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Reading Esther for race relations in a multi-ethnic faith community in the American South

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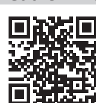
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Racism and racial terrorism are still prevalent in the United States (US). This article relates the experience of a multi-ethnic faith community in the American South that read together the Book of Esther to improve race relations. Based on a contextual Bible study (CBS) methodology, the Scripture was read with cultural and contextual sensitivity and hermeneutical creativity for racial justice, racial reconciliation, and racial unity. By reading Scripture with a diversity of people, individual biases and presuppositions were exposed and challenged, and new, rich insights were revealed and ascertained. Racial justice, reconciliation, and unity take a commitment to the regular study of Scripture and society, engagement in the public domain, and the church.

Contribution: The article intersects the biblical scholarship of Esther with the CBS of the scriptural novella in the American South, and with intercultural hermeneutics, vis-à-vis historically fraught race-relations – the fusion and dynamism of which bolster the local multi-ethnic faith community toward reconciliation and unity.

Keywords: Old Testament; exegesis; hermeneutics; faith communities; reconciliation; unity.

Introduction

I thought I knew the book of Esther very well … and then I read it with people of colour. Previously, I had read the Esther novella dozens of times, took a course on Esther (and Ecclesiastes) in seminary, preached through the book twice in two different pastoral contexts, and had published a few articles on the book of Esther. However, it was when I read Esther for race-relations implications that another dimension of the biblical novella opened up for me – and my fellow readers – and changed my outlook almost altogether.[1] I had never considered the racial dynamics within Esther; I had only seen the ethnic, national, and imperial aspects before reading in a racially diverse group, specifically with a historically oppressed demographic. Although I was a practitioner of contextual Bible reading and situational hermeneutics, I suppose I was, as a transplant to the American South, still learning and becoming enculturated; I am therefore grateful for the partnership I, as a white male of European descent, have had with people of African descent. This article aims to share the rich insights from the (trans)formative experience of reading Scripture together in the setting of a multi-ethnic faith community – for the purpose of examining, confronting, mending, and improving race-relations toward the ultimate goal of racial justice, racial reconciliation, and racial unity.

To provide the proper context, I must register my situatedness and methodology. Our social location is South Carolina, in the orbit and shadow of Clemson University.[2] I was pastoring a predominantly white church and we had entered into intentional partnership with a predominantly black church so that together we could be credible witnesses of Jesus Christ in terms of demonstrating the nature of the multi-ethnic family of God (cf. Rv 7:9).[3] Over many years, this looked like occasional intercultural worship nights, periodic Sunday morning joint-congregational gatherings, together attending local 'Black history month' events, and regularly intermittent midweek gatherings that were geared toward 'Unity in Diversity' conversations: whether engaging in a book club (e.g. Morrison 2019; Tisby 2021), discussing a controversial cultural topic (e.g. Critical Race Theory; Black Lives Matter), watching a poignant documentary (e.g. *13th*; *Unspoken*), or studying a book of the Bible (e.g. 1 Jn; [Eph]). In the Spring of 2022, we studied the

1. For studies of Esther through a racial lens, see for example Bailey (2009:227–250); De-Whyte (2022:1–16); Kuan (2000:161–173); Snyman (2003:438–452).

2. Just after I moved to the Clemson, South Carolina area, there was a hate crime, spawning a racial flare-up and subsequent protest and a week-long sit-in in response (see Thomas 2020:208–211).

3. https://bethebridge.com/christianity-today-interviews-btb-founder-latasha-morrison/

book of Esther.[4] This session was unique as far as it was a small crowd, and I was the only Caucasian joined by several African Americans. This opportunity was special to me, and the particular configuration of participants reminded me of the importance of socially engaged scholars reading with their local communities (ed. West 2007).

