

Alternative Visions: Esther, Ruth, and Jonah

Lecture 24 Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-24>

Overview

In this lecture, two final books of the Bible are examined and their attitudes towards foreign nations compared. In contrast to Daniel's reliance on divine intervention to punish the wicked, the book of Esther focuses on human initiative in defeating the enemies of Israel. Finally, the book of Jonah—in which the wicked Assyrians repent and are spared divine punishment—expresses the view that God is compassionate and concerned with all creation. Professor Hayes concludes the course with remarks regarding the dynamic and complex messages presented in the Hebrew Bible.

1. *The Book of Esther*

[1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* An interesting counterpoint to the apocalyptic literature and the apocalyptic reliance on God's cataclysmic consummation of history in order to dole out justice to the righteous and the wicked, is found in the Book of Esther. And this is a short novella. It's set in fifth-century Persia, it was probably written in the fourth century, we think, but it's set during the reign of Xerxes (and there's no x in the Hebrew alphabet — this is Ahasuerus, which is Xerxes), and he was a fifth-century Persian emperor from about 486 to 465.

[2] It's another heroic fiction that features a Jew in the court of a gentile king, so it's like Daniel. The Jews of Persia are threatened with genocide, and they are saved not by divine intervention but entirely through their own efforts. Indeed, the Book of Esther does not mention God once.

[3] The story revolves around Mordechai. Now, Mordechai is a pious Jew. He sits at the gate of the Persian king, Ahasuerus or Xerxes, and his beautiful niece is also central to the story of course — that's Esther — and he has adopted her as his own. There's a lot of comic irony in this story. It really is a fun read. Time is not going to permit me to go into the various subplots and the dramatic reversals, the ironies and twists, but I will just highlight a few of the most salient points that are relevant to the conversation we've been having.

[4] When the Persian king divorces his wife, Vashti, because she refuses to appear in the royal diadem before his male courtiers — presumably in nothing but the royal diadem — Esther's great beauty commends her to the king and she becomes queen. Now, her uncle Mordechai advises her to be discreet about her Jewish identity for safety's sake.

[5] In 2:10 and 11 it says,

Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred, for Mordechai had told her not to reveal it. Every single day Mordechai would walk about in front of the court of the harem, to learn how Esther was faring and what was happening to her.

[6] So, a little while later the king promotes a certain Haman, Haman the Agagite, to the post of chief administrator. And everyone in the palace gate kneels down to Haman as the king has ordered, everyone that is except for Mordechai. Day after day he refuses, and finally the matter is told to Haman. This is chapter 3:4-6, and "When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them," speaking to Mordechai and he won't listen to them,

...they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordechai's resolve would prevail; for he had explained to them that he was a Jew. When Haman saw that Mordechai would not kneel or bow low to him, Haman was filled with rage. But he disdained to lay hands on

Mordechai alone; having been told who Mordechai's people were, Haman plotted to do away with all the Jews, Mordechai's people, throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus.

- [7] So Haman casts lots. The word for lots is *purim*; so he casts lots in order to determine the date of the massacre and then he offers the king a handsome bribe in return for permission to kill the Jews of the kingdom. This is chapter 3:8-11 — and listen to the rationale that's proposed. He says to the king:

...”There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in Your majesty's interest to tolerate them. If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the stewards for deposit in the royal treasury.” Thereupon the king removed his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the foe of the Jews. And the king said, “The money and the people are yours to do with as you see fit.”

- [8] So he provides a rationale. He also provides a good bribe along with it to get this edict. So this edict goes out to every province to destroy, massacre, and exterminate all the Jews, young and old, children and women, on a single day. This is to be the thirteenth of the month of Adar. Jews everywhere begin to fast and weep and wail. They mourn, they wear sackcloth and ashes. And Esther sends to Mordechai for an explanation of the commotion. She's somewhat sealed off here in the harem and doesn't quite know what's going on. So he sends a message informing her of the decree. And he urges her to appeal to the king and to plead for her people. And Esther hesitates, partly because to appear unbidden before the king carries a penalty of death. And Mordechai responds with this message. This is Esther 4:13b to 16:

“Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance

will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.” Then Esther sent back this answer to Mordechai: “Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan,” [in Susa, in Persia] “and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law, and if I am to perish, I shall perish!”

- [9] So Mordechai went about the city and did just as Esther had commanded him. It's a very tense scene, Esther approaches the king and he — you get a signal: he raises his scepter or not, to accept you or not — and in this tense moment he permits her entry and he offers to grant her every request.

