

Biblical farce

Esther's story would be infuriating if it wasn't so over-the-top ridiculous.

by [Debbie Blue](#) in the [January 20, 2016](#) issue



Aert de Gelder, [The Banquet of Ahasuerus](#), oil on canvas, 1680s.

The Bible is a compilation of stories, poetry, and questionable history about an enigmatic but graceful God. This God seeks relationship with humans—self-important creatures who fluctuate perpetually between grandiosity and shame, mammals who spend an inordinate amount of time and resources trying to convince themselves and others they are something they are not (radiant, godlike, flawless, immortal, innocent).

Surely the whole premise of the book lends itself to humor on occasion. If you hope to reach the heart of this peculiar species, you will probably need a sense of humor. I'm pretty sure it's an essential quality of grace.

The Bible has many funny moments—though you might not know it from the history of Christian interpretation. One of Nietzsche's most penetrating critiques of Christianity was that Christians were a joyless people. Paul Tillich said he almost left the faith for the same reason. Of course, many preachers incorporate humor into their sermons these days, but I think we often miss the notes of irony, sarcasm, or hyperbole in the text itself. Maybe it has to do with some dour asceticism in our

history or our DNA.

Rabbinic readings are certainly more playful. The midrashic scholar Avivah Zornberg says that “the Midrash invites us to read the text with the truest—that is, with the least conventional, platitudinous, or even pious—understandings available to us.” Christians might heed that invitation. Stephen Moore, a New Testament scholar, says of Christians: “Victorian scruples regulate our reading habits. We need to rendezvous with the texts in the kitchen garden occasionally, away from the cloying niceties of the drawing room.” I like this image.

One of the most blatant examples of humor in the Bible is the book of Esther. If you are reading it with your Victorian scruples intact, however, you might miss it or dismiss it.

Calvin didn’t include Esther in his biblical commentaries. “I am so great an enemy” to Esther, said Luther, “that I wish it had not come to us at all.” He felt it had too much “Judaizing” and “pagan naughtiness.”

Thankfully, Luther didn’t have the final say. I’m thrilled Esther came to us. It’s edgy, funny, and strange. I like that in a holy book. And I like that it is a book about a woman who—without father or brother or husband, without being pure or holy or virginal—stands in the eye of an ego-driven, farcical, man-made, nearly catastrophic storm and acts to save her people from destruction.

Esther is not your typical saint. She doesn’t conduct herself like someone who is zealous about the law, yet she becomes a Jewish heroine. She doesn’t rise up from unsavory circumstances ringed with white blossoms of purity like St. Agnes, who was thrown into a brothel but remained, miraculously, immaculate. Esther is decidedly not a heroine of the nunnish type.

Esther’s comic aspects aren’t contained in a few jokes. Humor is the essence of the book. It’s a timeless sort of farce, full of men behaving badly. The king of the Persian Empire, according to Esther the greatest the world had ever known, is an ineffectual, pompous buffoon, surrounded by a cadre of advisers who pander to his ego. At the start of the book, he is throwing a preposterously lavish party—it’s six months long—culminating in a scene where the drunken king summons his queen to parade in front of his guests wearing nothing but her crown. She refuses to concede to this (rock on, Queen Vashti). He banishes her in a fit of rage, but soon he is petulant and lonely.

His advisers suggest that perhaps a harem of the most beautiful young virgins might brighten things up a bit. They will gather them from far and wide. Each night a different virgin will come in to him, and whichever one he likes best will be the new queen. This does mitigate the king's rage. Before the young women can enter his chamber, however, they must undergo a beautifying regime, supervised by eunuchs—an entire year of sloughing and moisturizing and having any natural fragrance perfumed away. Esther, a Jewish orphan raised by her uncle, Mordecai, turns out to be the virgin who pleases the king the most. So she becomes queen.

The whole thing would be infuriating if it wasn't so over the top. The book of Esther is poking fun at the Persian elite, mocking the decadence of empire and the absurdity of human pretensions. There is a shorter Greek version of Esther—distinct from both the Hebrew Masoretic Text and the Greek Septuagint—that has a totally different vibe. There's no comedy; the narrator delivers his grave lesson in a serious tone. But the Hebrew version is meant to get you laughing—at kings, goyish pomposity, absurd egos.

