

Review Essay

Not the Whole Megillah, Just Enough to Be Dangerous: “A Million Women: An Esther Call to the Mall.” October 12, 2024; Washington, DC

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I remember being a little unnerved and uneasy for reasons I didn't fully understand at the time, when, in the spring of 1999, various press reports (both pro-Israel and anti-Israel) suggested that Monica Lewinsky had found a position as a White House intern not because of qualifications and ambition but because she had been placed there, a Jew in Bill Clinton's court, to advocate for the Jewish state—"For such a time as this," as the quotation from Est. 4:14 goes.¹ The idea of anyone being a modern Esther struck me as ludicrous; the idea of it being someone my own age—a bright, over-eager, and exploited intern?—well, that was an idea best left to the *Purimspiels* (i.e., Purim plays).

Now, twenty-five years later, Esther is, quite suddenly it seems, everywhere, and while she is completely non-partisan, she is also distinctly Christian: American, non-denominational Protestant, to be specific.² When Kamala Harris became the Democratic Party's nominee, the Black Church PAC hailed her with an image saying, "We're with Kamala: For Such a Time as This." At that same moment, the women of the Republican party were already planning to assemble *en masse* in Washington, DC, in a large public demonstration of piety. The event was very intentionally scheduled for the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur (October 12, 2024) by lead organizers Jenny Donnelly and Lou Engle, evangelists associated with the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR), an increasingly prominent Christian Nationalist movement, with other prominent NAR and Dominionist leaders participating, including Lance Wallnau, Dutch Sheets, Cindy Jacobs, and Ché Ahn.³ Engle described his vision for the occasion using language that mingled the Jewish high holy day with other holidays, including Passover, Easter, and Purim: "And so, on this day of atonement, when the blood of Jesus is applied to the doorposts of our national guilt, you have come to a defining moment, just like Esther was brought to a defining moment."⁴ (It doesn't sound much like any holiday I've ever celebrated, or one Esther would likely have recognized, either.)

Reflecting the centrality of prophetic vision in the NAR movement (and a belief in the need to combat active and very real demonic forces⁵), Engle traces the Esther assembly to a revelation he was granted in 2017, one embedded in a more expansive prophecy addressing the need for godly women to counter the power of witches attempting to curse President Trump and a revelatory insight based on Tolkien.⁶ Acting upon this vision, Engle understood that he must be Mordecai, and so he reached out to his NAR compatriot Donnelly as his Esther. Together they conceived of an occasion on which all men would become Mordecais and all women Esthers and dubbed it, "A Million Women: An Esther Call to the Mall." The tagline? "It's not a festival, it's a fast."⁷

While Engle and Donnelly organized this gathering in keeping with their particular goals and objectives, the vast list of co-sponsors and affiliated websites, as well as the tremendous number of blogs, individuals, and church groups that attended or indicated support for the event, make it clear that the event tapped into a larger cultural moment for this biblical book. The signs, placards, and speeches of those who journeyed to DC for the event and those who shared the event on their blogs and websites reflect a wide hodgepodge of causes, including homeschooling, marriage laws, bathroom restrictions, sports policies, prayer in schools, immigration, and a rhetoric of maternal empowerment ("mama bear" is a frequent term of reference) that sounds feminist but exists in the context a complementarian theology.⁸ As compelling as these causes may be to their adherents, none of them find (explicit) mention in the book of Esther.

One website recruiting people to attend the march or support it from afar asks: "Just as Esther did, 1 million women will march upon Washington, DC to plea for their families. Would you like to be a part of the movement to reclaim our families? Answer the Call! Don't mess with my kids!"⁹

It is true that Esther intercedes with the Persian king, Ahasuerus, on behalf of her people, the Jews of Persia, whom the wicked Haman has plotted to kill, but we are never told that she had children or that she told Haman to keep his hands off them. The only children in the book of Esther are, in fact, Haman's, and they come to an unfortunate and violent end, at

the Jews' hands, no less—but not because they were “groomers.”¹⁰ What I hear in the words wooing people to come to the Mall are faint but unmistakable echoes of the proto-Q-Anon conspiracy theory, Pizzagate, with its implications that politicians were hurting our children and had to be stopped—by a mob, perhaps by violence. Of course, Pizzagate itself was only one manifestation of a conspiracy theory going back decades, or centuries, in which people in power are harming children through obscene rituals for their own gain, whether through sexual abuse or the taking of bodily fluids or unholy rituals, or a complex combination of such practices—depending on whether one traces it back to the Satanic Panic of the 1980s or the blood libels of the Middle Ages.¹¹

Attendance at the October 12 event included groups from Moms for Liberty, anti-abortion activists, and anti-LGBTQ+/anti-trans groups, many activated by proximity to the impending November election; and many of the speakers at the event invoked the need to protect children, whether they were unborn or vulnerable to abuse in schools, libraries, or medical settings.¹²

I am neither a scholar of American religion nor of American politics. Still, I have taught the book of Esther on multiple occasions, and its reception in antiquity occupies much of my current research. While much of my response to events such as the “Esther Call to the Mall” derive from aspects of my personal identity as a Jewish American woman—an individual voter with specific concerns about the agenda this movement represents and advocates—it is the engagement of speakers and, to some extent attendees, with the biblical text of Esther I can most readily assess.

