



CHAPTER 4

Esther as a Courageous Follower

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the role of Esther as an active, courageous follower versus the perceived passivity and negative connotation of followership. The roles of leadership and followership are intrinsically intertwined and without followers, there can be no leaders; still there is a stigma associated with being a follower (Hollander, 1992). Most papers (Adeney, 1987; Akinyele, 2009; Friedman & Friedman, 2012; Olusola, 2016) written on Esther approach from a leadership standpoint, this is a counterview examining Esther as a courageous follower.

One of the most common definitions of leadership is from Yukl (2013): the ability of a leader to influence followers to achieve an organization, vision, mission, and goals. Courageous followership requires a dynamic relationship between a leader and a follower that requires the follower to

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have an active role and not simply be submissive to achieve the leaders objective (Chaleff, 2009). Collinson (2006) argues that leadership and followership are positions and that at times a person is a leader, but within the same organizations under different conditions, they are a follower. Based on these definitions the story of Esther will be examined using exegetical methods and building on previous literature.

In the book of Esther, she pleads for the lives of the Jews to King Ahasuerus, this is often viewed a form of leadership, but this proposal is to instead explore Queen Esther as a courageous follower. This research will examine King Ahasuerus as an all-powerful leader with the right of life and death over the Jewish people and Queen Esther as follower in a culture that did not empower women and specifically as a Jewish woman using narrative analysis and socio-rhetorical criticism (Osborne, 2017; Robbins, 1996).

The purpose of this paper is not to demote the role of Esther from a leader to a follower, but instead to elevate the role of followership and promote the value of positive followership traits. This proposal intends to explore how a courageous follower can use moral actions to challenge a leader and achieve successful results. This research effort does not imply in any way that women cannot be leaders or that the Bible does not support women as leaders. At times it takes more bravery to be a follower, than a leader (Chaleff, 2009; Ricketson, 2008).

Definition of Terms

Courageous follower—A follower with courage, power, integrity, responsibility, and sense of service (Chaleff, 2009).

Servant Leader—A leader who attends to the needs of their followers and empowers followers instead of using power to dominate (Greenleaf, 1998).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is organized by first discussing the concepts of courageous followership and the importance of followership. Next, literature on the book of Esther is reviewed.

Courageous Followership

Followership is essential to leadership and organizations are unable to function without followers (Collinson, 2006). Chaleff (2009) explains that the model between leaders and followers needs to be more dynamic, not simply assuming that followers are weak and submissive. Leadership and followership cannot be viewed as two separate entities, but instead leadership and followership need to be viewed as intertwined and overlapping (Collinson, 2006). The leader and follower relationship is not static and both leaders and followers will react differently and display different traits in each unique dyad (Collinson, 2006).

Leaders in many organizations are viewed as the decision makers and followers are viewed as “second-fiddle” (Chaleff, 2009). Second doesn’t have to be bad though, and followers are in a position to support and empower the leader; to be influencers and shapers (Chaleff, 2009). Chaleff (2009) argues that stereotypes of leadership as good and followership as bad needs to be destroyed; leadership and followership are a relationship. Agho (2009) found that both effective followers and effective leaders were viewed as being able to influence work performance, building cohesive work units, producing quality work, and able to impact the satisfaction and morale of the environment. Agho (2009) argues that followership is under studied for four reasons: negative connotation of followership, traditional view of followers as passive, assumption that people instinctively know how to follow, and lack of scholarly research that captures effective and ineffective followership skills (Agho, 2009).

Courageous followership is not about being right or wrong, but the courage to be different and the willingness to share and explore unique perspectives (Chaleff, 2009). There are five dimensions that were developed by Chaleff (2009): the courage to be responsible, the courage to serve, the courage to transform, the courage to challenge, and the courage to take moral action. A key to developing courageous followership is communications and the interpersonal relationship developed between a leader and a follower (Chaleff, 2009).

Esther

The book of Esther in the Old Testament is part of the Jewish Bible, the Tanakh, which is composed of three sections (Moore, 2008). The first section of the Tanakh is the Torah, also called the law, the second section

is the *Nevi'im*, often called the Book of Prophets, and the third section is the *Ketuvim*, also called the writings (Moore, 2008). The story of Esther is located in the third section and is considered an important book of understanding Jewish persecution through the ages (Moore, 2008).

