

Esther in America

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1. by *Stuart Halpern* 2 . 26 . 21



The book of Esther, read during Purim, has a special place in American history. Though some have argued that the unifying biblical story for Americans is the account of the Israelites' exodus from Egypt, the courage of the eponymous heroine of the book of Esther has also been a source of succor and moral inspiration in America since the days of the colonies.

In the biblical story, Esther, after being taken to the palace of King Xerxes to be his queen, heroically risks her life for her people. At the urging of her cousin Mordecai, she acts to save her fellow Jews from the plot of the king's wicked adviser, Haman.

During the decade preceding the American Revolution, as colonists began rebelling against the British, newspapers and preachers turned to Esther's story to articulate their own struggle for freedom. Upon the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1765, the *Boston Gazette* declared that whoever had suggested George III enact such a law was "as great an Enemy . . . as was wicked Haman to the Jews." The *New York Journal*, in 1774, noted that like George III, the Persian king "reigned over many distant provinces," and was, "by his prime minister, induced to oppress, and take measures to destroy many of his subjects." Lord Bute—and later, Lord North—were British Hamans.

In a sermon titled *The Character of Haman*, Thomas Reese thundered, "No principles of religion, virtue or humanity can restrain the wretch, whose ruling passion is the lust for power." King George III, like Xerxes, was "too ready to believe evil of his subjects, and to comply with the oppressive measures of his prime minister." After the Revolution, president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton) John Witherspoon

compared the story of Esther to the story of America, preaching that “We have also an instance in Esther in which the most mischievous designs of Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite against Mordecai the Jew, and the nation from which he sprung, turned out at last to his own destruction, the honor of Mordecai, and the salvation and peace of his people.”

Americans also turned to Esther in the fight against slavery. In an influential 1836 pamphlet, Angelina Grimké urged Southern white women to act like the Jewish queen. Arguing that the sin of slavery would lead to the moral destruction of all of American society, she encouraged them to risk their own lives, as Esther had done, to ensure the survival of their people. “Is there no Esther among you?” she asked rhetorically, “Read the history of this Persian queen, it is full of instruction.”

Later, Sojourner Truth also quoted Esther in a pivotal women’s rights rally in New York City. “There was a king in the Scriptures,” Truth said, “and then it was the kings of the earth would kill a woman if she come into their presence; but Queen Esther come forth, for she was oppressed, and felt there was a great wrong, and she said I will die or I will bring my complaint before the king.”

Nine days before he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, pastor William Weston Patton quoted to Abraham Lincoln Mordecai’s request of Esther that she risk her standing to achieve the salvation of her people. Patton asked,

“who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” And your memorialists believe that in Divine Providence you have been called to the Presidency to speak the word of justice and authority which shall free the bondman and save the nation.

Americans today are not as biblically literate as their forebears. But Esther’s teachings should continue to resonate. Esther chose covenant over comfort. When Mordecai asked her to risk her life on behalf of her people, Esther sat in the lap of nobility. And yet she chose loyalty—to her family, to her people, and to their traditions.

Since the nation's inception, Americans have found comfort, inspiration, and courage in Esther’s pages. She continues to teach us that a polity can only truly flourish when ancient traditions and beliefs are not squashed in the name of unity, but celebrated.

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