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Esther and The Mexican

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Abstract

*The Mexican* can serve as a good heuristic example of the theology that one finds in the Book of Esther. It is a theology of divine fate. God is in total and somewhat paradoxical control of human events. Individuals enjoy some measure of free will, and God guides them inexorably toward the ultimate goal that is redemptive in nature. The fact that various characters in both works act willingly without fully understanding their role in the larger scheme of things reflects the difficulty of teaching the theological principle upon which the Book of Esther is based. The movie does present a clear picture of the difficulty. Diverse and somewhat contradictory events may appear to have no connection. Yet somehow all events are connected and at the time of redemption, all connections become clear to all. In this sense it is quite surprising to find *The Mexican* and the Book of Esther supporting the same notion of redemption.

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At a first glance, The Hebrew Bible, offers a simple explanation of the relationship between God and human events, i.e., history.\(^1\) God, as the creative power behind the creation of the world, is in complete control of all events, including human thoughts (Proverbs 19:21) and emotions (Exodus 7:3). God intervenes directly in history and redeems His people enslaved in Egypt. His direct intervention is not limited to the performance of miracles, that is the changing of the order of nature (parting the Sea of Reeds). He continues to be in control throughout the Israelite wandering in the desert. This form of divine intervention can be termed direct revealed intervention.

Although God does have complete control over human thought, feelings and actions, it is understood by the Deuteronomistic theology, that human beings have free will to choose "the blessing" or "the curse".\(^2\) Hence, God does not allow his omnipotence to interfere with human free will.

In other biblical books, particularly Esther, this model is wholly missing. The Book of Esther is about the planned "final solution" of the Jewish question within the Persian Empire and the Jewish Queen Esther.\(^3\) It is the story of one man's plot to kill the Jews of the Persian Empire and how his plan was foiled. The story opens with a scene that explains why King Ahasuerus searched for a queen. His queen, Vashti, had refused to appear before his guests during a festive feast, and therefore she was removed as queen. The King ordered his servants to round up all
of the beautiful virgins so that he might choose the most beautiful to be his new queen. Hence Esther was brought to the palace and the King found her to be to his liking. He decided to make her his queen.

The story then shifts to the other important character of the story: Haman. The King favored Haman over any other minister and elevated him to the highest post in the court. All of the courtesans showed their respect to Haman; however, when Haman exited the gates of the palace, he found that one individual, Mordechai (Esther's cousin), would not bow down and show him his due honor. Haman decided to punish not only Mordechai for his insolence but all of the Jewish residents of the Persian Empire.

Haman is able to get the King's support for his plan to get rid of the Jews in the Empire. Haman, believing that one needed fate on one's side, decides to select a date to begin the annihilation by a lot (Pur), leaving the date to be determined by fate. Upon hearing the news, Mordechai informed Esther the fate of the Jews a la Haman. There are several twists and turns in the story and in the end, the decree is repealed and Haman and his own family are punished with the ultimate penalty.

Throughout the text, God is not mentioned even once. There are prayers and fasts but no mention of God's actions. It is quite difficult to accept that the events occurring in the text are not under the direct control of God. It is not simply a
coincidence that Esther is selected as the queen. At least one of the characters in
the text seems to know that the story itself is under God's control: "Do not imagine
Esther that because you are in the royal palace, you alone of all Jews will escape.
If you remain silent at such a time as this, relief and deliverance for the Jews will
appear from another quarter; but you and your father's family will perish. And who
knows whether it is not for a time like this that you have become queen?" (4:13-14)

The relationship between God and human events is somewhat different in
The Book of Esther from the relationship one finds, for example, in the Book of
Exodus. In Esther, God's direct intervention is not revealed but concealed, yet
Mordechai and later Esther (as well as the readers of The Book of Esther) are quite
sure of God's working behind the scene to redeem the Jewish people from
annihilation.