This brings me to the methodology, not just the methods for this essay, but also that of the Bible study itself. Building from the works of West (1995; 2014:1–10) and Ekblad (2005; 2018),[5] the Bible study was highly contextual in its social and ecclesial situation. Furthermore, the aim of grappling with the biblical text was for liberation, although not for the immigrant or inmate (Ekblad), or the poor and the marginalised (West), but for people of colour in America, from systematic racism which still hampers full equality and opportunity. Such an approach is encapsulated by CBS (n.d.):

> Contextual Bible Study (CBS) is a methodology that is committed to reading the Bible prophetically for the liberation of communities struggling against the structures that keep them oppressed and marginalized. Toward this end, it is rooted in on-going cycles of action and reflection. It is an interactive process that brings Biblical texts into dialogue with particular communities for the purpose of transformation and change, on both individual and societal levels. It is a methodology that takes texts and contexts seriously – both the texts and ancient contexts of the Bible, and the 'texts' of people's lives today and their contemporary contexts. (n.p.)

In other nomenclature with similar objectives, the aim of *intercultural biblical hermeneutics* '"is primarily to offer insight into the degree to which people are prisoners of dominant reading traditions." By encountering how "the other" reads the same text, through organised intercultural confrontation, readers within a particular cultural context are "extracted" from their dominant reading traditions' (West 2014:7; cf. also Jonker 2015). In our context, each person of the intercultural, multi-ethnic group validated their truth and learned from others. What follows is a modicum of musings from said experience.[6]

Insights into Esther through intercultural biblical hermeneutics or contextual Bible study

Passing and code-switching

The first three chapters of Esther introduce the reader to the Persian Empire, as well as its main characters. The Jewish protagonists are named Mordecai and Esther, whose Hebrew name is Hadassah (Es 2:5–7). Esther and Mordecai are Persian names, resembling, respectively, *Ishtar*, the Babylonian goddess of love, war, sexuality, and fertility, and *Marduk*, the Babylonian high god of the pantheon (Hutzli 2022:191–213). Between this datum and the fact that Mordecai commanded his cousin Esther not to reveal her Jewish identity (Es 2:10), our discussion turned to the interrelated issues of names, *passing*, and code-switching.

Fresh in our minds from a recent book club experience was Jamar Tisby's (2021:124), *How to fight racism*, wherein he states: 'résumés with white-sounding names [*get*] 50 percent more call backs than those with African American-sounding names'. As the facilitator, I asked the (all black) group whether they had a similar experience. I took for granted the truth of the citation, and, as I looked around the circle of participants, I noted that about half of them had 'white-sounding names', whereas the other half had 'African American-sounding names'. The latter constituency immediately registered affirmation, and from the former portion, one person, Katie, shared an experience. She was once asked by another black person upon meeting for the first time, 'What kind of a Black girl name is that?' 'What choice do I have in receiving a name?' she quipped to the group.

This same woman proffered an observation that bordered on a confession. Katie is a graduate of Duke Seminary and an ordained minister of the United Methodist Church. Her longest pastorate was in a predominantly white congregation in Texas. In hindsight and based on reflection of our examination of Esther, she admitted that in the pastorate, there were many times that she toned down her blackness and implicitly and/or subconsciously tried to *pass* as a (not white, but) non-ethnic pastor. Esther, it would seem, also made efforts to conceal her Jewishness and *pass* as Persian.[7] Relatively, I shared how we have all experienced some dominant or white culture people try to *pass* – or more accurately, prove or project – as being *woke*, not-part-of-the-problem, et cetera, with people of colour, which is a futile and counterproductive effort.

One young woman, a graduate student at the local university, shared about code-switching. She remembered, as a young girl, hearing for the first time her mother altering the way she spoke when conversing with a family member, and then suddenly being approached by a white person. This confusion and fascination led her to research, for her Master's thesis, the communication styles of African Americans and how code-switching is a daily occurrence. As a black woman, she knew of alternate and even underground apps and platforms whereby black people can be themselves in speech, to meet, warn, organise, et cetera.[8] As a result, the mediation of one's person and spheres to (circum)navigate was insightful.

4.It was my counterpart in the black church who initiated the specific study of Esther. She had read Lucado (2021) and wanted to have our own constructive conversations and restorative readings in the book of Esther.