- [10] And so she asks that the king and Haman attend a banquet that she's preparing. And at Esther's banquet, the king offers to grant Esther any request that she might wish to make. And so her request is stated in the following terms, terms that show her loyalty to her people. Esther 7:3b-6:

...”If Your Majesty will do me the favor, and if it pleases Your Majesty, let my life be granted me as my wish and my people as my request. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated. Had we only been sold as bondmen and bondwomen,” [as slaves] “I would have kept silent; for the adversary is not worth the king's trouble.”

- [11] Thereupon King Ahasuerus demanded of Queen Esther, “Who is he and where is he who dared to do this?” “The adversary and enemy,” replied Esther, “is this evil Haman!” And Haman cringed in terror before the king and the queen.

- [12] So Esther boldly reveals her Jewish identity before the king. She expresses her solidarity in her speech with phrases like “we” and “my people and I.” There's a real comedy of errors that follows. The king leaves the room in a rage and Haman falls prostrate on Esther's couch to beg for his life. So when the king reenters the room, he sees Haman in this compromising position and he declares, “Does he mean to

ravish the queen in my own palace?” So he orders Haman to be impaled on the very stake that Haman had set up for Mordechai, and Mordechai in fact is then elevated in Haman’s stead within the court.

for their wickedness, then the book of Jonah offers another perspective.

2. *The Book of Jonah*

[13] But the Jews are still in danger because an edict of the king’s cannot be revoked. Once a word has gone forth from the king, it is law. So the solution is a second edict in which Ahasuerus charges the Jews to arm and defend themselves. And so then we have another of many reversals in this story. What was to be a day of defeat and massacre of the Jews becomes a day of triumph as the Jews who now have permission to arm themselves and fight, slay those who were bent on murdering them.

[18] The book of Jonah is actually found among the section of the Bible called the Prophets — the second section, the prophetic books of the Bible — and that’s because in the book of Kings, 2 Kings 14:25, we have someone identified as Jonah, the son of Amittai, the prophet. This is considered the same Jonah, and so the book is considered to be among the books of the Prophets.

[14] The victory celebration which is the festival of Purim is commemorated by Jews to this day. The very melodramatic story of this luxurious Persian court life and all of the attendant political intrigue that goes on in this story, it’s recreated in annual Purim celebrations, very raucous, carnival-like dramatizations. According to the Talmud on Purim, it’s a mitzvah, which can mean a commandment or a good deed, to get so drunk that you can’t distinguish between Mordechai and Haman.

[19] But it differs in significant ways from the other prophetic books. It is not, in fact, a collection of oracles. It’s actually a story, a somewhat comic story, a comic tale about a reluctant prophet named Jonah. The second interesting or unusual thing about this book, is that Jonah is commissioned by Yahweh to carry a message to the people of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, not to the people of Israel.

[15] But for all of that there are some very important and striking themes in the story. First, there’s the ethnic element of Jewish identity, rather than religious, that comes to the fore in the book of Esther. The presentation is secular, the Jews are described as a people, an ethnos. Esther is fully assimilated to her gentile environment. Unlike Daniel, who prays towards Jerusalem daily in the court of the king and observes the dietary laws in the court of the king, we hear nothing like this about Esther at all.

[20] The Israelite concept of divine mercy receives its full expression in the book of Jonah. In the first chapter, Jonah receives a call from Yahweh who instructs him to go to Nineveh, whose wickedness is great, and to proclaim God’s judgment. Chapter 1, the first three verses: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim judgment upon it; for their wickedness has come before Me. Jonah, however, started out to flee to Tarshish from the Lord’s service.” [That’s like saying he got up and went to Timbuktu. Tarshish was the extent, the farthest extent of the known world navigable through the Mediterranean. So it’s rather comic: “go to Nineveh” and he got up and went the opposite direction as far as he could. He tried to flee from the Lord’s service.] “...He went down to Joppa [Jaffa] and found a ship going to Tarshish. He paid the fare and went aboard to sail with the others to Tarshish, away from the service of the Lord.”

[16] There’s also a very human and very anti-apocalyptic message in this story. It gives expression to the conviction that solidarity and heroic resistance are necessary in the face of overwhelming anti-Jewish aggression to ensure Jewish survival. This, according to the book of Esther, so different from the book of Daniel, is the lesson to be learned from Israel’s history.