Esther is a rare book in that it also focuses on a Jewish woman in a very unique role during the time of the Persian Empire (Moore, 2008). Esther is also a rare book as the name of God does not appear anywhere in the document (Friedman & Friedman, 2012). Fountain (2010) argues that there is no need for the name of God to appear in the book as it is clearly inspired by the holy spirit. Bellis (2007) describes Esther as the foil to Jezebel.

Ginzberg et al. (1998) describe Esther as ray of light on one of the Jews darkest days and a reminder to the Jewish people to look to beacons of hope in unexpected places when they face trials and tribulation. Esther, like Ruth, is a positive female role model in the Bible that is written in a narrative focusing on a woman as a main character instead of a supporting character (Bellis, 2007). Some view the story to be how women are a supporting character and only have power through their husbands (Bellis, 2007). Moore (2008) focuses on the human struggle of Esther being an orphan and a minority during politically charged times. Esther is a woman, a minority of a disenfranchised people, yet because of her beauty still becomes a queen (Nixon, 2015).

Esther is a female, in a society where she is valued for her looks, a woman who has two strong males that she must answer to, and she must balance their requests of her (Friedman & Friedman, 2012). Esther is fostered by her cousin Mordechai a Jew, but also in a powerful position as a servant to the King (Friedman & Friedman, 2012). Once Vashti, the previous queen, displeases the King Ahasuerus he seeks out a new queen, solely selected for her beauty, to replace the previous queen (Friedman & Friedman, 2012). King Ahasuerus is a leader who is focused on his own “glory and fame” (Friedman & Friedman, 2012). Haman, the Grand Vizier to the King, is second only to the King and passes an edict to have the Jews killed when Mordechai, Esther’s cousin, refuses to bow to him (Friedman & Friedman, 2012).

Modern researchers have viewed Esther within the context of servant leadership (Akinyele, 2009; Friedman & Friedman, 2012; Nixon, 2015). Akinyele (2009) asserts that Esther is a servant leader because she “exerts influence, does not seek fame, nor does she seek to hold on to the power inherent in her leadership.” Nixon (2015) describes Esther as a bridge between two patriarchal worlds who must traverse the dangers of gaining

safety for her people. Olusola (2016) examines how modern women in patriarchal societies can learn and apply leadership lessons from Esther in their own situations.

Akinyele (2009) states that Esther leads from what appears to be a powerless position under an oppressive system where she has little authority. Friedman and Friedman (2012) make a case that King Ahasuerus and Haman adhere to a leadership style that is leader first, whereas Esther displays traits of servant leadership. Interestingly, Friedman and Friedman (2012) do not address the leadership style of Esther's cousin Mordechai who refused to bow to Haman, resulting in the proclamation of death to the Jewish people.

METHOD

Exegetical research papers are based on the primary source, in this case the book of Esther, and secondary source documents to include journal articles (Osborne, 2017). Both narrative analysis and socio-rhetorical criticism will be used to examine the book of Esther in the Old Testament (Osborne, 2017; Robbins, 1996). The researcher used the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible to explore the book of Esther, based on its clear and accurate translation from original manuscripts (Fee & Strauss, 2007). Research regarding linguistics and translations will be noted when applicable, but original translations will not be used for this study.

Osborne (2017) explains that a failure of scholars is that they often break the pieces of narrative into small textual items; instead the narrative should not be isolated but examined as a whole. Another method is to combine source criticism and redaction criticism together while placing within a historical context (Osborne, 2017). Esther is a Biblical narrative and though written as stories, Biblical narratives are true historical accounts, the Bible consists of approximately 40 percent narrative (Moore, 2008). Biblical narrative follows the same genre as fiction to include characters, plot, dialogue, and dramatic tension (Osborne, 2017).

When reviewing Old Testament works, source criticism is especially important (Osborne, 2017). When studying narratives, a researcher needs to read the narrative thoroughly and in its entirety (Osborne, 2017). Moore (2008) highlights the difference defined by Stuart, that Biblical narratives are different than other stories because they are inspired by the Holy Spirit. Osborne (2017) states that the use of close reading to

understand the setting and point of view of the characters is important gaining insight. Narratives are composed of two elements, the poetics that are the linguistic nuances, and the message, or meaning of the text (Osborne, 2017).