5.In addition to this list of publications, there are the personal communications I have had with both gentlemen.

6.As the literary aim is to represent an accurate depiction of the events, a few caveats must be registered. Firstly, I cannot herein add to the academic rigor; although this is expected in academic journals, I was interacting with laity, so I wanted to keep the discussion on a popular level, mostly. Secondly, I cannot subtract from the personal nature or voice of this contribution, although it is a defect in scholarly writings to be too personal. I was nonetheless the facilitator and a participant of the CBS experience, so it is part and parcel of the contribution.

7.For the concept of *passing*, see DiAngelo (2018:xvi); compare also Duran (2006:68): 'In order for all the Jews, including Esther, to survive, Esther had to pass as Persian, just as light-skinned African Americans have sometimes passed as white in order to survive racism'.

8.For a conceptual definition of *code-switching*, see McCluney et al. (2019).

Learned discrimination and racial terrorism

The conflict that spans the biblical novella, it can be argued, is rooted in racial discrimination. Haman is introduced as 'the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews' (Es 3:10, NRSV; see also Es 8:1); and once Haman acquires supreme power as second-in-command (Es 3:1), he could enact his hatred against the Israelites or Jews by legislating a state-sponsored annihilation campaign (Es 3:13; 7:4; 8:11). The animosity between the Amalekites and Israelites stemmed from antiquity (cf. Ex 17:8–16; Dt 25:17–19; 1 Sm 15) and ran along the lines of race and ethnicity, which, continued into the Persian period. Our group teased out the aspects and influences of discrimination and racial terrorism in our conversation.

One participant noted instantly that what is at work in Esther and in the United States is a learned racism. It was contended that a young child does not naturally hate or fear people who are different than them; rather, discrimination and subsequent racism is learned (whether taught or *caught*). This mindset can thence be transmitted generationally, entrenching ethnic relations on a societal level. In some cases, learned discrimination can be subtle or incidental, as when striving to impart truth and realism. Such an example given was the phenomenon of *Driving while Black* (2020). In other cases, discrimination is transferred among individuals directly and explicitly. An example of this is the white supremacist rhetoric.

When invited to draw correlations between Esther and our context regarding state-sponsored racial terrorism, there were ready answers. The obvious example was the institution of slavery; and the contemporary example is the violence of white police officers on black civilians (the murder of George Floyd and many others were still vivid in our memories). Yet, another striking example had particular resonance with the book of Esther: lynching.

In Esther, Haman could not wait for the appointed day of Jewish eradication for Mordecai to die, so he erected an impalement pole, after the Persian method of the public humiliating criminal executions, to kill his nemesis sooner (Es 5). His plan would have worked had it not been for a fortuitous turn of events (Es 6). In the end, Haman was himself impaled upon his 50-cubit/75-foot/23-meter pole (Es 7:9–10; 8:7). Haman's scheme, to reiterate was an extrajudicial killing (for the genocidal decree had become law).

Lynchings are extrajudicial killings that the state allows and implicitly condones without penalty. Often lynch mobs were guerrilla activity, although sometimes, lynch mobs broke people out of jail to execute a person sooner – and more inhumanely. In the United States, throughout the Reconstruction era and into the Modern era, there have been tens of thousands of lynchings of black people by white mobs, mostly in the South but also throughout a large territory of the mainland. The last recorded lynching was in 1947 in nearby Pickins, SC (cf. Willimon 2017; Gravely 2019). Several members from our multi-ethnic faith community (mostly among the white constituency) have made a pilgrimage to Montgomery, Alabama to visit the Equal Justice Initiative's Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice.[9] In both centres, lynching victims are commemorated in compelling ways. The harrowing reality and crushing weight of this was felt by the entire reading group as we made connections and recalled it anew or shared new perspectives and experiences. The ancient execution pole as a lynching tree also sheds evocative light on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (Cone 2011).