[21] So he does this immediate about-face in a very comic touch and sets sail for Spain, the other end of the Mediterranean. But of course, Jonah cannot escape from God, and God sends a storm which threatens to destroy the ship.

[17] If the book of Esther presents one alternative to the post-exilic eschatologies in which Yahweh’s enemies are afflicted and consumed

[22] The non-Israelite sailors on board pray to their gods and then finally they cast lots in order to

discover who it is who's brought this danger to the ship. And the lot falls to Jonah. So Jonah confesses that he's a Hebrew who worships the Lord who, as he now realizes, made both land and sea. And that is a fact that strikes great terror in the heart of the sailors when they hear this, that his God is Yahweh. Jonah further adds that he's trying to flee from God's service and the clear implication is that he is the cause of this terrible storm.

[23] So Jonah proposes that he be thrown overboard to save the ship. The sailors strive mightily to battle the storm but finally in despair they pray to God, Yahweh, to forgive them for killing an innocent man. And they heave Jonah overboard and save the ship.

[24] Now, the sailors are said by the narrator to revere God. They offer a sacrifice to him. They make vows. In the meantime, God has appointed a huge fish to swallow Jonah and so preserve his life. And from the belly of this fish, Jonah prays to God. The prayer or the psalm is not entirely appropriate to the narrative context. It's probably an insertion in the story by a later writer. It's an insertion that was probably suggested by references within the prayer to drowning in the deep, to crying out to God from the "belly" of Sheol — and Jonah is in the "belly" of the fish, so that linguistic resonance may very well have been what prompted someone to insert this prayer here. In any event, in response to Jonah's prayer, God orders the fish to spew Jonah out onto dry land. In chapter 3, Jonah gets his second chance. God calls him again and in contrast to his first response, this time Jonah sets out for Nineveh at once. And he proclaims God's message: "In forty days Nineveh will be overthrown." And then comes the shocking element in the story.

[25] Chapter 3:5-10:

The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth. And when the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his robe, put on sackcloth, and sat in ashes. And he had the word cried through Nineveh: "By decree of the king and his nobles: No man or beast — of flock or herd — shall taste anything! They shall not graze, and they shall not drink water! They shall be

covered with sackcloth — man and beast — and shall cry mightily to God. Let everyone turn back from his evil ways and from the injustice of which he is guilty. Who knows but that God may turn and relent? He may turn back from his wrath, so that we do not perish." God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment He had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out.

[26] So idolatrous Nineveh believes God and humbles itself before God hoping to arouse his mercy. And in another humorous touch, we read that even the animals are wearing sackcloth — they're fasting and crying out to God. So from the greatest to the very least, the inhabitants of Nineveh turn back from their evil ways and God's mercy is in fact aroused.

[27] The Assyrians are spared, and Jonah is furious. Chapter 4:1-4:

This displeased Jonah greatly, and he was grieved. He prayed to the Lord, saying, "O Lord! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in my own country? That is why I fled beforehand to Tarshish. For I know that You are a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in kindness, renouncing punishment. Please, Lord, take my life, for I would rather die than live." The Lord replied, "Are you that deeply grieved?"

[28] Jonah doesn't respond; he just leaves the city to sulk. And his complaint seems to be twofold. If you're going to punish the wicked then just punish them. They deserve it. And if you're planning to spare them, then just spare them and don't waste my time with messages and oracles.

[29] But the stronger problem for Jonah seems to be the lack of punishment for the wicked. Jonah is indignant that the Assyrians didn't get what they so richly deserved: didn't I say this would happen? You always forgive, you're this slow-to-anger, compassionate guy! You always repent, the wicked are never punished! I'm fed up with the way you do things, God. Your mercy perverts your justice. And some things ought not to be forgiven. People must be held to account for their evil actions. How can God not do justice?

[30] Jonah sits in a little booth that he has constructed and God causes a leafy plant to grow over him, providing shade and saving him from a good deal of discomfort. And the plant is to be the source of a final lesson for Jonah. Jonah 4:6-11:

...Jonah was very happy about the plant. But the next day at dawn God provided a worm, which attacked the plant so that it withered. And when the sun rose, God provided a sultry east wind; and the sun beat down on Jonah's head, and he became faint. He begged for death, saying, "I would rather die than live." Then God said to Jonah, "Are you so deeply grieved about the plant?" "Yes," he replied, "so deeply that I want to die."

Then the Lord said, "You cared about the plant, which you did not work for and which you did not grow, which appeared overnight and perished overnight. And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left, and many beasts as well!"