Despite its many strengths, narrative criticism has weaknesses; to include the lack of historical context (Osborne, 2017). To address the need for historical context, socio-rhetorical criticism is used. Socio-rhetorical analysis is a process that allows a researcher to connect the reading to the cultural and historic context (Robbins, 1996). Socio-rhetorical criticism consists of the interpreter's location and ideology, inner texture, intertexture, social and cultural texture, and ideological texture (Robbins, 1996).

A significant risk to this study is that the researcher needs to constantly address bias to prevent eisegesis. Eisegesis occurs when a researcher imposes their interpretation on to text rather than drawing meaning from the text (Osborne, 2017). Using both narrative criticism with socio-rhetorical criticism is a technique to ensure that the narrative is reviewed both in its entirety and within the cultural and historical context to minimize the risk of taking excerpts out of context. Eisegesis commonly occurs when small portions of a passage are used to fit a modern situation (Osborne, 2017).

ANALYSIS

This research explores the role of Esther as a courageous follower and demonstrates that she displayed the five dimensions of a courageous follower as defined by Chaleff (2009). Further the continuum of leadership and followership to break the stereotype of followers as docile sheep is explored (Collinson, 2006). This research explores along the leader-follower continuum that Esther exhibits traits of a courageous followership but does not refute that her traits could also be applied to servant leadership.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis consists of three essential elements: source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism, ignoring any aspect does an injustice to the passage (Osborne, 2017). Narrative analysis views the Bible as an art and explores the entire passage, not simply a discrete segment

(Osborne, 2017). The story of Esther contains ten chapters that build on each other to a climax and then with a conclusion at the end, the analysis takes into account all ten chapters of the story.

Source Criticism

Source criticism explores who wrote the material and what were the sources used (Osborne, 2017). Bellis (2007) argues that Esther is not a true account of a historical event, but a historical fiction as part of narrative about Jewish Queens. The reign of King Ahasuerus can be traced through historical records as the first son of King Darius I after he was crowned and the Book of Extra connects Ahasuerus to Atossa in the book of Ezra (Moore, 2008). Walvoord and Zuck (1983) make a case for the author of Esther being an eyewitness, another Jewish exile, and influenced by the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah.

Esther is estimated to have been written in a time when the Jews were in exile and is an example of how the Jewish people survived in Diaspora (Akinyele, 2009). Friedman and Friedman (2012) note that Esther was written during a time when the Persian King Darius Hystaspes permitted the Jewish people to rebuild the sacred temple. Esther is the foundation for the celebration of the feast of Purim in Jewish society today (Walvoord & Zuck, 1983).

Form Criticism

Form criticism addresses how much the work changed from the original historical actions until the time when the action was written down (Osborne, 2017). According to Walvoord and Zuck (1983) the story was written soon after the events and would not have changed much. If the story is fiction, as asserted by Bellis (2007), this would not be as relevant as it is a teaching story of relevance to Jews in exile.

Redaction Criticism

Redaction criticism is the theological and sociological bias that impact the communicative strategies of the author (Osborne, 2017). A significant theological and sociological concern of Esther is that the book does not contain the name God throughout the book (Friedman & Friedman, 2012). Fountain (2010) states that some early Christian scholars felt that the book of Esther had so little theological value to the Christian community that it should not have been included in the original Canon. The entire book when viewed holistically, however, is a story that shows that

even in the worst exile and against great powers, God will guide and provide (Fountain, 2010).

Narrative Criticism

Narrative criticism expands from the author to the reader and includes the story, plot, dialogue, characters, and setting (Osborne, 2017). Whether researchers believe Esther to be historical fact or fiction, all agree that it is tale with a clear plot and storyline (Bellmann, 2017).

The book of Esther opens with the deposition of Queen Vashti, who displeases King Ahasuerus. The first chapter is dedicated to setting the scene of how the position of queen becomes vacant and that by not appearing before the King when he asked was enough to have Queen Vashti removed. This scene setting is important as it clearly demonstrates that the position of Queen is not a peer relationship to the King, and in fact subject to his whims.

