



Violence and the Survival of Israel in the Book of Esther

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Violence and the Survival of Israel in the Book of Esther

A dissertation presented
by

Thomas A. Wetzel

to

the Faculty of Harvard Divinity School

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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Violence and the Survival of Israel in the Book of Esther

Abstract

The book of Esther stands in a complex relationship to the Christian tradition. Accepted as canonical by ancient Israel, Judaism, and Christianity, the book nonetheless is known in the Church not for its powerful narrative of Jewish deliverance, but rather for the ways in which Christian interpreters have rejected the narrative as too violent and too “Jewish” to be normative in any way for Christians. Reading the Hebrew version of the Esther story preserved in the Masoretic Text, one at first notices the story’s complete lack of overt references to Israel, Torah, or even the God of Israel, suggesting to many gentiles throughout Christian history that it is not a religious narrative, but rather a story of Jewish nationalism “gone mad” in a willful excess of ethnic violence, as one interpreter has described it.

Reading the narrative with attention to the myriad of canonical allusions contained within the story, however, the interpreter will recognize that the God of Israel is indeed present in the Esther story, manifest precisely in the perduring presence of his covenantal partners, the Jews. This reading of the narrative is made apparent in the Septuagint versions of the Esther story, which display their religious sensibilities overtly. But this reading is also evident in the Masoretic Text, seen first in the victory of Esther and Mordecai over Haman. This victory both represents and embodies the Jewish victory over Amalek, the cosmic opponent whose existence throughout history has continually challenged and undermined the divine order in creation. The reader then sees that Israel is present in the Esther story in the *zera’ hayyēhūdīm*, the seed of the Jews who (perhaps even unknowingly) enact a real and efficacious form of liturgical memory in their fasting, penitence, and military action. Despite the characters’ (and the narrative’s) religious

silence, the portrayal of Jewish victory in the Esther story challenges the Church to rethink its understanding of salvation history, as well as the Church's place in the biblical understanding of God's covenant with Israel and the divine order of creation.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	vi
Chapter One. “Establish Me for All Generations”	1
Chapter Two. A Set of Greek Correctives	37
Chapter Three. A Gentile Warning and a Revelation	74
Chapter Four. Seeds of History, Seeds of Holiness	109
Chapter Five. “Reveal Yourself in this Time of Our Afflictions”	165
Bibliography	204

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Chapter One. “Establish Me for All Generations”

“Theology,” says Stanley Hauerwas, “is the delicate art necessary for the Christian community to keep its story straight.”¹ The “story” of the Church, according to Hauerwas, consists of the Church’s shared narratives, as well as the beliefs and practices that arise out of the Church’s reflection on those shared narratives. At its root the story of the Church is the biblical canon. As a result, Hauerwas can also assert that “at least one of the tasks of theology [. . .] is to provide a timeful reading of the scripture for our time.”² A “timeful” reading must bring the beliefs and practices of the Church today into meaningful contact with those shared narratives of the Church’s canonical Scriptures. Without such contact, the story of the Church falls apart; and without a coherent story, the life of the Church falls apart.

Regardless of his own skill as a biblical exegete, Hauerwas here has touched upon the critical role that biblical exegesis plays in the Church. As the bishops of the Catholic Church expressed this at the Second Vatican Council, all the teaching of the Church rests ultimately on a coherent canon of the Bible:

Sacred theology rests on the written word of God, together with sacred tradition, as its primary and perpetual foundation. By scrutinizing in the light of faith all truth stored up in the mystery of Christ, theology is most powerfully strengthened and constantly rejuvenated by that word. For the Sacred Scriptures contain the word of God and[,] since they [all] are inspired, really are the word of God; and

¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Cross-Shattered Christ: Meditations on the Seven Last Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 17.

² Ibid.

so the study of the sacred page is, as it were, the soul of sacred theology.³

A lack of attention to the canonical Scriptures undermines the Church's self-understanding and its ability to proclaim what it believes it has been divinely given to be and to do in the world. "Therefore, like the Christian religion itself," the fathers of the Second Vatican Council emphasize, "all the preaching [and teaching] of the Church must be nourished and *regulated* by Sacred Scripture.[. . . T]he force and power in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church."⁴ Hauerwas and the bishops of the Second Vatican Council might disagree as to what constitutes "a timeful reading of scripture for our time," but neither Hauerwas nor the bishops would deny that the fullness of the canonical Scriptures must be central to whatever such reading emerges.

