

YORAM HAZONY

GOD AND
POLITICS
IN ESTHER



God and Politics in Esther

YORAM HAZONY

The Herzl Institute, Jerusalem



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God and Politics in Esther

A political crisis erupts when the Persian government falls to fanatics, and a Jewish insider goes rogue, determined to save her people at all costs.

God and Politics in Esther explores politics and faith. It is about an era in which the prophets have been silenced and miracles have ceased, and Jewish politics has come to depend not on commands from on high, but on the boldness and belief of each woman and man. Esther takes radical action to win friends and allies, reverse terrifying decrees, and bring God's justice into the world with her own hands.

Hazon argues that the story of Esther was meant precisely to speak to a generation like ours – one which doesn't tend to see God in the world and isn't waiting for miracles. The biblical God, we learn, is an emergent God, who appears in history and in our lives through those who choose to act, and so build God's kingdom on earth.

This is a thoroughly revised and expanded edition of *The Dawn* (1995), with three controversial new chapters addressing the astonishingly radical theology that emerges amid the political intrigues in the narrative.

Yoram Hazony is President of the Herzl Institute in Jerusalem. He is founder and past president of the Shalem Center, now Shalem College. His books include *The Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* (Cambridge University Press, 2012) and *The Jewish State: The Struggle for Israel's Soul* (2000). Hazony directs the John Templeton Foundation's project in Jewish Philosophical Theology and is a member of the Israel Council for Higher Education committee on liberal studies in Israel's universities.

Praise for Yoram Hazony's *God and Politics in Esther*

“Extraordinary. Yoram Hazony reads the book of Esther as is it has never been read before. Beautifully written, brilliantly reasoned. *God and Politics in Esther* is a mind-opener.”

Jeff Jacoby, Boston Globe

Praise for Yoram Hazony's *The Dawn*

“A brilliant exegesis of this controversial work ... Esther – wily, courageous, undespairing, loyal – teaches that all of us must help each other seize and defend our freedom.”

William Safire, *The New York Times*

“Hazony makes the book of Esther come alive in a manner that is realistic and fascinating. Details which I had read again and again for the past sixty years, and which made no particular impression upon me, suddenly came alive with a significance that never occurred to me.”

Norman Lamm, President, Yeshiva University

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For Aba

With love

Preface

Recent decades have seen rapidly growing interest in the book of Esther, both in the popular media and among scholars and theologians. Its plot and characters, theology and political philosophy, are all benefiting from a much-deserved reevaluation. I am pleased to be able to contribute *God and Politics in Esther* to the discussion. I have long considered the Esther story to be an important doorway into the worldview of Hebrew Scripture and of Jewish tradition more generally. In this book, the second in a trilogy of works on the philosophy of the Hebrew Bible that are to appear with Cambridge University Press, I explain why this is so.

My work on Esther began with a challenge many years ago from Rabbi Jay Marcus, to whom I am grateful for commissioning and publishing the earliest version of this book. I am grateful, as well, to Lewis Bateman of Cambridge, who has set the pace for the new storm of academic publishing interest in the area of Jewish ideas. Lew has done perhaps more than anyone else to bring my work to the attention of a broad audience, a debt that I can hardly hope to repay. Thanks, too, to Suzanne Balaban of BMM Worldwide, who has deftly handled publicity for my recent books and added much good spirit to the publishing process besides. I wish to express my appreciation to those who have supported my work on this book, including Michael Murray, John Churchill, and Alex Arnold at the John Templeton Foundation, Barry and Lainie Klein, Seth and Nealy Fischer, Roger Hertog, David Messer, Jack Berger, Bart Baum, Ron Hersh, and Michael Moskowitz.

This book is dedicated to my father, Yehonathan Hazony, whose teachings and ideas are present in each page I write. His ongoing research into the behavior of quantum bodies, and his dissent from accepted theory on this subject despite the hardship of such an unpopular road, is an inspiration to me every day of my life.