Confronting racism: Education, preparation, and activation

When the empire-sponsored ethnic-cleansing edict was published, the populace was bewildered (Es 3:15). Esther, though, seems to be oblivious of the genocidal decree, even though she resides in the palace whence it emanated. When she hears that Mordecai is making a public spectacle of himself by weeping and lamenting in sackcloth and ashes, Esther, rather than inquire about his actions, has clothes sent to him to become presentable again. It is then that Mordecai informs Esther of what has been decreed by Haman with the king's signet ring (Es 4:1–5). This awkward interaction elucidated something important to consider before advocacy is discussed.

Education is part of the preparation that must be done before a cause is activated. Esther becomes educated concerning the source of the problem, instead of focusing on the symptom of the problem. Once intelligently informed on the matter (Es 4:6–9), she set out to prepare for activism. After deciding to accept the risk of life to advocate on behalf of her people, Esther prepares her steps by facilitating a community-wide three-day fast to be held on her behalf (Es 4:10–17). Poignantly, Mordecai challenges Esther to be the catalyst due to her proximity to the king, and he maintains that silence cannot be the alternative (Es 4:14).

In current race relations issues in the United States, these foregoing matters are relevant. My friends of colour consistently lament the white ignorance and want white people to do their homework. 'Do your own research', they often say, when a Caucasian wants a black person to inform them on a racial matter, without considering the taxing, exhausting, or even post-traumatic stress disorder effect a black person experiences by engaging (or refraining to engage in) the question or conversation repeatedly, often with little progress. In addition to education or preparation, the call to not be silent but to (in community, in numbers) engage in activism, is salient. Silence, I have learned in my own research and experience, is a mode of perpetuating racism (DiAngelo 2018:57–58, 148–150; cf. also DiAngelo 2021; Resane 2021:a2661). As DiAngelo (2018), author of *White Fragility*, states:

> [*W*]ithin a white supremacist society, I am rewarded for not interrupting racism and punished in a range of ways – big and small – when I do. I can justify my silence … But my silence is not benign because it protects and maintains the racial hierarchy and my place within it. (p. 58)

9. https://eji.org/ – see also Stevenson (2014).

This is why DiAngelo (2018:9, 128, *et passim*) routinely speaks of 'interrupting racism', just as Esther had to interrupt the natural flow of regal matters, the grinding machinery of empire, for her cause. Likewise, protests, (sit-in) strikes, boycotts, et cetera are visible, physical, and vocal interruptions to society, as were Mordecai's public actions throughout chapters 4–7 of Esther. Thus, the education, preparation (organisation), and activation or activism schema is informative and constructive.

Through two banquets and a twist of events (Es 5–7), Esther's activism is successful. Esther, having spoken truth to power (Es 7:3–6), exposed Haman in his ugly intrigue that does not actually benefit the realm (cf. Es 3:8). Bible scholar Day (2005:128) comments: 'Like the hoods being removed from a Ku Klux Klan lynching mob, Haman's racism is now fully revealed for the world to see his true nature'. *Woke*, the king thence reacts (Es 7:10).

Reparations? Retaliation?

Once the immediate threat of death was annulled, in Esther, a change of power occurred. Mordecai became second-in-command in the place of Haman (see Es 8:1–2a). Not only was the grand vizier's post occupied by Mordecai, though, so also was Haman's estate (perhaps the prime minister's government housing) bequeathed to him (see Es 8:2b). I asked the group if this gesture was reminiscent of reparations, and what we thought about reparations, or the lack thereof, in the United States. This did not actually generate too much conversation; perhaps because reparations are such a large-scale and complicated issue (cf. Kwon & Thompson 2021).

I then asked, in the vein of the countermand of Mordecai – viz. how the Jews could defend themselves against the onslaught of the original genocidal edict (Es 8:11) – and in the spirit of a freewheeling thought-experiment, whether it would somehow be beneficial for black people in America, now or at any earlier stage in the country's history, to be decreed the opportunity to retaliate by way of therapeutic venting, or evening-the-score, so to speak. While the participants thought, I commented on how in South Africa in the 1990s, Afrikaners feared a bloody overthrow by the black/indigenous population; although, through the efforts of Desmond Tutu et al., with the Truth and Reconciliation Project, a peaceable, even gospel-oriented, transition of governance was realised.