This brings us to the problem that the book of Esther poses for the Church. It would seem self-evident that reading (and reading well) the book of Esther—or any book of the canonical Scriptures, for that matter—would constitute a required part of "keeping the Church's story straight." Yet from all appearances, the Church throughout much of its history has assiduously avoided this particular part of its central narrative; alone among the works considered canonical in what today is often called the Hebrew Bible, the book of Esther remains for Christians a marginal story.⁵ The Church Fathers rarely mention the book, and no known Christian

³ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation/Dei Verbum* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1965), para. 24.

⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 21, emphasis added.

⁵ Roughly speaking and oversimplifying to some degree, the *Hebrew Bible* (as it often is called in academic biblical scholarship) represents the standard Hebrew version of the canonical Scriptures of ancient Israel as defined by the tradition of the Masoretic Text (henceforth referenced with the abbreviation MT). In terms of content, it is the equivalent of the Rabbinic Tanakh and the Protestant Old Testament. The Catholic Old Testament, based on St. Jerome's Latin Vulgate, is a translation of a particular version of the Greek Septuagint (henceforth LXX). It therefore includes seven additional books not in the Hebrew Bible, as well as additions and alterations to some of the shared books. For a careful discussion of what is at stake in how we name this collection of texts, see Jon D. Levenson, "The Hebrew

commentary on the book exists from the first seven centuries of the Common Era. Even as Christian commentaries on the book began to emerge in the later medieval period, they were exclusively homiletical or devotional in nature, emphasizing free allegorical readings that were heavy in Marian dogma and light in their attention to the literal meaning of the text.⁶ As Lewis Bayles Paton summarizes, “During the period when both the halakhic and the haggadic exegesis of Esther were having such an elaborate development among the Jews, the book received almost no attention from Christians. Dislike of its revengeful spirit and doubts in regard to its canonicity led the Fathers of the Eastern and of the Western Church for the most part to ignore it.”⁷

This exegetical silence was not a theological vacuum, however, as we will soon see. By the time of the Protestant Reformation, the story’s supposed excessive violence, coupled with its seemingly overt Jewishness, stood as the primary reasons for Christian hesitance to embrace the book. This view continues for the most part into the present day. “Esther poses a particular problem,” as Timothy Beal puts it. “Christian theology has had a very difficult time knowing what to do with this text. Esther is treated as the most remote outpost in the Old Testament colony: exotic, savage, violent, difficult to reach, difficult to map, dangerous, perhaps irredeemable.”⁸ Beal argues that within the history of Christian exegesis of the book, there emerges a collective need to define the book as somehow different from the Christian self-

Bible, The Old Testament, and Historical Criticism,” in *The Hebrew Bible, The Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 1–32.

⁶ Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908), 107. Jo Carruthers, in her *Esther through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), notes examples of Marian “readings” of the Esther story. See esp. 192–95, 198–99.

⁷ Paton, *Esther*, 101.

⁸ Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 5.

understanding of the Church as peaceful and universal. Christian interpreters therefore “link what is asserted to be the *Jewishness* of the text [. . .] with what is asserted to be its ungodly immorality, and then repudiate both as quintessentially not-us.”⁹

The point here bears emphasizing: the Church appears intentionally to have avoided theological engagement with the book of Esther. If so, then the Church has misread this part of its canon. In doing so, it has likewise broken in some manner the Church’s story as a whole, thus damaging the life of the Church. The exegetical resistance to the book of Esther appears to lie in the confluence of three narrative issues. First, there is the overt violence acknowledged in the book, violence that is massive in scale with more than 75,000 deaths by the story’s end. Second is the seeming ethnic nature of the violence. The battle lines in the story—from the earliest moments of the conflict between Mordecai and Haman until the final battles on the thirteenth and fourteenth of Adar—are clearly marked as a conflict between Jews and gentiles, and while it is clear that not all the gentiles in the narrative are described as enemies of the Jews, many Christian exegetes have missed this basic narrative point. Last and perhaps most troubling to the typical Christian exegete, the Hebrew version of the Esther story lacks any overt reference to the God of the Bible or even to an obviously coherent expression of religious practice.

These problems have only rarely bothered Jewish exegetes. The Jewish exegetical tradition not only has understood the story as one that is consonant with the religious tradition but has found in even the theologically circumspect Hebrew narrative one of the great stories of Jewish deliverance available in the canonical Scriptures. Indeed, the story was so remarkable to Second Temple Judaism that it exists in three extant forms (along with numerous minor variants) that appear aimed to please different communities of listeners. First is the Hebrew version of the

⁹ Ibid.