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Introduction

Ever since the inclusion of the book of Esther in the biblical canon two thousand years ago, there have been those who have asked what place such a work can have in the Bible at all. Their question must be well taken, for at first glance Esther appears to be something very different from what we usually consider to be “biblical.” Esther is a tale of kings and queens and evil grand viziers that cannot help but strike one as a romance or a fairy story. Nowhere in its ten terse chapters can one find the cascading moral imperatives of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and even less in evidence are the sober laws of Moses. The term “God” appears nowhere, and one is hard-pressed to find any trace of theology amid the hairpin turns of the tale. Moreover, the Jewish heroes of the story seem to display little piety and negligible concern for Jewish law: Mordechai the Jew guides and advises his cousin, Hadasa, as she hides her heritage, marries a non-Jewish potentate, and, in a realm apparently rife with anti-Semitism, presumably gives up on any aspect of Jewish observance that would betray her past so that she may remain in the royal palace. The book even refers to the young Jewish heroine by the Persian name of Esther, meaning “star” – and the stars were themselves part of the cult of idolatry in Persia – a fact that cannot but suggest assimilation and capitulation to the surrounding civilization.

Yet for all this, when the rabbis of the Talmudic period looked back across Jewish history, seeking to grant it coherence and permanence by assembling its teachings into a canon, they ascribed great significance to Esther as a work concerned with themes relevant to the conclusion of the Bible. Indeed, when the rabbis spoke of the giving of the *tora* to the Jewish people, they argued that it had been accepted not once but twice: Once at Sinai at the beginning of the Bible, and then again at the end, in the time of Esther.¹ And when they considered the eternity of the Bible’s teachings, they asserted that there were

two portions of Scripture that could never be abolished, the books of Moses and the book of Esther.² And while they taught that the other parts of the Bible could bring an understanding of piety, wisdom, consolation, and greatness, it was only the book of Esther that they thought offered the key to the miraculous.³ To the rabbis, this little story of persecution and court intrigue was something precious, powerful, and exceedingly important.⁴ It was a writing thought worthy of being the Bible's closing words to man – in a sense, God's last words to man.⁵

To begin unraveling the riddle of Esther's meaning, we must first recognize that Esther is a book about exile. That is, unlike most of the other works of the Bible, which depict the Jews in their efforts to come to the land of Israel and build a Jewish nation there, Esther describes a world in which the Jews are distant from their land, their tradition, and their God. When sovereign in the land of Israel, the Jews are confronted directly with questions of national morality: how to govern justly, how to obtain security and peace, how to establish the pious and good society in the face of the terrible obstacles encountered by any realistic appraisal of the proclivities and aptitudes of men. But in Israel, the Jews at least have the advantage of sovereign authority: The government may muster vast material resources and promulgate laws in the service of the public interest; the intellectual leaders may freely study, teach, and write in the pursuit of truth; and the leaders of the spirit may go about inculcating a love of justice and peace among the people. In sum, when sovereign in their own land, the Jews at least possess the power needed to determine and implement an ideal according to their own lights, whether they choose to make appropriate use of this power or not. And it is no coincidence, either, that it was when the Jews possessed this power, living on the land and fighting for it, that they also found themselves directly confronted by their God.

In exile, whether in ancient Persia or in a more contemporary one, Jewish life must somehow persist without the immense resources made available by independent, sovereign power. In exile, the Jews must live in dispersion, their institutions weak, their concerns wandering far from Jewish things, and their politics alienated from every obvious source of cohesiveness, direction, and strength. It is clear at the outset that under such conditions, there is no possibility of freely seeking and implementing any Jewish ideal. To live in a society ruled by others means that the government and the laws are not the product of a Jewish concern for the general public interest, and that they are certainly not the result of an interest in the well-being of the Jews as a nation; that Jewish intellectual endeavors are under constant pressure, whether overt or implicit, to conform to alien norms; and that Jewish leadership, if it is capable and effective, is perpetually viewed with a certain measure of suspicion and even fear – both by the community of non-Jews,

and by members of the Jewish community concerned that Jewish success may be interpreted by the gentiles as a challenge to their authority. Thus exile, while never precluding entirely the possibility of Jewish power, nevertheless establishes a formidable presumption against it – a presumption that has ominous theological echoes in the fact that even the most devout come to feel that the way has been lost, and begin to speak, as though in winter, of God having “hidden his face” from his people.⁶

