

INTRODUCTION

The biblical book of Esther records an account of Jewish resistance to attempted genocide in the setting of the Persian Empire. According to the text, Jews were targeted for annihilation simply because of their Jewish identity. However, the story also reports that they were allowed to defend themselves against anyone who sought to kill them. Particular features included in the original Hebrew and two subsequent Greek versions reveal much about ancient anti-Judaism, as well as the anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism that was yet to come. In the context of attempted genocide, the message of Esther addresses a timeless and universal issue of justice: that humans have the right and responsibility to defend themselves against those who intend to murder. The combination of this message with an exploration of what three versions of Esther reveal about anti-Judaism makes this book profoundly relevant to the contemporary issue of the contested legitimacy of the State of Israel in relation to the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict.

Israel is a tiny state in the midst of twenty-two vast Arab and Muslim nations, whose populations are comprised of people groups that have more than a millennia-long history of internecine warfare. Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, these nations have finally found something they can agree on: the shared belief that the Jewish State needs to be wiped off the map.¹ And yet, if one

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1. In 1948, five Arab armies – Egypt, Syria, Transjordan, Lebanon, and Iraq – invaded Israel for the purpose of destroying the fledgling state. Azzam Pasha, Secretary General of the Arab League, made their intentions quite clear: “It will be a war of annihilation. It will be a momentous massacre in history that will be talked about like the massacres of the Mongols or the Crusades.” In 1963, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO)

were to accept the perspective of the vast majority of the international media, as well as the belief of significant portions of the modern Church, one would erroneously conclude that the current violence and unrest in the Middle East is due to the existence of Israel and its efforts to defend itself against those who seek its destruction.

Indeed, in the decades since the Holocaust, the very existence of the State of Israel has become the new “Jewish question” troubling the world.¹ Prior to the Holocaust, discussion of the “Jewish question” was most often cloaked in theological garb, and the anti-Semitism that enabled the Holocaust was fed, in part, by an anti-Judaism perpetuated by the Church.² After the

was formed, and with it, the Palestine National Charter, which called for Israel’s destruction. On May 27, 1967, former President Nasser of Egypt declared, “Our basic objective will be the destruction of Israel. The Arab people want to fight.” In June 1967, the armies of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon launched joint offensives against Israel, but were defeated in just six days. Another failed attempt on the part of the Arab nations to destroy Israel occurred in 1973 in what is known as the Yom Kippur War. Since 1973, Palestinians have carried out multiple terror attacks and perpetrated intifadas against Israeli citizens. The first intifada lasted from 1987-1993, and the second from 2000-2005. The fact that the Arab Palestinians still intend to destroy the Jewish State is demonstrated by statements contained in the current Palestinian Liberation Organization’s Charter, Fatah’s Constitution, and Hamas’ Charter. For example, Article 15 of the PLO’s Charter mentions the need to “repulse the Zionist, imperialist invasion from the great Arab homeland.” Article 9 of Fatah’s Constitution states that liberating Palestine is a “religious and human obligation.” And the Hamas Charter begins with an introduction that calls on Allah for help in its jihad “for the purpose of liberating Palestine.”

1. Robert S. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (New York: Random House, 2010), 62.
2. The terms “anti-Semitism” and “anti-Judaism” will be defined in more detail in Chapter Five. However, at this point, “anti-Judaism” can be defined as referring specifically to the opposition to, and persecution of, Jews based on their religion, or the denial of the right of Jews to exist in terms of their own self-understanding. “Anti-Semitism” can be defined as opposition to Jews on the basis of ethnicity, which results from and includes delegitimizing, demonizing, and dehumanizing Jews as a people group. However, in spite of the fact that anti-Judaism is defined in religious terms and anti-Semitism in terms of race, there is essentially no difference between the two on the practical level. An underlying contempt towards Jews is the foundation for both, and opposition to Judaism almost always, if not always, results in opposition to Jews.

Holocaust, much of the Church world seemed to recognize the error of its ways and, in some cases, adopted theoretical positions in opposition to anti-Semitism. However, many of these same members of Christendom are now opposing the existence of the State of Israel and/or the efforts it takes to defend itself against attempted annihilation. As I will demonstrate, this stance is nothing more than a fresh manifestation of anti-Judaism, because it is a stand in opposition to one of the essential identifying features of Judaism – the importance of the Land of Israel to the Jewish people.