Masoretic Text (henceforth called *MT Esther*); it is the most cryptic version of the story, at least in terms of its religious intentions, and remains the most frequently discussed version of the story throughout the history of Jewish or Christian biblical scholarship. From the standpoint of a shared biblical tradition among the branches of Judaism and Christianity, MT Esther is *the* Esther story. There also exists the so-called Septuagint version of Esther (henceforth *LXX Esther*), which is a Greek text of the story that is notably longer than MT Esther and represents an overtly theological understanding that overlays a core version of the Esther story much in agreement with that of MT Esther. Lastly, there is the A-Text or Alpha Text (henceforth *AT Esther*), a variant Greek version of the story that appears in some LXX minuscules. AT Esther appears to possess a basic Esther story somewhat at odds with the details of MT Esther but that has been expanded or built out with aspects of LXX Esther's overt theological leanings.¹⁰

As one can see, the confusions quickly multiply in any attempt to work one's way through the Esther narrative tradition. In this respect, the book of Esther may be something of a bellwether for Christian biblical exegesis: it indicates not only where lies Christian resistance to aspects of the canon but also what lies at the heart of that resistance. What makes the story a uniquely irritating matrix for post-Reformation Christian exegesis is rather simply put: the book of Esther appears to suggest that the narrative's Jews were delivered from genocide by a violent exercise of their own hand and will. From a theological perspective, the canonical status of the

¹⁰ MT Esther is the canonical version of the text found in the Jewish Scriptures and that forms the basis for the Old Testament version in most Protestant Bibles. LXX Esther is the canonical textual tradition that forms the basis of the version found in the Old Testament of most Eastern Orthodox Christian Bibles. For Roman Catholics, the canonical text is a hybrid: following St. Jerome's Vulgate, the canonical Catholic Old Testament typically draws upon MT Esther for the main text of the book but also includes the LXX "Additions" to Esther as part of the deuterocanonical texts of the Old Testament. Contemporary Catholic translations tend to merge these variant parts back into the main text of MT Esther, forming an amalgamation of the MT, LXX, and AT textual traditions that (strictly speaking) accurately represents none of the extant texts.

book of Esther appears to undermine the direction of salvation history, at least as it has been understood by interpreters shaped by the thought of the Reformation. The Jews in the Esther story rely not on grace but on the sword and, in doing so, are victorious. Even worse, the story's protagonists are not models of edifying piety or willing martyrs turning the other cheek to their enemies. Lacking any definite connection to their religious tradition, the Jews within the Hebrew version of the Esther story are nonetheless rewarded with deliverance.

The problem with the Esther story, however, is not what it seems to be from this perspective. The Christian theological resistance to the Esther narrative is not due to what it *lacks* in theological understanding; quite to the contrary, I believe that the Esther narrative traditions have been avoided because of what they bring into theological contact with the story of the Church. The Esther story is an outlier, as Timothy Beal noted. It exposes the Church's ambiguous relationship to the reality of divine (and divinely mandated) violence. It overtly challenges typical Christian understandings of *heilsgeschichte*, the history of God's personal redemptive activity within history. And perhaps most difficult for Christian exegesis, the narratives of the Esther tradition attest to the ongoing reality of a special place in history for the children of Israel, the Jews whose military victory in MT Esther is imbued with liturgical and one might even say sacramental significance, even in the absence of any clear divine presence.

None of this is to say that the whole of the Church's fraught relationship to the Jews, or the Church's problematic connection to the Scriptures the Church shares with Israel, can be restored with a right reading of the Esther story. Rather, I am hoping to convince the reader that reading the Esther story well might be a good starting point for the restoration necessary to keep the Church's story straight. Such reading, however, requires a "delicate art," as Hauerwas noted. A good interpretation requires first a good understanding of the basic narrative one is reading.

We must clear away the confusion and first see the narrative of the Esther story as it is, rather than how so much of Christian exegesis has wished it to be. We must begin there and then explore why the Esther story has been misread before we are prepared to read with the delicacy necessary to bring a difficult story into contact with the Church's story.