Chapter two of Esther introduces Esther as both an orphan and a Jewish young woman. Book two provides two separate examples of Esther as a follower willing to serve. Esther chapter two verses nine willing submits to going to the harem and immediately gains favor with the King's eunuch, Hagai. Esther chapter 2 verse 15 learns from Hagai and only asks the King for those things which the eunuch advised. Esther chapter 2 verse 10 also serves Mordecai, her uncle, who has charged her to keep her heritage a secret.

Chapter three of Esther introduces the character of Haman, a chief advisor to the King and an adversary of Mordecai. It is not clear why Mordecai is so opposed to Haman, but the refusal of Mordecai leads to grave circumstances for the Jewish people. Haman decides to punish all Jews, not just Mordecai for his refusal to show obeisance and gains the King's permission to have all the Jews executed for having separate laws and being different than the other people under the King.

Chapter four shows when Esther embraces the courage of accountability. She does not call out Mordecai for creating this situation, but instead asks him to gather the people to fast, while she and her maids fast. Esther has been reminded by Mordecai that she as a Jew has everything on the line and that perhaps she was placed in the royal palace to save the Jews.

Chapter five shows that Esther has transformed and has learned how to interact within the court. Esther approaches the King, and he lets her approach him and offers up to half his kingdom. Esther does not

immediately ask the King for a stay of the execution of the Jews, but instead asks to hold a banquet for the King and his trusted advisor Haman. Haman is so pleased that he boasts to others about the banquet planned by Esther and his desire to punish Mordecai.

Chapter six does not focus on Esther, but instead a turn of events happens, and the King is reminded of a great service which Mordecai performed for him in preventing an assignation attempt. The King orders Haman to robe Mordecai, give him a horse, and honor him. Haman tells of this to his wife and friends who are very concerned at this turn of events.

In chapter seven, Esther demonstrates both the dimensions of the courage to take moral action and the courage to challenge. Esther asks the King to go against the edict of Haman and to not kill the Jewish people and herself, revealing that she is a Jew. Esther is physically confronted by Haman while she is reclining on a couch and Haman is taken away by the King's eunuchs and hanged from the same gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Table 4.1 below shows the narrative agents of this passage based on Robbins (1996, p. 50).

Esther builds her story to challenge the edict of Haman to the king and does so by building up the king and his power. Esther also for the first time identifies herself as a Jew and her impassioned pleas are both for herself and her people; calling the person who has decreed their demise a foe and an enemy to the king. It is only once the King asks her to provide a name, that she names Haman, as this foe, even calling him "wicked Haman."

In chapter eight, the King gives Esther the house of Haman to set Mordecai up as the new house leader. By revealing Mordecai to be her uncle, Esther is again demonstrating courage to transform. She and Mordecai can change the previous edict of the King and the Jews are given the right to assemble and defend themselves. Mordecai was robed and wore a crown and joy and festivities took place in the city of Susa, the capital.

In chapter nine Esther is consulted by King on what action to take regarding the capture of Haman's ten sons and others that have wronged the Jews. Esther advises that the ten sons of Haman be hanged from the gallows. The Jews were also given permission to kill those that had wronged them, but they did not plunder. Mordecai sent forth letters to the provinces of the King and established the celebration of Purim, based on Queen Esther coming to King Ahasuerus and overturning the plot against the Jews.

Table 4.1 Narrative agents of Esther 7

<i>Verse</i>	<i>Esther</i>	<i>Ahasuerus</i>	<i>Haman</i>	<i>Jews</i>	<i>Mordecai</i>	<i>Harbona</i>
1	Queen Esther	King	Haman			
2	Esther, Queen, You	King				
3	Queen Esther, I, Me	O King, king			My people	
4	I, I	King, king	Enemy	We	My people, we, men and women	
5	Queen Esther	King Ahasuerus	He, He			
6	Esther, queen	King	Foe	Enemy, Wicked Haman, Haman		
7	Queen Esther	King		Haman, he, him		
8	Esther, Queen	King, my, Own house, king		Haman, himself, he	Mordecai	
9		King, King, King		Haman, Haman's house, him	Mordecai	
10		King, king		Haman, he	Mordecai	they

Chapter ten concludes with Mordecai as the second only to the King. Esther is not mentioned in the concluding chapter of the book named after her.