The model of God's concealed intervention is a dominant theme in the
recently released film, The Mexican. Starring Brad Pitt, Julia Roberts, and James
Gandolfini, The Mexican, is a story about Jerry Welbach, played by Brad Pitt, a
clueless low-level mobster who is given two ultimatums, one by his Mob superiors,
particularly by Nilan, played by Bob Balaban, and another by his girlfriend
Samantha, played by Julia Roberts. Nilan's ultimatum is as follows: "find a gun,
known as 'the Mexican,' or die." Samantha's ultimatum is: "come with me to Las
Vegas or we are through!" Jerry, somewhat torn between the choices given, chooses
life over death, hoping that as long as he is alive, he may be able to repair his dysfunctional relationship with Samantha.

Jerry travels to Mexico to find the gun; however, there are more twists in this plot than there are twists in a pretzel. Throughout the movie, one senses that all the many random events are guided by some higher meaning, something more than just the greed of various people for an expensive gun. One of the recurring motifs in the movie is the story of the origin of the Mexican (the gun). It was made by a gunsmith as a wedding gift from him to a nobleman's son in hopes that the nobleman would take the gunsmith's daughter as the bride. In typical Shakespearian style, the daughter is in love with no other than the gunsmith's assistant. Several characters in the movie have different traditions regarding the gun, but it appears that only Margolis' (played by Gene Hackman) version has the accurate one.

Margolis, who is the mob boss, released from prison, is the person who sent Jerry to find the gun. It is he, like Mordechai in The Book of Esther, who is sure that there is a connection between random events that appear (only mistakenly) to be meaningless. Margolis sent Jerry to retrieve the gun not because he is greedy, but because he would like to return the gun to its owner. The owner wants the gun so that the soul entrapped in the gun can be redeemed and return to the angels. Hence the basic story, if one ignores the subplot of dysfunctional relationships (both
Jerry and Samantha and Leroy, played by Gandolfini) is one of redemption and the mechanics of redemption.

Redemption, following Esther's model, is not achieved through careful planning by human beings (which was realized by Margolis in prison). Redemption is accomplished through the concealed and hidden direction of God or fate. Jerry, unbeknownst to him, is the instrument of the redemption in a similar way that the character Esther was the instrument of the redemption of her people. Both were thrust into a position for which they were ill prepared. Jerry was supposed to go to a particular Mexican town, locate a bar, and bring Margolis' grandson back to Los Angeles. The grandson is killed by a bullet fired randomly into the air during a celebration. The car in which Jerry hides the gun is stolen a few seconds later. Jerry appears to be the wrong person for any job, let alone a job that requires stealth, quick thinking and most importantly, precision. Yet it is this unlikely character that is the instrument of redemption. Nonetheless, Jerry has one quality that is the prerequisite: a pure heart or even a naïveté. Jerry seems to be an honest gangster. He has to argue with a car thief, explaining his reasons for shooting him in the foot. He cannot act ruthlessly even when there is a need or an opportunity to do so.

The Mexican, as a story, shares the theology of the Book of Esther. It is a theology that views human events as controlled from above yet with some room left for a measure of free will. It is not a strict determinism, which would rule out
any responsibility by the various characters for their actions, but a kind of fate. The idea of fate accepts that there is a higher purpose for all events in life. As Margolis states, there is a reason why he sent Jerry to do the job. Margolis and Jerry met when a traffic light malfunctioned and Jerry ran a red light (opening scene of the movie). When the police arrived on the scene, they found a person bound in Margolis' car and so arrested Margolis. Because Jerry was the occasion of the accident, the arrival of the police, of Margolis' arrest, and of his being sent to prison, Jerry has to work for Margolis as a payment for the arrest.

It should be noted that Margolis is a very interesting name for a character; and to anyone who knows Hebrew it is a familiar word. Margolis is the northern European pronunciation of the Hebrew word Margalit - pearl. Moreover, there is a famous Talmudic statement, which seem to apply to the character Margolis: "a mouth which produces pearls ... (margaliyyot)." (Kiddushin 39b) This is applied to those who speak words of wisdom or speak beautifully. And Margolis is the one that ties all of the seemingly random events into a meaningful whole thereby fulfilling the Talmudic reference to his name.