[31] How could Yahweh not be compassionate? For even the most evil of peoples are no less his creation that he has cared for, than precious Israel. And if they will only turn to Him in humility, he'll wipe the slate clean, he'll show compassion and forgive. It is only human to long for the punishment of the wicked. But God longs for their re-formation, their turning.

[32] The date of the book of Jonah really can't be ascertained and you will hear arguments in both directions. Many scholars date it late; others suppose that the story is at least at base an old, old story. Nineveh appears as another Sodom, basically. It's a story that is in keeping with that older Torah tradition in which it's assumed that God punishes non-Israelites or other nations for immorality, but not necessarily for idolatry.

[33] The gentile sailors even, who worship others, are not necessarily punished and in fact, it's said that they revere God and they're reluctant to throw this man overboard. Other nations are not obligated, in the view of this book as in the early traditions of Genesis, to accept monotheism. But they're bound by a certain

basic moral law, maybe the moral law of the Noahide covenant, and it's for this that God has decreed punishment.

[34] So the theme or the basic problem in this short book is the problem of God's justice verses his mercy. And Jonah is a champion of divine justice. He believes that sin should be punished, he's outraged at God's forgiveness. But Jonah learns that a change of heart is enough to obtain mercy, and that the true role of the prophet is perhaps to move people to reformation and turning.

[35] What must have been the reception of this book in the post-exilic period? Again, not knowing exactly when it was written — We can imagine, however, in the manner of a canonical critic, how it might have been perceived by people in the post-exilic period for whom it would have become canonical.

[36] The very idea of a prophet being sent to Nineveh — Nineveh the capital of the hated Assyrian empire, the home of the people who had destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the ten tribes of Israel in 722, dispersing those ten tribes forever, the nation that had then laid siege to Jerusalem and exacted tribute from Judah for many years — this must have been startling. Ultimately then, this book would represent a strand of thought in post-exilic Judah that differed very much from the eschatological fervor that delighted in fantasies of the destruction of Israel's enemies, such as we found in Joel and as would be featured later in Daniel, and in post-biblical apocalyptic literature most notably the Christian book of Revelation.

[37] The book of Jonah reminded Israel that the universal God is desirous of the reformation and the turning of all his creation, human and animal. And proposes that the Israelite prophet is called upon to carry a message of divine forgiveness to other nations, not just judgment. Even those that have humiliated and despised God's chosen. So wittingly or unwittingly, we may never know, the author of this little satire fostered the post-exilic sense of Israel as a light unto the nations. This is an idea that we've already seen in some of the late prophetic writings.

3. Concluding Remarks about the Dynamic and Complex Messages in the Hebrew Bible

- [38] Just a few words of conclusion. The literature of the Hebrew Bible relates the odyssey of Israel from its earliest beginnings in the stories of individual Patriarchs worshiping a Canaanite deity to its maturity as a nation forced by history to look beyond its own horizons and concerns.
- [39] The Israelites were lifted up to become something greater than they could ever have planned. They came to see themselves as God's servants to the world, at the same time that they struggled and argued with their God and criticized themselves for their very human weaknesses and failings.
- [40] From another vantage point, the Bible can be seen also as an anthology that struggles against great odds to sustain a peoples' covenantal relationship with God.
- [41] The contrast between reality and the religious-moral ideal that good prospers and evil is defeated was a distressing and perplexing problem that occupied the biblical writers. The existence of evil, the suffering of the righteous, the defeat of God's chosen, all this seemed basically incompatible with certain fundamental monotheistic intuitions; that God holds supreme power in the universe, that God is essentially good and just, and his providential care extends throughout creation. How can faith in such a God be upheld in the face of evil and suffering?
- [42] Although, all ancient cultures — and modern cultures — struggle with the problem of evil, it had particular poignancy for ancient Israel. In other Ancient Near Eastern literatures, we find doubt about the existence of a moral order, certainly. But only in Israel does the question of evil touch on the very essence of God and the very foundation of religious faith. Paganism posits the existence of primordial evil demons or gods, and thus the existence of evil and suffering does not impugn the good gods themselves.
- [43] Later religious systems that grow out of the Bible will in fact increasingly posit demons or a devil. Second Temple Judaism, later-rabbinic Judaism, and most especially Christianity, will posit some devil to account for evil in the world. Undeserved suffering, outrageous and frustrating as it might be, can then be explained at least by the jealousy or the caprice of the evil angels or gods or the demons or devil, who are indifferent to man's fate. But in biblical religion there is no independent evil principal. And so, undeserved suffering and rampant evil impugn the goodness and justice of God himself.
- [44] Biblical persons have no refuge from evil and suffering other than faith in God's justice. And if that justice is slow in coming, then despair and doubt threaten. For this reason, Israelite theodicy, I think, is charged with great pathos because the stakes are so high. If one loses faith in an essentially moral universe, one loses God. Or at least as we saw in the Book of Job, one loses a God who governs the world according to a clear moral standard.
- [45] But the biblical writers don't approach the problem as philosophers or theologians might. For the philosopher, theodicy, the problem of evil is primarily a logical problem, it's a contradiction. How can a just and good God allow evil and suffering to exist in the world? And like any other logical problem, it's best solved — according to the philosophers and theologians — through the careful construction of a systematic argument.
- [46] This is not the method or the approach of the biblical writers. For them, the problem is not philosophical; it is personal, it is psychological, it is spiritual. The burning question is really this, how can one sustain a commitment to Israel's God in the face of national catastrophe and personal suffering? How can one have the strength to embrace, to trust, to love this God knowing that unpredictable suffering and chaos have struck and may again strike at any moment?
- [47] And various writers from various periods add their voices to Israel's struggle to come to terms with the problem of sustaining faith in the midst of evil and suffering. The Bible's aim is not to solve the philosophical problem of theodicy, so much as it is to enable the relationship with God to survive all shocks, to make life in covenant with God a viable option, despite the evil and the suffering that are experienced by the faithful.
- [48] The Bible doesn't offer one single model of how to cope with this problem. A dynamic relationship with what is perceived to be a living personal God rather than the static God

