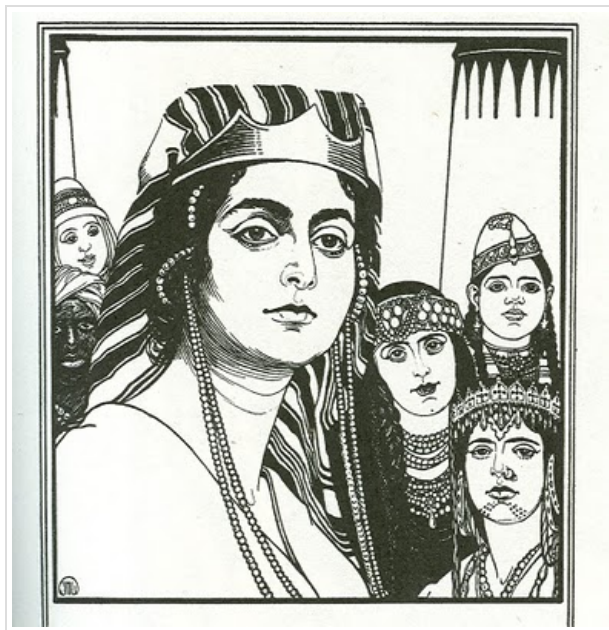


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W E D N E S D A Y , F E B R U A R Y

Esther: The Myth Behind the Legend



[Esther in the herem of the king, by E.M. Lillien]

Shortly Jews everywhere will be celebrating the farcical, ferocious festival of Purim.

Built entirely around that acute and absurdist meditation on antisemitism, the Book of Esther, we Jews have serious fun, ridiculing authority, laughing at a sacred text, hiding our identity behind costumes and masks, even as we reveal another side of ourselves through our riotous behavior and the very personas we choose to disguise ourselves.

Scholars have long been aware that the author of Esther did some pointed borrowing from mythology in telling his story. Esther and Mordecai, the "Persian" names of the Jewish heroine and hero, are seemingly derived from the Ancient Near Eastern deities, Ishtar and Marduk (alternatively, in the case of Mordecai, the Sages think it may be derived from *mor dror*, "dripping myrrh" [*Megillah* 10b], see below for how that factors in).

But there is more. Esther's Hebrew name is *Hadassah*, "myrtle," a tree used medicinally in the ancient world for its contraceptive effect, offering a possible parallel to Mordecai's name, which the Rabbis connected to myrrh, another popular contraceptive substance.

In fact, the Book of Esther reminds the mythologically minded of the

A B O U T M E



G E O F F R E Y D E N N I S
 T E X A S , U N I T E D
 S T A T E S

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Congregation Kol Ami and teaches Kabbalah and Rabbinic Literature in the Jewish Studies Program at the University of North Texas. He is the author of *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic, and Mysticism*, a Runner Up for the 2007 National Book Award, and recipient of an Honorable Mention for the 2007 Jewish Library Council Book Award. He has written numerous articles. The most recent, "A Song of Desire: Creation and the Yearnings of Israel's God" appears in *Parabola Magazine* (Fall 2010)

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myth of Myrrha, the woman miserably married off in an incestuous-rape relationship to her father the king, where she suffers drunken sexual assaults until the gods take pity on her, transubstantiating her into the myrrh tree. The tree's oil, which drips from the branches like tears, was also a prime contraceptive substance (Notice the six-month treatment of the virgins with myrrh prior to their night with the king in Esther 2:12).

Joseph Prouser points out parallels between the myth and the book of Esther:

- 1) Incest - What was Esther and Mordecai's relationship? The Rabbis suspected it was more than "Uncle" and "ward" (B.T. *Megillah* 13a-13b)
- 2) Transgressive marriage - in Esther, both she and the king are forbidden to each other by both Jewish law and Persian royal taboos.
- 3) A drunkard king (Esther 1:10)
- 4) Rape (Esther 7:8)
- 5) Death and salvation through a tree (Esther 7:9-10)[translated as "stake," or "gallow," in Hebrew execution device is consistently called an *eitz*, "tree," in the four places it is mentioned].[1]

All of which suggests that the story of Esther may have as much basis in myth, the deliberate Judaic reworking of pagan mythology, as it does in any historical event.

Zal g'mor: To learn more, read the Encyclopedia of Jewish Myth, Magic, and Mysticism:<http://www.amazon.com/Encyclopedia-Jewish-Myth-Magic-Mysticism/dp/0738709050>

1. Prouser, Joseph, "As the Practice of Women," *Conservative Judaism*, Winter 2001.

P O S T E D B Y G O D F R A E M Y D E N N I S A T

4 C O M M E N T S :

 Suecae Sounds said...

I haven't heard the idea of likeness to Ishtar and Marduk. But maybe it makes sense. :)

1 : 3 2 A M

 Anonymous said...

Nice post and this post helped me alot in my college assignement. Say thank you you on your information.

1 2 : 1 9 P M

 Anonymous said...

Since Passover is almost here, I was wondering about the occult aspects of Miriam, or the exact practice of magic in the Pharaoh's court. The snake staffs and the Nechushtan are very interesting, and I would like to know how they were done by either party.

7 : 1 1 P M


 Anonymous said...

Sorry for my bad english. Thank you so much for your good post.
Your post helped me in my college assignment, If you can provide
me more details please email me.

3 : 0 5 A M

P O S T A C O M M E N T

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