The role of fate -- as opposed to the Deuteronomistic theology of free will - is quite evident in both the Book of Esther and The Mexican. The role of fate, as a theological doctrine, was a central tenet of Pharisaic (and later Rabbinic) beliefs. To quote Josephus, "Now for the Pharisees, they say that some actions, but not all,
are the work of fate, and some of them are in our own power, and that they are liable to fate, but not caused by fate."\(^6\) In another telling passage, he writes, "The Pharisees are those who are esteemed most skillful in the exact explication of their laws ... These ascribe all to fate, and to God, and yet allow that to do what is right or the contrary, is principally in the power of men although fate does cooperate in every action."\(^7\) In both Esther and *The Mexican*, the characters, such as Haman, or Nilan (wanting the gun for himself so he could sell it) exercise their free will, yet fate allows for the story to develop according to strict guidelines. This type of theology is illustrated by the famous teaching of Rabbi Akiba, "Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is given."\(^8\)

There are some striking similarities between *The Book of Esther* and *The Mexican*. Esther and Jerry both have a certain naïveté which appears to be necessary for the task of redemption. Both Esther and Jerry make an attempt at hiding their identity and blend in to their surroundings. Esther uses a Persian name instead of her Hebrew name Hadassah while Jerry wants to rent a car that appears to be more "ethnic."\(^9\) Mordechai and Margolis may not have complete knowledge as to the outcome of events but understand that there is a guiding principle to all human events in the story. Both Esther and Jerry perform their fateful duty while fearing death. In both cases, someone wishes to kill them; Haman wishes to kill Esther and Mordechai while Nilan wishes to kill Jerry and possibly Margolis.
Furthermore, the characters of Haman and Nilan share some key features. For example, both plot against their patrons. It is quite obvious that Nilan is plotting against Margolis, but it is not so clear that Haman is plotting against Ahasuerus. However, as Esther explains to the King what Haman plans to do, she states, "For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, slain, and exterminated. If it had been a matter of selling us, men and women alike into slavery, I should have kept silence; for then our plight would not have been such as to injure the king's interests." And the King answers, "Who is he, and where is he? Who has dared to do such a thing?"(7:4-6). Haman acted and conspired against the interests of the king in a similar manner that Nilan plotted against Margolis.

In the Book of Esther, Haman was charged with violating the sanctity of the king's harem (7:8-10) in apparently attempting to rape Esther. Haman is hung on the same gallows he had prepared for hanging Mordechai for this violation. In The Mexican, Nilan violated the sanctity of Samantha's dysfunctional relationship with Jerry by threatening to shoot Jerry and by offering him a job that would offer "sex and travel." Nilan is shot by Samantha with the same gun that was to be sought in that job.

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2 For example, Deut. 12:26-29: "See, this day I offer you the choice of a blessing or a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I give you this day; the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn from the way that I command you this day…” (Oxford Study Bible, p.194) Also see, Deut. 30:15-20: "Today I offer you the choice of life and good, or death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I give you this day, by loving the Lord your God conforming to his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes, and laws, then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land which you are about to enter to occupy. But if in your heart you turn away and do not listen, and you are led astray to worship other gods and serve them, I tell you here and now that you will perish, and not enjoy long life in the land which you are to enter and occupy after crossing the Jordan river… I offer you the choice of life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life and you and your descendents will live.” (*Oxford Study Bible*, p.213)

3 See Esther 3:8-10 for Haman's justification of killing the Jews of the Persian Empire: "Dispersed in scattered groups among the peoples throughout the province is a certain people whose laws are different from those of every other people. They do not observe the king's laws and it does not befit your majesty to tolerate them. If it pleases your majesty, let an order be drawn up for their destruction…” (*Oxford Study Bible*, p. 504)

4 Esther 3:7. The date which is chosen by lot is the thirteenth of Adar, but the decree was issued on the thirteenth of Nisan, a day before Passover, see Esther 3:12.
For example, Deut. 11:26-29.


8 Ethics of Fathers, Chap. 3:13.