It is to such a setting that we are introduced in the book of Esther. Never before have the Jews experienced anything like it, unless it was in Egypt, a thousand years earlier. Persia is an archetypal oriental tyranny in which the peoples live by grace of the despot's wishes, and in which the physical survival of the Jews implicitly remains an open question, even when, as at the beginning of the tale, the waters seem untroubled. Under these circumstances, the narrative of Esther is faithful to the tenor of the times, seeming to bypass issues of theology and religious observance to cope with the more burning issue of the actual physical survival of the Jews. For this reason, the book of Esther deals first and foremost with the problem of a Jewish politics in exile: how the Jews, deprived of every sovereign institution of power, may nevertheless participate in, and in the last resort make use of, the authority of an alien government to ensure their own vital interests, and in this case their lives. Esther offers its readers a choice between two antithetical conditions – the one being a nightmare of impotence, in which “it was written ... in the name of Ahashverosh the king ... to annihilate, to kill and to destroy all Jews, the young and the elderly, children and women, in one day,” and there is nothing to be done; and the other, in which Mordechai the Jew rises to a position of great power with the ability to act in defense of the Jews, being, as it says in the closing chapter, “second to Ahashverosh the king, ... seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his descendants.” The nature of this utterly political choice – and how it is to be made in practice – is the principal concern and teaching of the book of Esther.

At the same time, Esther also moves to assert itself against another, more subtle opponent, one that had loomed over Persian Jewry for years before Haman had plotted against them. Persia in Esther's time is a cosmopolitan world empire, offering success and wealth to those among the Jewish exiles who will give up on the past and play by its rules. In Persia, as elsewhere, the Jews begin to disappear into the fabric of the empire, some of them changing their names and their attire, and arguing with self-confidence against the possibility and desirability of a continuation to Jewish history. What argument can be made as against these, to a defeated and dispirited Jewry, scattered to the corners of the world and no longer privy to the word of God? In making its political argument, the narrative of Esther consciously responds on these

historical, religious, and theological battlegrounds as well, offering answers that are among the most daring, and ultimately the most successful, in Jewish history.

Yet these deadly serious messages tend to be lost when the book is read today. Its association with the activities now surrounding the festival of Purim, the Feast of Esther, has rendered such themes obscure, since Esther is seldom read in a context in which it may be taken seriously on its own terms. As a consequence, many read the book only in a cursory fashion, believing that the plot pivots on "coincidence" or "luck." But a closer examination reveals that there are no coincidences in the tale: The political events leading to the salvation of the Jews of Persia are planned by Mordechai and Esther, and come to succeed by virtue of their shrewd understanding of the principles of politics, their courage, and their faith in the face of an apparently godless world. How these elements can work to produce the greatest of political events, in which "the enemies of the Jews hoped to rule them, but the situation reversed itself and it was the Jews who asserted rule over their enemies," is the true tale of Esther, whose teachings demand our attention and our interest so many centuries later.

PART I

ESTHER 1.1-1.22

It came to pass in the days of Ahashverosh, the same Ahashverosh who reigned from India to Ethiopia, over 127 provinces, ²in the days when Ahashverosh the king sat on his royal throne, which was in Susa the capital. ³In year 3 of his reign he made a feast for all his princes and his servants, the military power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces being before him, ⁴during which he displayed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his excellent majesty for many days – 180 days.