of the philosophers, is too complex to be captured in a single dimensional theology. Systematic theology could not do justice to the variegated experiences of the nation and of an individual life, and that's not the mode or genre chosen by the biblical writers.

struggling with personal despair and anger or brimming over with joy and faith. Job gives vent to the outrage we feel over unjust suffering, while Ecclesiastes preaches existential pleasures as a solace for the vanity of all human endeavor.

[49] And so various models are presented, not all consistent with one another, but each serving a particular segment of the community coping with a particular challenge at a particular time. Each is an attempt to sustain Israel's relationship with God in the face of challenges to that continued relationship. Biblical writers tell stories and they interpret history in order to illustrate the many ways in which various individuals and the nation as a whole, have managed to make sense of the covenantal relationship with God. There's room for multiple models, multiple images of God and his relationship to Israel. And as modern readers of the Bible, we can only marvel at this unresolved polyphony in this ancient anthology. It's as if the rabbis who were later to canonize this collection saw the truth in the words of Qohelet, that to everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under heaven. And so they included books with very different approaches to the fundamental problems that face the ancient Israelites as Israelites and as human beings.

[52] Ezra and Nehemiah confront the very real problem of assimilation and identity with a call to Israel to close ranks, while Jonah and Ruth remind Jews of the universal providence of their God and the power of repentance. Esther and Daniel provide encouragement of radically different types for Jews under threat of persecution and massacre – one a plea for self-reliance and solidarity, and the other, a promise of divine intervention in an apocalypse.

[50] So after 586 BCE, the Deuteronomist salvaged Yahwism from going the way of other defeated national religions by arguing that Israel had suffered not because God's promises weren't true but because they weren't believed. And this enabled the Israelites to continue faithful to their God, despite the destruction of his sanctuary, his chosen city and his ruler.

[53] Do all these books contradict each other? No more than I contradict myself when I say that today I feel happy, but yesterday I felt anxious. Israel's relationship with God has always been a dynamic and a complex one. To each of these books there was a time and a purpose in the past, and as countless readers of the Bible have discovered over the centuries these books offer continued teaching and inspiration in the shifting moments of every age.

[51] The prophets emphasized the moral and communal aspects of the covenant without which all sacrificial worship was anathema. And so they unwittingly prepared the way for a worship without sacrifice in the Diaspora, and in later Judaism. The Psalms give expression to the deepest emotions of the worshiper

[54] Thank you very much for your attention this semester. Don't forget the review session that will be held here with me next week from 10:30-12:30. And you're early; you get to go home ten minutes early. Thank you.

[55] [end of transcript]

[56] References

[57] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations have been quoted from "Tanakh: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text." Copyright (c) 1985 by The Jewish Publication Society. No part of this text can be reproduced or forwarded without written permission of the publisher.