MT Esther poses a number of exegetical problems from its start. Set in the time of the ancient Persian Empire (ca. 539–333 BCE), the story begins *in medias res* with a description of the sumptuous extravagance of imperial power in the days of the Persian king Ahasuerus.¹¹ Modern critical scholarship tends to admit that the story's historical narrative is deeply problematic and unlikely; at the same time, there is a clear sense of Persian historical data within the text. The author, in other words, knows enough to make his fiction look historically compelling to the average reader. The vexing part of this historical problem is not the historical inaccuracies themselves; rather, it is that so many scholars seem to need to force the text into some sort of historical accuracy in order to discuss the theology of the text.¹² This is an

¹¹ The name *Ahasuerus* in MT Esther appears to be a Hebrew rendering of the Persian name that the Greeks rendered as *Xerxes*. Problems abound with this equation, not the least of which is that the Greek of the Septuagint, amply able to solve this problem, instead states that the king is Artaxerxes. In any case, there are other problems with the story's grasp of history: Herodotus tells us that the Persian kings were able to marry within seven families of Persian nobility, none of which (needless to say) would include a Jewish adoptee. Even more problematic for our heroine is the fact that history bears no record of Xerxes' (or Artaxerxes') marriage to either a Vashti or an Esther. The number of Persian satrapies mentioned in MT Esther's opening, 127 (1:1), does not match by any stretch the totals listed among extant recovered Persian inscriptions, and most central to the story before us, there is no record of the absurd rule that a law could be declared forever irrevocable by the king of Persia or his counselors. André LaCocque disagrees with this last point, claiming that Diodorus Siculus (a first century BCE writer) "establishes it [i.e., the irrevocability of Persian law] as a historical fact" (XVII.30, cited in André LaCocque, "The Different Versions of Esther," *Biblical Interpretation* 7, no. 3 [1999]: 311). Given that LaCocque is among a quite small minority of Esther scholars in adhering to this view, the establishment of this "fact" seems a much more open question than LaCocque seems to think.

¹² One well-respected example of this is Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New Haven, CT: Anchor/Yale University Press, 1971), esp. xxxiv–xlvi. For further discussion of the text's historicity and the general position (advocated here) that Esther is something close to the modern

erroneous assumption. Recognizing narrative fiction *as fiction* enables the reader to see that the world of the given story is fully circumscribed by the written text.

A fictional narrative, even an historical fiction like the Esther story, relies on its historical setting for context and color, perhaps at times for certain characterizations or key events, but not on history as its interpretive boundaries. An historical fiction is not required, as is historiography, to document correctly the events or people of a given time “as they truly were” and may in fact take broad liberties with historical data, reinventing characters, telescoping events, and even creating from whole cloth other parts of the story. The “Persian Empire” in the Esther story need not cohere with the Persian Empire of history; instead, the author is using the (real) historical entity to shape a (fictional) context and setting in which his story takes place. History informs the Esther story most surely, but it does not delimit it.

A theological reading of fiction is much easier than is a theological reading of history. With the messy, murky circumstances of history and our frank inability to see clearly the full range of historical influences impacting either the event or the historian, the theological lesson of a given moment or event in history—or whether there even is a theological lesson in a given event—is far from obvious. A fictional event, by contrast, is solely the product of its narrative. The writer gives to the reader or listener a finite set of circumstances and characters (some overtly present in the text, some implied by the narrative), and these are the limits of the factors at work in the narrative world. Whether the Persian Empire in history gave its kings the power to declare irrevocable decrees, for instance, is irrelevant to the primary reading of the Esther story.

short story, see Frederic Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 297–309; Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, second (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 131–39; Jon D. Levenson, *Esther*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1997), 23–27. For an approach that considers the story a historicized wisdom book, see Shemaryahu Talmon, “‘Wisdom’ in the Book of Esther,” *Vetus Testamentum* 13 (1963): 419–55.

The “Persian Empire” that we encounter in the story has given its king these powers, and so a proper exegetical reading of the text must accept this as a fact of the narrative. (Of course, when the interpreter turns to how the author of the story viewed the *actual* Persian Empire of history, then such comparisons to historical data become not only helpful but necessary.) We must keep in mind as we read the various Esther stories that a proper exegesis of a narrative *as a narrative* (rather than as an historical document or record) helpfully limits our data to what the story has actually given us as it was understood by its author in his original historical context. Only after we have established this may we move to the work of interpreting the text.¹³

Returning to the Esther story, we see that the Persian king has hosted a rollicking drinking party (actually a set of them) for his royal court and for the citizens of the imperial city of Susa when, overheated by the festivities, he orders his queen Vashti to appear before the male revelers. When Vashti refuses, the king is incensed, and a royal crisis ensues. The text offers no explanation for Vashti’s refusal, most certainly nothing suggesting supernatural or divine intervention. This absence has made her refusal a rich site for postbiblical interpretation. As Jon Levenson notes, the Christian and Jewish traditions have at times seen her as a prideful and perhaps inflexible figure undone by her own dignity—a counterpoint, in essence, to Esther’s future behavior before the king.¹⁴ The Talmudic tractate *Megillah* and Targums I (*Rishon*) and II (*Sheni*),¹⁵ as well as other ancient commentaries, play off the king’s request that Vashti appear

¹³ As we will see in the coming chapters, we must explore in regard to the Esther stories whether (and how) the author of MT Esther is aware of the biblical canon. Such awareness, if projected into his narrative, necessarily enlarges the amount of data that the narrative is supplying to us as readers.