⁵When these days had run their course, the king made a feast for all the people present in Susa the capital, from the highest to the most lowly, lasting seven days in the court, in the garden of the king's palace. ⁶There were hangings of white, of fine cotton, and blue, suspended with cords of fine linen and purple from silver rods and marble columns, divans of gold and silver on a floor of alabaster, marble, pearl, and precious stone. ⁷And drinks in vessels of gold, and vessels, each one differing from the others, and the royal wine aplenty, from the hand of the king. ⁸And the drinking was in accord with the law that none should be compelled, for so the king had instructed all the officers of his house, that they should do according to each man's will.

⁹Vashti the queen made a feast for the women as well, in the royal house of Ahashverosh the king. ¹⁰On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Bizeta, Harvona, Bigta and Avagta, Zetar, and Karkas, the seven chamberlains who served in the presence of Ahashverosh the king, ¹¹to bring Vashti the queen before the king wearing the royal crown,

to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was fair to look upon. ¹²But Vashti the queen refused to come at the king's command as communicated by the chamberlains, and the king was exceedingly angered, and his rage burned within him.

¹³The king turned to his advisers, who understood the precedents, for such was the king's habit before all who knew law and judgment – ¹⁴those who were close to him being Karshena, Shetar, Admata, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memuchan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and who sat first in the kingdom –

¹⁵“According to the law, what should be done to Vashti the queen, who has not performed the word of the king as communicated by the chamberlains?”

¹⁶Memuchan said to the king and the princes: “It is not the king alone who has been wronged by Vashti the queen, but all the princes, and all the peoples in all the provinces of Ahashverosh the king. ¹⁷For this deed of the queen will become known to all the women, and their husbands will become contemptible in their eyes, when they tell: Ahashverosh the king commanded that Vashti the queen be brought before him but she came not. ¹⁸And this day, the princesses of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's deed will be telling it to all the king's princes, and there will be much contempt and anger. ¹⁹If it please the king, let a royal decree be issued, and let it be written among the laws of Persia and Media, so that it should not fail, that Vashti come no more before Ahashverosh the king, and let the king give her royal estate to someone better than she. ²⁰And when the king's edict, which he will issue, is heard throughout his entire kingdom, vast though it be, all the wives will give honor to their husbands, from the highest to the most lowly.”

²¹The idea pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memuchan advised. ²²He sent letters to all the king's provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man should rule in his own house and speak in the language of his own people.

Submission and Rule

Esther begins with a party in which Ahashverosh, king of Persia,¹ entertains his princes and legions, drinks himself into a tantrum, fights with his wife the queen, consults with his advisers, and then has his consort humiliated and deposed. The whole sordid scene takes place without mention of the Jews or of their enemies, the subject of the book of Esther, so that one has to ask why the narrative should not have begun with the second chapter or even with the third, when the plot against the Jews breaks into the open. It was this question that moved the rabbis of the Talmud to argue that the Jews of the capital must have been present at the feast, and that something that took place there – either the misbehavior of the king toward the Jews, or their own misbehavior – must have served as the provocation that triggers their subsequent persecution.² But the purpose of the party in the book of Esther is not to add to an otherwise dense plot. It is to acquaint us with its host and with the manner in which he rules his empire. It is this empire that inherited those who destroyed the kingdom of the Jews. Dispersed in its midst live their remnant. And one cannot understand what has become of them there, nor whom they will have to fight and why, nor the dangers before them, nor the greatness of their triumph, without first understanding Ahashverosh and his party, and the appetite for rule that throbs there drunk among the revelers from a hundred lands, so that the rabbis said that the Satan danced there himself.³

Ahashverosh is the ruler of most of civilization, from Ethiopia to India, and one might think that his time would be taken up with the responsibilities of governing more than a hundred provinces, or of securing them against external threats. Nevertheless, Esther begins by informing us that by the third year of his reign, the principal concern to which he dedicates himself is an ongoing carnival of drinking, which occupies the attention of the political, military, and administrative elite of the empire for no less than six months. Moreover, even