Robert Wistrich classifies this relatively new phenomenon as “anti-Zionism,” which he identifies as the “offspring and heir” of historical anti-Semitism.¹ Anti-Zionism, or anti-Israel sentiment, has developed in response to the fulfillment of the Jewish people’s two-millennia-old dream to return to their ancient homeland. It is the “offspring” of historical anti-Judaism/Semitism because people today justify their anti-Israel sentiments as an appropriate response to actions taken by the government and defense forces of the Jewish State, just as historically people justified their anti-Semitism as an appropriate response to the defining characteristics of Jews or Judaism. To an alarming degree, “critics of Israel and Zionism tend to attribute to them the negative qualities which antisemites were wont to attribute to the Jews in general.”² In other words, stereotypes and “reviling accusations” against Israel are being employed in “a covert anti-Semitic approach similar to that which claims that the evil quality of the Jews is immutable and is, as it were, a transhistorical factor.”³ As a result of this approach, Israel – the collective Jew – has its right to exist delegitimized, its actions to defend itself against enemies intent on its destruction demonized, and its people dehumanized.

It is indeed sobering that in the last few decades, under the guise of anti-Zionism, substantial parts of the organized Church have succumbed once again to the millennia-old practice of delegitimizing, demonizing, and dehumanizing Jews. However, what is most alarming is that in recent years, those who identify

1. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession*, 62.

2. Yehoshafat Harkabi, “On Arab Antisemitism Once More,” in *Antisemitism Through the Ages* (ed. Shmuel Almog; Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1988), 227-39.

3. *ibid.*, 231.

as Evangelicals – historically the members of Christendom most supportive of Israel – have been targeted with a false pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel narrative specifically designed to turn traditional supporters of Israel away from that support for the purpose of garnering it for Palestinian Christians instead. While the Palestinian Christians’ need for support is no doubt genuine, the means being implemented for the sake of this end are disingenuous and blatantly anti-Jewish.

This book has been written in response to this relatively new development within the Evangelical part of the Church in the hope of providing that particular audience with helpful material with which to counter the deceptive narrative being thrust at it. More specifically, this work has been composed for the purpose of exposing the theological and historical errors that form the foundation of the anti-Jewish/Israel narrative Palestinian Christians are promoting with the help of prominent Evangelical leaders in the United States. This volume draws on previous academic work that contributed to the author’s PhD dissertation on the story of Esther and anti-Semitism, and research for articles posted on the website of the Committee for Accuracy in Middle East Reporting in America. As a result, extensive footnotes are provided for readers who want to pursue particular topics in more depth. This book is unique in that it uses an academic approach to demonstrate the relationship of historic theology to current events concerning Israel for the purpose of encouraging the Church in general, and Evangelicals in particular, to maintain their position of support for Israel’s right to exist and defend itself against those who seek its destruction.

Because the survival of the Jewish people has been threatened by successive empires since before the time of Esther, and because the Hebrew and Greek versions reveal so much about historic anti-Judaism, the book of Esther, with its account of Jewish resistance to attempted genocide, is particularly germane to current events. Indeed, the story of Esther is “surprisingly prophetic about the anti-Judaism that would later come,”¹ and its timeless message of justice has much to say in relation to Israel’s right to exist, and to anti-Zionism as a new form of anti-Judaism. Therefore, the majority of this volume is devoted to discussions

1. Linda M. Day, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries: Esther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 75.

of the message of the Hebrew text, the reality of the danger of annihilation revealed by all three versions, and the unbroken history of anti-Judaism/Semitism from the ancient world to the present, as revealed through the history of interpretation of Esther's story.