¹⁴ Levenson, *Esther*, 48–49.

¹⁵ For translations of the two Esther Targums, see Bernard Grossfeld, trans., *The Two Targums of Esther*, The Aramaic Bible 18 (Collegeville, Minnesota: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1991). The names in parentheses above are Grossfeld’s transliterations of the respective Targum titles. I have retained them here to assist the reader wishing to consult Grossfeld’s translations.

wearing her turban (or “royal diadem,” according to the JPS, 1:11)¹⁶ and suggest that she was ordered to appear wearing *nothing but* this headpiece, a fitting instance of *lex talionis* for one whom the rabbis accused of similarly degrading Jewish women.¹⁷

In any case, this queenly calamity is the first overt cue that not all is well in the Persian Empire and a nod to the comic tone that permeates an otherwise danger-filled story. Vashti’s refusal, according to the king’s closest advisors, cannot be handled privately lest the women of the empire hear of her disobedience to the king and so take it as license to assert their own independence at home. As proposed by his advisors and implemented by the king in a royal edict “written into the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot [ever] be abrogated” (Esth 1:19), the solution involves banishing Vashti from the royal presence and conferring her title on a more worthy successor. It also declares “to every province in its own script and to every nation in its own language that every man should wield authority in his home and speak the language of his own people” (1:22).¹⁸ As Levenson notes, “[O]ne point of the decree [when seen through the lens of Neh 13:23–24] is to establish the father as the ruling figure of the household. That the goal should have been attempted through an imperial edict is a comic touch that testifies to Ahasuerus’s nearly fatal tendency to confuse the personal and the political, to utilize the vast

¹⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of passages from the Hebrew Bible are taken from David E. Solumm Stein, ed., *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, second edition (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999). Future citations will be noted parenthetically within the text. Emendations, when necessary, will be noted.

¹⁷ Levenson, *Esther*, 48–49; Moore, *Esther*, 13; Carruthers, *Through the Centuries*, 62. All three cite *Megillah* 12b, which says that “the wicked Vashti used to take the daughters of Israel and strip them naked and make them work on the Sabbath.”

¹⁸ The last part of this verse has generated a great deal of critical attention and desire to emend, including Moore’s reading, “that every man should be master in his own home and say whatever suited him” (Moore, *Esther*, 3). Bush (*Ruth/Esther*, 352), Fox (*Character and Ideology*, 23, 275), and Levenson (*Esther*, 50, 51–53) resist emendation and follow the lines of the present JPS translation.

powers of his office to compensate for his deficiencies of character.”¹⁹ When dealing with the royal household, it seems, a domestic dispute can only be resolved through a change in the imperial law code.²⁰

After her deposition, Vashti is never heard from again in the story. Michael V. Fox points out that this textual silence extends even to the absence of any formal condemnation of Vashti within the narrative. This is ironic, given the tendency among interpreters to see Vashti as prideful or arrogant, because by the story’s end, *both* Vashti and Esther will refuse to obey specific rules of approach to the king.²¹ Fox goes so far as to suggest that “Vashti’s fate is not a disaster [since there is no record that she is executed]; one might consider her rewarded by being forbidden to come where she had refused to go.”²² The irrevocable decree ironically then may have done little more than to affirm the very independence among women that the Persian court sought to undermine.

The decree likewise solves nothing for the king, other than leaving him a lonely master of home and empire who, even with the passage of time, has found no woman within his harem worthy to succeed Vashti. Enter again a set of advisors (this time the king’s palace servants) who arrive armed with new imperial solutions to domestic problems. In this case, they propose a contest of sorts that will gather appropriate eligible maidens from throughout the empire and, via a series of nighttime encounters in the king’s bedroom, award the queenship to her who most and

¹⁹ Levenson, *Esther*, 52.

²⁰ Barry C. Davies, “Part 2: Expositions of the Book of Esther,” in *God behind the Seen: Expositions of the Book of Ruth and Esther*, Expositor’s Guide to the Historical Books (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995), 137. Cited in Carruthers, *Through the Centuries*, 91.

²¹ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 166–70.

²² *Ibid.*, 170.

best pleases the king.

