed as good, pious Jews, but food laws are ignored and the Sabbath is not kept, even though these practices were still important to Jews in exile. The additions to the Greek version attempt to address these issues in various ways, from small adjustments (Esther mentions not eating at the king's table, God "[changes] the spirit of the king" [Add Esth 15. 8]) and large ones (Mordecai is given a vision about the events to come, Esther and Mordecai offer long prayers to God). Mordecai is given a more central role with his dream as the first chapter and a more complex subplot involving the assassination attempt on the king. With these updates, two of the most unique and potentially offensive aspects of the Hebrew Esther are lessened. It should not go without saying, however, that the estimated date of the additions is relevant. It is assumed the additions date around 150-100 B. C. E., during the time of the Macabees, when the Jewish people were once again hoping to be delivered from oppression. Decrees issued in the king's name are printed in their entirety (to add historical credence to the work), and the "otherness" of the Gentiles is amplified. The increased presence of God and the decrease in the ferocity of Jewish vengeance in chapter nine of the Hebrew reveal the feelings of desperation from a suffering people waiting for the aid of their god. It is telling, however, that the additions are ultimately not included in <https://assignbuster.com/the-subtle-hand-of-god-and-the-female-archetype-in-the-book-of-esther/>

the Hebrew canon. Conclusion: Esther and the Human Experience Despite all of the challenges and controversy surrounding Esther, it remains an intriguing book to scholars, and Purim, a celebration of life and victory, is one of the most light-hearted Jewish holidays. So what does this book, its intricacies, eccentricities, revisions and restorations tell us about the psychology of the Jewish people? The fact that the Hebrew canon preserved the “hidden miracle” of the original text, even with the difficulties it presents, reveals not only a profound trust in the divine, but a belief that human action is often necessary, especially when the face of God appears to be turned away. The actual nature of fate seems to transform once the protagonists, especially Esther, choose to become active. In this way, we see Esther and the Jewish people as a whole in the process of individuation. The book of Esther is not unlike a game of connect-the-dots: seemingly random occurrences mapped out before hand by a distant, all-knowing force, waiting for the player to take the initiative, pick up her pen, and see the larger picture emerge.