While tremendously popular in contemporary American society, the book of Esther initially seems to have existed at the margins of the canon, perhaps because it exists to justify a controversial and non-Pentateuchal festival (Purim), and one with a Diasporic (Persian) origin, or perhaps because it conspicuously fails to mention the deity. It is the sole book of the Hebrew Bible not attested at Qumran, and Martin Luther would have gladly ejected it from his revised Bible if he could have, for—along with Maccabees—it “Judaize[s] too greatly and contain[s] much heathen naughtiness (*heidnische Unart*; *Table-Talk* §24).” Particularly when decoupled from the holiday of Purim—a carnivalesque festival to which Christians objected since the days of the emperor Theodosian, on account of Jewish expressions of anti-Christian sentiment¹³—or purged of the pious Greek additions of the Septuagint,¹⁴ the book of Esther becomes a difficult book to justify.

Perhaps the most unsettling element of Esther is how little interiority the characters display. The biblical text stresses externalities: it sets scenes, places characters, and carefully describes how characters move within space. But it offers few, if any, indications for why they act. Generations of readers have filled these gaps so that students often assume they know why

Mordecai did not bow to Haman in Esther 3 or why Esther decided to throw a second banquet (Esther 5). But in truth, Esther is more like a script into which readers, as if actors preparing for a new role, can project themselves. Because the characters have so little interiority so few ascribed motives or moods, they become vessels for a kind of “readers’ theater” of exegesis. To understand the book demands imagination and empathy. You can’t be a passive and uninvolved reader of the text. But, at the same time, this demand for engagement makes it easy for readers of the same text to experience very different Esthers. It is very easy for reading Esther to become personal.

Within the Jewish community, Esther became the subject of a tractate of Mishnah (Tractate Megillah, i.e., “The Scroll”—for while there are five festival scrolls in Judaism, Esther is the festival scroll par excellence). Mishnah Megillah addresses, at least loosely, topics associated with the scribal and performance practices associated with the production of the book of Esther and its annual reading on Purim.¹⁵ Nonetheless, Esther has typically been a book in which readers can find what they are seeking. Among Ashkenazi Jews, the theatrical elements of the book, with its emphasis on clothing and its keen awareness of spatiality—the way the author places characters in relation to each other anticipates a modern director’s idea of blocking out a scene—combined with the annual recitation of the scroll give rise to the phenomenon of the Purimspiel, likely connected in some fashion to the Catholic celebrations of Fasching and Fastnacht, which often featured overtly antisemitic motifs.¹⁶ As in the Byzantine period, Purim afforded Jews an opportunity for carnivalesque release and subversion. For Jews living in post-1492 Iberia, by contrast, Esther was beloved because of the motif of concealment: her virtue as queen for much of the biblical story resides in her concealment of her Jewishness, an act to which many crypto-Jews could easily relate.¹⁷ In Iran—that is, Esther’s Persian homeland—Jews filtered Purim through an entirely different lens and set of traditions, quite unlike those of their brethren living in Christendom.¹⁸

In the modern period, unsurprisingly, in a period when women’s voices are (at least in theory) valued and female role models actively sought after (at least by some) for reclamation and celebration, Esther has emerged as a valued role model, particularly in evangelical and postdenominational Christian circles, where the emphasis in Bible study is heavily on personal identification with biblical figures. This can be seen in Beth Moore’s ten-part curriculum through Lifeway (“Esther: It’s Tough Being a Woman”¹⁹), Donna Snow’s course, “Chosen” (“In this eight-week individual study, see that God’s presence is ever-abundant in your life, and that God gives you the courage to live fearlessly as Esther did”²⁰), and perhaps the apex of the phenomenon, Esther Press (mission statement: “At Esther Press, our purpose is to transform women’s lives by encouraging and equipping them to walk courageously in the light of God’s truth for such a time as this”²¹). Unsurprisingly, this

discourse has generated internal critiques, as we see with Rachel Held Evans and others—including critiques of the Esther March on Washington.²²