It is at this point that young Esther enters her own story. A Jewish woman and the adopted daughter²³ of her cousin Mordecai who took her in after her parents' death, Esther arrives in Ahasuerus' harem to be readied for her night to prove her worth to the king. She is apparently an agreeable young woman. No character in the story finds fault in her; most characters, from harem eunuch to court minister and ultimately even the king himself, find her sympathetic and possessing a winning personality, in addition to her obvious beauty. Outside this beauty and general likeableness, though, Esther is at first a rather flat character.²⁴ More important to our discussion, Fox notes that the author of MT Esther ("unlike the Jewish interpreters and translators") does not "seem troubled by the intermarriage [with a gentile] or the inevitable violations of Esther's Jewish obligations. In contrast to the authors of Daniel (Dan 1:8–16) and Judith (Judt 10:5; 12:2–5), the author of Esther shows no concern for dietary rules and does not even bother to excuse their violation by appeal to circumstances. There is not even an awareness that Esther's induction into the harem and the queenhood involved sacrifices on her part, albeit justified by the outcome."²⁵ We see no evidence of Torah observance in her life, and

²³ Esther's relationship to Mordecai varies according to the textual tradition. The Masoretic Text, the Old Latin, and the Vulgate describe Esther as the *cousin* of Mordecai (Moore, *Esther*, 15), while the Septuagint states that Mordecai "brought [Esther] up to be his wife," suggesting that Esther at the time of the story is either betrothed to Mordecai or they have already married (*ibid.*, 21; LXX Esth 2:7). This confusion among the texts leads to further intermingled references within the traditions. Thus, even though the LXX version is the basis for the canonical Roman Catholic text, the Catholic tradition has followed the broad Christian tradition in holding that Esther is (only) Mordecai's cousin and adoptive daughter.

²⁴ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 196–99.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 34. We will revisit the issue of religious observance—and its relationship to overtly expressed religious practices—in chapter four. References to, and comparisons with, the books of Daniel and Judith will appear throughout our discussion. Esther, Daniel, and Judith as narratives all share at some point the same basic plot: a resourceful Jew, trapped under a foreign authority, must exercise careful cleverness to overcome a threat to Jewish religious practice that likewise threatens the integrity of the Jewish people. The three texts likewise share post-exilic composition dates and reflect contact with Greek

her adoptive father Mordecai has ordered specifically that she “not reveal her people [עַמָּהּ] or her kindred [מִוֹלָדֶיהָ]” (Esth 2:10). Esther passes as a Persian maiden, and nothing in her life—her appearance, her language, her dietary habits, or her (lack of) religious observance—suggests otherwise to the reader or to the other characters in the story, even after she has surpassed all the other women in the harem and finds herself the queen. Esther is an utterly anonymous Jew.²⁶

Some time later, Ahasuerus appoints Haman the Agagite as his prime minister or vizier.²⁷ For reasons not entirely clear at the level of a surface reading, Mordecai (apparently a civil servant of some sort in the royal court) refuses to kneel or do obeisance in Haman’s presence. Nothing in the text states or even suggests that Haman claimed some sort of divine honors for himself or wore some item associated with idolatry,²⁸ and there is likewise no overt sense that Mordecai is acting out of religious commitment. No place in the Torah requires that Jews not bow down to humans, and as Levenson notes, such bowing before human rulers happens

culture. In addition, all three contain seemingly intentional disregard for historical accuracy or continuity. Together, these shared similarities suggest a similar set of problems faced by the respective authors and (as I hope at least to suggest) a shared theological outlook. More on this in chapters four and five.

²⁶ In addition, the reading that Esther is either betrothed or married to Mordecai (as in the LXX and paralleled only in the rabbinic Esther midrash and its derivatives) created for some readers even more problems for Esther’s Jewish religious identity. If she is married to Mordecai, according to this tradition, then her subsequent marriage to the king (or at least the appearance of such a marriage since the MT is not overt in stating this) makes her potentially a bigamist and an adulterer, issues that neither the LXX nor the MT tradition engages. As Barry Dov Walfish notes however, Talmudic and medieval rabbinic exegetes also found in the tradition a vindication of sorts for Esther: because of her valid marriage to Mordecai, her relations with Ahasuerus were, according to *halakhah*, “involuntary relations”—or put less finely, rape (“Kosher Adultery? The Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus Triangle in Midrash and Exegesis,” *Prooftexts* 22 (2002): 307, 309–11). This reading creates a deeply ambivalent shadow over the comedic nature of the story and does not fit well with MT Esther. It does, however fit with the content and emotions of Esther’s prayer in the LXX, as we shall see in chapter two.