Socio-rhetorical Criticism

Social-rhetorical criticism requires the reader to read and reread a passage from different perspectives to provide a deeper understanding of the text within the context of the world in which it was written (Robbins, 1996). Social-rhetorical criticism is an approach that generates multiple strategies for reading and interpreting text (Robbins, 1996). In the narrative analysis above, Esther was examined as a Biblical story, but the historic customs, culture, and societal elements were not explored. In addition,

social-rhetorical criticism moves the reader from an ethnocentric viewpoint to an understanding of the Biblical times which the passage was written (Malina & Pilch, 2001). Robbins (1996) explains that interpreters rely on their own personal lives and experiences when processing text.

Social and Cultural Texture

Intertexture builds on the foundational exchange between a writer and reader and expands this approach to include the role of the texts (Robbins, 1996). Robbins (1996) describes social and cultural analysis as using the full resources of social sciences to conduct exegetical interpretation. Understanding the social and cultural dynamics of the times highlights the courage that was required by Esther to confront King Ahasuerus.

Women during this period and in both Jewish and Persian cultures were not as valued as men (Bellis, 2007). Vashti, a Persian woman from a wealthy family, was removed by King Ahasuerus for displeasing him during a banquet (Friedman & Friedman, 2012). Esther is constantly following the men who are set-up as leaders in her life; whether her uncle, husband, or even the eunuch who prepares her to serve the king. Esther is not mentioned in the final chapter of the book, once again highlighting that she understands the courage to serve as defined by Chaleff (2009).

Esther had been raised as both an orphan and a Jew, dependent on the kindness of others (Friedman & Friedman, 2012). Esther leaves behind her life and goes to the harem based on the commands from Mordecai, knowing that she is breaking the laws and that there is no return for her to Jewish society (Nixon, 2015). King Ahasuerus is a man whose actions in chapter one of Esther and throughout the story portray a ruler who wants to be admired and in charge; Esther uses this knowledge of the King to build up to revealing her identity and to name Haman a foe (Moore, 2008). Esther shows that she is able to embrace the transformation required in herself to become the queen that King Ahasuerus and the Jewish people need, demonstrating the courage to transform as described by Chaleff (2009).

The courage to be accountable is a foundation of the five dimensions of courageous followership (Chaleff, 2009). Initially upon hearing the plight of the Jews, Esther tries to deflect her opportunity and potential role to save her people (Nixon, 2015). The second time Mordecai contacts her, he points out that her position will most likely not save her from the fate of her people (Moore, 2008). Esther was also aware that Vashti had

displeased the King and was removed, so Mordecai's point regarding her vulnerability and need to act was heeded (Bellis, 2007). Esther demonstrated that people can falter, but still come through in the end; she does embrace the courage to be accountable the second time.

The courage to take moral action as defined by Chaleff (2009) is particularly hard under the circumstances faced by Esther. Esther, even as the queen, is unable to approach the king without his express permission (Olusola, 2016). In a male-dominated society and the royal palace, Esther is risking her life, simply to get an audience with the king to address the plight of her people (Friedman & Friedman, 2012).

Once Esther gains an audience with the King, she is faced with the difficult situation of how to challenge him, without doing so in a way that will anger him. The justification for removing Vashti was that her willful disobedience would be seen by other women and emulated (Ginzberg et al., 1998). Esther instead sets up the challenge in such a way that the King realizes that someone, Haman, has abused the trust and authority of the king (Moore, 2008). Chaleff (2009) explains that the courage to challenge requires the follower to assist the leader with reviewing their own beliefs and assumptions.

CONCLUSION

Both narrative analysis and socio-rhetorical criticism support that Esther demonstrates the five dimensions of courageous followership defined by Chaleff (2009). In leadership studies the role of the follower is often viewed as weak and less than that of being a leader, instead of being an essential member of a team (Buford, 2018). Esther demonstrates an essential awareness that leadership and followership are positional throughout the narrative, following the men in her society as is the custom, but also leading her maids in fasting in preparation for her interaction with the King.

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