Speaking as a professor, much of Esther is easy to teach; the hardest part can be obscure Hebrew vocabulary. But the final chapters require a great deal of thought and seem to vary every time, not because of the violence *per se* but because the seemingly abrupt pivot jolts the students into such unhappiness, and because how I feel I need to teach about violence changes with every iteration of the class. Students who have grown up thinking of Esther as the Bible's answer to "Disney Princess" girl-power messaging in Vacation Bible School or as one of the better episodes of the Veggie Tales experience find the spasm of mayhem at the book's end as woefully out of place. For that reason, we often explore how various contemporary retellings of the book elide and soften chapters eight and nine, and how that alters the story in vital ways, and we have uncomfortable but important discussions about humor, farce, and revenge. But while students may find the bloodshed difficult, I find it increasingly essential that they understand how intimately it is connected to what may be the oldest conspiracy theory I know of: Haman's accusation against the Jews in Esther 3:8, "There is a certain people . . ." The link between that accusation and the convulsions of violence cannot be severed. And that linkage between conspiracies and violence, hovered very near the surface of the Million Esther March on October 12.

Among the speakers and attendees and fans of the "Esther Call to the Mall," the violence embedded in Esther—thoroughly decoupled from the wry satire of the biblical text—was given an earnest voice. It was framed as concern for children, but who fights harder than someone protecting their family? Who is more primed to violence than someone defending the defenseless—an innocent baby, unborn, even? Who will not take the laws into their own hands if the alternative might be utter lawlessness? This was, after all, "a last stand for America"—and many "appeal to heaven" flags flew over the crowd. When Bernadette Smith, a vice chair of the Michigan Republican Party, spoke, she invoked the now-commonplace description of American politics as a "spiritual fight" and said: "It's evil versus good, demons versus the light," and she added, "We are the light and we will eradicate the darkness that's on the face of the Earth." Then Mark Gonzales, head of the US Hispanic Action Network, called on "the church to rise up like never before and we decide who's gonna serve at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. We're gonna decide who's gonna walk the halls of Congress. And we're gonna decide who's gonna be at our city council, our school board, our boards and commissions, if the church begins to rise up in this hour." Perhaps most unnervingly, Jonathan Cahn, an evangelical author/doomsday preacher who has claimed Joe Biden put the United States under "demonic possession" for lighting up the White House in rainbow colors²³ smashed an "altar to Ishtar" while comparing Donald Trump to

Jehu and Kamala Harris to Jezebel—all while wearing a tallit (as were many others on the stage), in a stark example of fetishization of Jews—a cosplaying of Jewish piety on Yom Kippur. The preachers had lost the plot, perhaps because Esther's narrative did not provide the preachers with the precise plot they were seeking.

I write this at a moment when American society anxiously waits to learn if we will have a peaceful transition of power from president to president or if we will have another election marred by riots. In that context, it is unnerving to hear another quotation from Esther becoming common. Mordecai had told Esther that perhaps she found herself in the palace precisely so she could save her fellow Jews; she was there "for such a time as this." She objected, noting that to approach the king unbidden was to risk her own life but eventually, she agreed, saying: "If I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16).²⁴ On the very location in the nation's capitol where the Esthers and Mordecais mustered on October 12, less than a month before the election, the shadows of America's own recent, violent past—and Americans' anxieties about the near-term future—were legible. The merging of the language of conspiracy theories with the violent rhetoric of Esther gave me a chill unrelated to the turn of the seasons.

NOTES

- [1] See <https://www.jta.org/1999/01/26/lifestyle/queen-esther-and-a-prayer-book-jewish-involvement-in-monicagate>.
- [2] As early as 2004, Rebecca Phillips observed in *Tablet*, "Christians Have Fallen in Love With Queen Esther, Purim's Jewish Heroine" (12 March 2014); in 2018, Mike Cosper advocated countering the reactionary "Benedict option" with a resistance-minded "Esther option"—a conservative, evangelical never-Trump line of action (which he articulates here: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/esther-option/>). The publication of Anthony Tomasino's *Esther: Evangelical Exegetical Commentary* (Lexham Press, 2016) also seems to have generated interest in the book within the evangelical community, even as it also reflected growing interest in the text.
- [3] There has been a great deal of recent scholarly and journalistic writing on the New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) and Dominionism. See Matthew D. Taylor, *The Violent Take It by Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening Our Democracy* (Broadleaf Books, 2024); John Weaver, *The New Apostolic Reformation: History of a Modern Charismatic Movement* (McFarland, Incorporated, Publishers, 2016); Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (Bloomsbury, 2020); and James Aho, *Maelstrom: Christian Dominionism and Far-Right Insurgence* (Taylor and Francis, 2023). Dominionism is an old impulse within American politics and often entangled with violent organizations such as the Klan and militias, which can be seen as the precursors of contemporary groups; see Sara Diamond, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States* (Guildford Publications, 1995) and Kenneth Saul Stern, *A Force Upon the*

Plain: The American Militia Movement and the Politics of Hate (Simon and Schuster, 1996).