Haman is a comic villain, a prince in the king's court who is elevated to a place of importance for no particular reason but who takes his unfounded fame very seriously. There is a slapstick quality to Haman's self-importance. When Mordecai won't bow down to him, he responds by convincing the king to annihilate every Jew, young and old, on the day for which he drew lots. It makes no sense that the king casually agrees to this. The whole situation is ludicrous.

Concerned for the fate of his people, Mordecai asks Esther to talk to the king. She is reluctant, because if you go into the king's chamber without being summoned, you are put to death. The only chance you have is if the king holds out his "golden scepter" toward you. Esther says the king hasn't summoned her to his chamber for a whole month, so the golden scepter may not be likely to point in her direction. The euphemistic nature of the scepter is pretty obvious, and the bawdy humor sets a comic rather than tragic tone.

Mordecai convinces Esther to give it a try—not by offering her an infallible directive from God, but by posing a question: Who knows? Maybe you're in this place at this time for a reason. God is not flashy or obvious in the book of Esther. In fact, in the Hebrew text God is not mentioned at all. Nothing is certain, ambiguity prevails, but Esther decides to act to divert the coming disaster. She decides, "If I perish, I perish."

Esther goes to the king's chamber. The golden scepter points in her direction. In fact, she pleases the king so immensely that he says he will do anything she asks. She asks him to come to dinner and bring Haman along. They drink wine. The king is happy. He tells Esther to ask whatever she wants of him. She asks him to come to dinner with Haman again the next evening. Haman goes home and regales his household with stories of his great success in court, his general splendor and riches—how he and only he has been invited to dine with Esther and the king.

At dinner the next evening, Esther tells the king of the terrible plan to be carried out against her people. He seems astonished, though he played a pretty big role in it himself, and asks, who is the man? Esther points to Haman, “a foe, the enemy!” The king orders Haman to be hanged on the preposterously large gallows he had been constructing for Mordecai—as high as a six-story building.

On the day the Jews were to be slaughtered, they defend themselves (perhaps a tad too robustly). Mordecai makes a decree that from now on, on the 14th day of the month of Adar, the Jewish people will celebrate with feasting and holiday making. They will send good food to one another and give to the poor. They will celebrate this way on the day on which the Jews got relief from their sadness, when their sorrow was turned into laughter, and the feast day shall be called after the *pur* (the lots) that Haman cast.

And so it has been to this day, over the centuries quite merrily. In the spirit of the book of Esther, Purim is a funny sort of holiday. Esther is read aloud in the synagogue, and whenever Haman's name is mentioned (which is 54 times) children rattle special noisemakers made for the occasion. Some people write Haman's name on the bottom of their shoe and stamp their feet to blot out his name, as instructed by the ancient rabbis, who do have a sense of humor.

There are special foods for this feast—little triangular pastries filled with poppy seeds, chocolate, or apricot called *hamantaschen* (Haman's pockets) or *oznei Haman* (Haman's ears). A special loaf of bread, baked in the shape of Haman's head, is called “the eyes of Haman.” The eyes are made of boiled eggs.

One of the most important obligations of the feast day is to eat a festive meal (I love an obligation like that) and not only to eat but to drink wine, lots of it. The sages of the ancient Talmud said that people should drink so much wine on Purim that they can no longer distinguish between the phrases “cursed is Haman” and “blessed is

Mordecai.” Later some rabbis said that maybe you should drink only a little more than usual after all—but still, you are obliged to drink, laugh, and have fun.

People dress up in costumes as a way of emulating God, whose presence was disguised but who was nevertheless among them, quietly, hidden—maybe a bit hard to glimpse, but underneath holding all things.

We need to be able to laugh at ourselves, our species. Maybe we wouldn’t be so destructive if we didn’t take ourselves so seriously. Of course, there are times to be dead serious, but laughing at kings is a way to not give the powerful the power they so pompously claim.

While Esther is an obvious example of comedy in the Bible, I’m pretty sure there are others that we miss. Jesus uses hyperbole, sarcasm, and irony. He’s a mensch with chutzpah, not a tepid kind of saint. I sometimes wonder if Jesus was joking when he called Peter the rock on which the church is built. The rock sinks when it believes it can walk on water; it crumbles in betrayal at a crucial moment. There’s tragedy in this, of course—but perhaps a bit of humor, too.