One soft-spoken man, close to retirement, contributed at this point. He had previously shared his first racial memory. As a young child, he was sitting at a red light with his mother driving the family car. In a convertible in front of them sat two KKK (Klu Klux Klan) clansmen in full regalia. He viscerally remembers feeling a tremendous fear. This elder in the church responded to my prompt, saying (something like): 'We don't want retaliation; we want an apology – an official, from the White House apology – that slavery, and all its effects, was deliberately enacted and is wrong: "we" [*are*] sorry'. But that has never happened. Concessions were made and unofficial things were hinted at, but not a direct, public, official statement of wrongdoing and remorse. We indeed did that for Japan! It took several decades, but the US officially and formally apologised for its disproportionate bombing. You mentioned South Africa. At least, there, people could go to the courts and give their testimony, speak their truth, state what happened – and it is in government records. But we are still not believed about the experiences we have gone through – and still go through. They are real, and they need to be answered for'. Though the facts of the matter are not precisely represented herein,[10] I was, nonetheless, impacted by his sentiment, and there was much nonverbal accent around the circle too.

Fear and frivolity

As we read together the final few chapters of Esther, our conversation addressed a couple of other issues. My black counterpart was struck by the word *fear* that came up several times:

- Many of the peoples of the country professed to be Jews because the *fear of the Jews* had fallen upon them (Es 8:17b NRSV).
- The Jews gathered […] to lay hands on those who had sought their ruin; and no one could withstand them, because *the fear of them* had fallen upon all peoples. All the officials of the provinces, the satraps and the governors, and the royal officials were supporting the Jews, because *the fear of Mordecai* had fallen upon them. (Es 9:2–3 NRSV).

This is probably a (elusive) metonymy for a fear from the LORD that falls upon enemies in warfare (cf. Dt 2:25; 11:25). Nevertheless, she asked me, as the only white participant: 'Why do you think white people, in general, fear the thought of racial justice, racial reconciliation, and racial unity?' Weighing my answer, I ventured with (something like): These things shouldn't be feared, of course; yet white people's words and actions often do convey fear. It is like you mentioned earlier, when a white guy at work said, 'How far are we going to go with all this equality stuff?' Well, until things are equal! But if equality seems unfair to white or dominant culture, then that betrays how accustomed we are to tipped scales of advantage. It seems that what is feared, by some whites, is that they will no longer be the master class; they probably fear becoming subordinated, disenfranchised, not as privileged in opportunities of wealth and social mobility, for example. In fact, it now occurs to me that many of these same types of white people are also those who spout the rhetoric of freedom at every turn (even, for instance, freedom from wearing masks during a deadly global pandemic); but really, their version of freedom is white hegemony.

We see the same phenomenon in Esther 1. The king of most of the known world was threatened by the defiance of one woman, Queen Vashti, to the extent that he decreed an empire-wide hegemony for the dominant gender.

10. Compare https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/five-times-united-states-officially-apologized-180959254/

Another main issue in the last few chapters of Esther, beyond the legislated battles of Adar which occur, is the establishment of a new Jewish holiday, Purim. Because Purim is beyond the purview of the Torah, which serves as the basis for all other religious Hebrew holidays, there is space dedicated to its particulars (Es 9:18–32) and the tradition of observance has developed over the centuries. In short, Purim is a holiday for feasting and gladness (Es 9:17–22) to commemorate their relief (Es 9:16, 22) and deliverance (Es 4:14; 9:1).