- [4] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DAznDpAmfc>. C. Peter Wagner, one of the founders of the movement and a Professor at Fuller Seminary, was interviewed by Teri Gross on Fresh Air on 3 October 2011 (<https://www.npr.org/2011/10/03/140946482/apostolic-leader-weighs-religions-role-in-politics>; accessed 19 October 2024).
- [5] For example, the book *How to Cast Out Demons: A Guide to the Basics* (Baker Publishing Group, 1999) is by Doris M. Wagner, who was among the co-founders of the New Apostolic Reformation movement with her husband, C. Peter Wagner. Language of “spiritual warfare” derives from this belief. See also Sean Durbin, “Violence as Revelation,” *Journal of Religion and Violence* 7.3 (2019): 231–254. More broadly, Jeff Sharlet’s recent *The Undertow: Scenes from a Slow Civil War* (Norton, 2023) offers an overview of NAR and a variety of other related phenomena, which he traces back to their origins in the Puritan foundation of the US, as well as the reactions of reactions that have arisen in response to them.
- [6] <https://www.thebriefing.us/blog/2023/10/3/122-a-million-voices>.
- [7] <https://amillionwomen.org/>.
- [8] See Beth Allison Barr, *The Making of Biblical Womanhood: How the Subjugation of Women Became Gospel Truth* (Baker Publishing Group, 2021).
- [9] <https://theesthercall.org/>.
- [10] The creativity of the conspiracy-minded is such that we can easily imagine a sermon in which the sons of Haman become groomers, however.
- [11] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2016/12/08/the-satanic-roots-of-pizzagate-how-a-30-year-old-sex-panic-explains-today/>; <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/9475/blood-delusion/>. As Paul Johnson wrote in the April 1984 issue of *Commentary*, “And anti-Semitism is the father of all conspiracy theory” (“Marxism vs. the Jews,” <https://bit.ly/3rjMhQU>).
- [12] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FmTtUcO4Bk>—this is the livestream of ten and half hours of the event.
- [13] The Theodosian Code 16:8:18 states: “The Emperors Honorius and Theodosius Augustuses to Anthemius, Praetorian Prefect: The governors of the provinces shall prohibit the Jews from setting fire to Haman in memory of his past punishment, in a certain ceremony of their festival, and from burning with sacrilegious intent a form made to resemble the Holy Cross in contempt of the Christian faith, lest they introduce the sign of our faith into their places, and they shall restrain their rites from ridiculing the Christian law, for they are bound to lose what had been permitted them till now unless they abstain from those matters which are forbidden. Given the fourth day before the calends of June at Constantinople, in the consulate of Bassus and Philippus.” See the discussion of this passage in John Victor Tolan, “The Rites of Purim as Seen by the Christian Legislator: Codex Theodosianus 16.8.18,” *Ritus Infidelium*, ed. José Martínez Gázquez and John Victor Tolan (Madrid: Casa de Velázquez, 2013), 165–173.
- [14] Especially relevant here is Meredith J. Stone, *Empire and Gender in LXX Esther* (SBL Press, 2018).
- [15] Joanna J. Homrighausen, Homrighausen, Jonathan Joanna. “Writing Esther, then and Now: The Materiality of the Megillah in Ritual, Memory, and Biblical Interpretation,” Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation (Duke University, 2024).
- [16] See the discussions of the topic in *Purimspiel und Fastnachtspiel: Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur Gattungsinterferenz*, ed. Klaus Wolf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).
- [17] See Emily Colbert Carins, *Esther in Early Modern Iberia and the Sephardic Diaspora: Queen of the Conversas* (Palgrave 2017).
- [18] See Adam Silverstein, *Veiling Esther, Unveiling Her Story: The Reception of a Biblical Book in Islamic Lands* (Oxford 2018), especially pp. 79–91.
- [19] <https://www.lifeway.com/en/product-family/esther>.
- [20] <https://www.cph.org/chosen-a-study-of-esther>.
- [21] <https://estherpress.com/>.
- [22] <https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/esther-introduction-princess-whore> (a five-part series); <https://realchristianwomen.blog/2024/04/13/have-you-heard-of-one-million-esthers-for-america/>; and this episode of the Lovesick Scribe podcast: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-rise-of-one-million-esthers-for-america/id1535754914?i=1000649840143>.
- [23] <https://www.mediamatters.org/charlie-kirk/charlie-kirks-podcast-doomsday-prophet-jonathan-cahn-fearmongers-ancient-god-dess>.
- [24] I found Est. 4:16 (“if I perish, I perish”) on various Facebook and Reddit pages associated with Ashli Babbitt, who was shot and killed by a Capitol police officer on January 6, 2020.