²⁷ The Hebrew here is vague in terms of designating a particular office, saying simply that Ahasuerus “set his [Haman’s] seat over all the other officials with him” (3:1).

²⁸ Moore, *Esther*, 36; Paton, *Esther*, 196.

regularly in Scripture.²⁹ Regardless of his reason, Mordecai's refusal sets in motion the grave crisis of the story because his only explanation to his peers for this insubordination lies in his ethnic identity: "When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman in order to see whether Mordecai's resolve would prevail; for he had explained to them that he was a Jew" (3:4). Haman responds in rage, "but he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone; having been told who Mordecai's people were, Haman plotted to do away with all the Jews" (3:6).³⁰ Haman casts the lot (10:24–26), and a date is thus chosen for the diabolic plan. The *lot* that Haman casts in the Hebrew text is the singular פּוּר (*pûr*), while the name of the festival, פּוּרִים (*pûrîm*), implies that more than one lot will be cast as the story unfolds. No other lot appears in MT Esther. In the LXX textual tradition, a divine lot accompanied that of Haman, and while this duality may serve as the basis for the name of the festival, we cannot know for certain.³¹

Haman then approaches Ahasuerus with a sales pitch cunning in its mixture of truth and falsehood.³² Rather than refer to "the Jews," Haman calls this group that he seeks to destroy "a certain people," as the JPS Tanakh puts it. The Hebrew is even more cryptic: literally, Haman

²⁹ Levenson, *Esther*, 67, where he notes Gen 23:7; 27:29; and 1 Kings 1:31 as key examples.

³⁰ The term *Jew* (i.e., יהודי, *yěhûdî*) here appears to be an ethnic, rather than a religious, designation (at least within the narrative world of the text), as Sidnie Ann White notes ["Esther," *The Women's Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 161-77]. Levenson suggests a similar understanding, noting first that the term *yěhûdî* in the biblical tradition usually is limited in reference only to Israelites descended of the tribe of Judah (*Esther*, 57). He adds, "[I]n the wake of the exile of the only tribal unit still intact, Judah, the ethnic term *yěhûdî* came to refer to *any* Israelite" (ibid.). Haman's response to Mordecai is indicative of this view: when he resolves to punish Mordecai's insubordination, Haman does not decide to destroy Mordecai's religion or even its practitioners. He instead wishes to do away with "Mordecai's people [*am mordōkay*, אַם מֹרְדֳכַי]" (Esth 3:6). In chapters three and four, I will argue that the latter wording is significant to precisely this issue.

³¹ This tradition may likely be an example of a pious etymology coined after the fact; the true source of the festival's name remains opaque at best.

³² Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 53.

refers to עַם־אֶחָד, “one people” or “one nation.”³³ He then argues that the Jews observe a “law [תָּוֶ, *dāt*] different from those of any other people” (3:8). This is presumably a cryptic reference to Torah (תּוֹרָה) although, falling in line with the religious silence in MT Esther, this is never explicitly stated. Based on this, Haman then suggests that by practicing this different law, the Jews likewise reject imperial rule and so should be “destroyed, massacred, and exterminated,” as he will put it in the royal edict (3:13). Ahasuerus falls in line with his royal advisor, just as he has done with other advisors twice already in the story, so for the third time, an imperial law is decreed in order to solve an interpersonal conflict.

When Mordecai learns of the decree, he tears his clothes and puts on sackcloth and ashes,³⁴ and he sets off to challenge Esther to intercede with the king on behalf of the Jews, believing that she “may have attained to royal position for just such a crisis” (4:14). Esther at first wavers, particularly because the punishment for approaching the king without a royal summons is death; but once she finds her resolve, she calls for a three-day fast among all the Jews of Susa and with this act shifts in her role from a passive object of male possession to an independent actor who will change the course of the empire. The king warmly welcomes Esther into his presence, unaware either that Haman’s decree has targeted the Jews or that his queen is one of that very people.

As expansive and comically inept as ever, not even waiting to hear Esther’s request, Ahasuerus impetuously vows to fulfill whatever she asks, “even to half the kingdom, it shall be

³³ The JPS translation here is both typical and correct in its rendering of the Hebrew, but it loses some of the nuance of how truly vague Haman’s reference is.