The US was also commemorating a new holiday that celebrated a deliverance, the historic emancipation of enslaved Africans: Juneteenth.[11] President Biden signed the holiday into law in June 2021. Our Esther Bible study took place during March–April 2022; thus, we were coming up on the second federally recognised, annual Juneteenth observance. After drawing out the previously mentioned connections,[12] I asked the group of African Americans what Juneteenth meant to them. The response was largely ambivalent. The most pronounced statement on the subject was made by an older man who had previously shared that his first racial memory was accompanying his dad to a grocery store and having to go to the back door designated for 'negros'. He cogently stated that he hopes Juneteenth does not lose its meaning to commercialisation, consumerism, or colonialisation.

Generational re-education?

Our conversations on Esther concluded by debating whether there can be a legitimate extrapolation from the biblical text concerning generational re-education. My reading partners were convinced that with power comes responsibility. Therefore, did Esther and Mordecai use their positions as queen and second-in-command (Es 10:3), respectively, to stem bigotry and turn the tide of antisemitism or racism? It was lamented among our reading group that while the Germans nowadays soberly teach the truth about Hitler and Naziism in schools (see Neiman 2019), the Americans still have not unlearned the sanitary mythology of slavery, and relearned how racism on societal and systemic levels is a nefarious permutation from the periods of enslavement and reconstruction.

The book of Esther offers little support for this compelling reading, yet there are a few suggestions. We noted the favour of Esther (Es 2:9, 17; 5:2, 8; 7:3; 8:5) and the fear of Mordecai (Es 9:3; cf. also Es 10:2–3) could have been translated toward a progressive, restorative empire-wide agenda. Esther's command to hang Haman's ten slain sons, in addition to the villain, is curious (Es 9:13b–14, 25); perhaps it is a way to curse the next generation of oppression, ethnic cleansing, and other such evils (Dt 21:22–23). A more overt affirmation of the sentiment I mentioned is found in the Greek additions to Esther, particularly Esther 16:1–24. Although we did not read it or digress to the Septuagint version of Esther, I appreciated the insight of a generational re-education and wanted to offer my support for it.

Overall, I was heartened that our reading group wanted to appropriate the gleanings of the book of Esther into their lives and our societal context.

11. See Byas (2021:36–39). For his speech, 'What to the slave is the Fourth of July'?, See Douglass (1855); see also Lecrae's tweet on 04 July 2016 (https://x.com/lecrae/status/750012773212401665).

12. May I say, tongue-in-cheek, that the ancient Persian couriers (Es 3:13, 15; 8:10, 14) did a much better job than their modern US counterparts. Whereas the couriers in Esther canvased the largest empire to date with the genocidal edict and its countermand, the Emancipation Declaration, although signed in 1863 by Abraham Lincoln, was not known to faraway Galveston, Texas, until two years later 19 June 1985.

Conclusion

It has been over 60 years since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was ratified in the US. Progress has been made in terms of racial justice, equality, and opportunity; yet there is still much, much more progress to be realised. In various ecclesial contexts in the American South (and elsewhere), people of faith are intentionally living and labouring together toward racial justice, racial reconciliation, and racial unity – a biblical imperative (Williams 2021) – to contravene prejudice, racism, and hatred (cf. King 1981). I have offered herein a profitable experience of a CBS in the book of Esther, utilising intercultural biblical hermeneutics to illustrate and exemplify – and hopefully inspire – people of faith of various ethnicities and races to read Scripture together, to learn from one another, and as they exegete the Bible and their local communities, to catalyse one's agency of restoration and equity in terms of race relations.[13]

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CRediT authorship contribution

Joshua J. Spoelstra: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. The author confirms that this work is entirely their own, has reviewed the article, approved the final version for submission and publication, and takes full responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

13. The book of Esther has lately been receiving analytical attention by scholars of colour or minority scholars – which is a much-needed voice and long-overdue representation to the academic conversation (see, inter alia, Chan 2021:51–71; Cho 2021:663–682; Davidson 2009:280–287; Hatzaw 2021:1–34; Mapfeka 2019; Mosala 2006:134–141; Nadar 2002:113–130; Ruiz-Ortiz 2017; Song 2010:56–69).

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Data availability

The author confirms that the data supporting this study and its findings are available within the article and its listed references.

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