In order to establish the relevance of the book of Esther to current events in relation to the contested legitimacy of Israel, one chapter will be devoted to each of the three versions. The first chapter will establish the intent of the author of Hebrew Esther by demonstrating that the account of an attempted genocide of the Jews is purposefully set in a particular historical context within the Persian Period. The historical setting is verifiable through analyses of semantic features and Persian elements in the story, as well as through the establishment of the date of composition of the text. By providing multiple accurate details throughout the account, the author validates the message the audience was intended to hear. Not only was there an attempt to annihilate Jews in a particular time and place, but, when given the means to do so, Jews were able to defend themselves successfully. The identification of this message is a prerequisite for appreciating the significance of later interpretations of the story, and is essential for the purpose of answering the question of whether Esther tells a story of Jewish aggression or one of Jewish resistance. Because the debate over the issue of aggression versus resistance among Esther scholars is almost indistinguishable from ongoing controversy over military actions taken by Israel, the answer to this question is quite applicable to the contested legitimacy of the Jewish State.

Previous statements have already informed the reader that three versions of Esther were written in antiquity. These statements have also inferred that the Hebrew version predates two subsequent Greek renderings, which are known to scholars as Old Greek (OG) Esther – the version preserved in the Septuagint – and Alpha Text (AT) Esther. Chapters Two and Three will focus on OG and AT Esther respectively because they represent the earliest interpretations of the account preserved in the Hebrew version. But, before proceeding to Chapter Two, there will be an Excursus that demonstrates the textual relationships of the three versions of Esther for the purpose of establishing the primacy of Hebrew Esther. It is provided for readers who are interested in the technical work that determined the correlation of the three

versions. However, it is not necessary to digest the information provided in order to benefit from the rest of the book, and so readers who are not interested in this material can freely go on to Chapter Two.

Chapter Two will answer the questions of when and why the first Greek version of Esther – OG Esther – was written, and Chapter Three will answer the same questions concerning the second Greek version, AT Esther. These questions will be answered by determining the historical setting of the composition of the texts, and by identifying the intent of their authors. The determination of historical settings will answer the question of when the texts were written, and the identification of the intent of the authors will answer the question of why they were written. The establishment of the context and purpose behind the composition of OG Esther will reveal the reason so many changes and additions were made to the Hebrew version, and the establishment of the same behind the composition of AT Esther will clarify why additional changes were made to the Old Greek. These analyses will provide essential context for the literary comparisons of Greek and Hebrew Esther in Chapter Four.

The fourth chapter will provide an overview of the use of both Greek texts since the time of their composition. A knowledge of *which* version of the story was being read *when*, *where* and *by whom* is foundational for comprehending how historic understandings of Esther have contributed to anti-Jewish interpretations of the story. Following this survey, literary comparisons of pertinent elements in the Old Greek version with those in the Hebrew will demonstrate that the changes made by the author of OG Esther are the primary source of traditional interpretations and present-day beliefs concerning Jews. Because this rendering of the story is included in the Septuagint, which is still read by significant parts of the Church, interpretations based on OG Esther continue to contribute to a negative perception of Jews that has much in common with the beliefs that feed current Christian anti-Zionism.

Finally, Chapter Five will examine the relationship between historic anti-Judaism and current anti-Zionism by summarizing the development of Christian anti-Judaism, as demonstrated through replacement theology, and the role that erroneous Christian doctrine has played in historic anti-Semitism, even to the point of fueling and justifying the Holocaust. Significant features of Christian anti-Judaism will be identified for the purpose of

illustrating how anti-Jewish theology defines Christian identity. Recent statements and activities of certain church leaders in the United States who are promoting a pro-Palestinian, anti-Israel narrative will then be analyzed in order to reveal the doctrine that is at the heart of current Christian anti-Zionism. In short, the same erroneous theology and anti-Jewish features that have defined Christian identity historically appear prominently in the theology of Palestinian Christians and a growing number of Evangelicals. This anti-Jewish theology not only defines their identity, but justifies their anti-Zionist crusade as well.

This work is submitted to the reader in the hope that perspective gained from this study will result in an understanding of the relevance of the message of Esther to the controversy over the contested legitimacy of the State of Israel and the role that anti-Judaism plays in that debate. It is also offered in the hope that knowledge of the theological and historical errors at the root of the anti-Jewish/Israel narrative being promoted by Palestinian Christians will encourage Evangelicals to maintain their position of support for Israel's right to exist and defend itself against those who seek its annihilation.