³⁴ These are common penitential and mourning rites among religiously observant figures in the Bible; see, for example, Gen 37:29–34; 2 Kgs 18:37; and Job 1:20, 2:8. As we will see in chapter four, this is one of the cues to a hidden religious life and hidden religious narrative present in the MT version of the story.

granted you” (5:3), a vow that he will repeat with the same gusto later that same day at the first banquet she has planned (5:6). He will make the same offer a third time at her second banquet (7:2). Esther’s reduplicated requests have at times confounded critics. In response to the first and second royal offers, Esther asks the same thing: that the king and Haman attend a banquet hosted by Esther. Given Ahasuerus’ jovial response to her, as well as his general malleability, why does Esther not simply request her people’s deliverance immediately? Some interpreters have attributed this to a loss of will in Esther at the time of the first and second offers; others have thought that she might be attempting to make Ahasuerus jealous by suggesting an undue interest in Haman.³⁵ Fox notes that some have wrongly inferred a two-source explanation for the duplication of the banquets.³⁶ David Noel Freedman’s answer may be the best we can know for sure: “The third time is the charm in literary accounts. It is like the acrobat or magician who deliberately fails twice in trying to perform his most difficult feat, before succeeding on the third try.”³⁷

In the same way that Ahasuerus remains consistent in his part of Esther’s plan, so too does Haman. Haman is vainglorious, quick to jump to conclusions, and prey to petty emotional responses. The story already has demonstrated this in dangerous fashion with his genocidal response to Mordecai’s insubordination, but in the midst of Esther’s banquets, the comic side of Haman’s petty nature emerges. The reader, able to see Haman’s home life, watches as he fills his conversations with self-congratulatory enumeration of his wealth, his sons, and his place in the king’s service, making special note to his family and friends of the queen’s banquet invitation—

³⁵ Noted (and rejected as correct readings) in Levenson, *Esther*, 90–91; Moore, *Esther*, 57–58.

³⁶ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 70–71.

³⁷ Qtd. in Levenson, *Esther*, 91; Moore, *Esther*, 58.

even as Esther is plotting his downfall. His reveries are punctuated, though, by Mordecai's ongoing refusal to bow before him, and Haman's obsession with Mordecai's slights leads him and his friends to plan a fifty-cubit stake on which to impale Mordecai before Haman's return to Esther's second banquet (5:9–15).

Meanwhile back at the royal household, a sleepless Ahasuerus peruses the royal annals and is reminded that Mordecai never was rewarded for a kindness done to the king years earlier, shortly after Esther's accession to the queenship, when Mordecai helped foil a plot to assassinate the king. In a comic reversal worthy of the best vaudevillian pratfalls (and again, with no overt hint of divine intervention guiding the coincidence), Haman arrives at the palace to request Mordecai's execution at the precise moment that Ahasuerus ponders how best to reward Mordecai. Haman vainly mistakes the king's musings over how to reward an excellent (and unnamed) servant as a coy way to discover how best to reward Haman himself. In his typical self-aggrandizing manner, Haman in turn offers a garish royal treatment that the king embraces, commanding Haman to lead Mordecai through the streets, enrobed in the king's garb and riding the royal stallion, while Haman bleats out before him, "This is what is done for the man whom the king desires to honor!" (6:1–11). This event thus embodies a sort of inverse *lex talionis* in which the rewards sought by a wrongdoer are visited instead upon his intended victim.³⁸

³⁸ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 81. Fox notes the specific resonance of Prov 26:27 to this scene: "He who digs a pit will fall in it,/And whoever rolls a stone, it will roll back on him." Levenson and Fox both likewise note the particular proverb's significance to Haman's final undoing (Levenson, *Esther*, 105; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 88). In relation to this point, both Levenson and Fox note Shemaryahu Talmon's well known discussion of MT Esther as an "historicized wisdom-tale." Talmon specifically notes Haman's fate as evidence that he is numbered among the "wicked wise," rather than among those truly wise ("Wisdom in Esther," 445–46), listing Prov 26:27 among examples of wisdom literature related to the teachings of MT Esther.

I readily recognize the relevance of the proverb to Haman's final fate; after all, he is impaled on the very gallows he intended for Mordecai, and it will be Haman's people who will be executed by royal decree, rather than Mordecai's. My point, here, however is a bit different; Mordecai's receipt of a reward that Haman himself sought is an expression of another aspect of the wisdom tradition in which the good or righteous person not only avoids the trap of the wicked person but instead receives the reward the

The large number of coincidences in the Esther story has tripped up more than a few interpreters. Moore's interpretive logic exemplifies this tendency:

Unable to sleep, the king has his record book read to him, thereby finally learning that Mordecai had saved his life. Unlike the ancient versions, the MT does not attribute the king's sleeplessness to God. This does not mean, however, that the author of the Hebrew Esther did not believe in the active hand of Providence here [. . .] for Mordecai's victory over Haman (vs. 11) results from a series of seemingly trivial circumstances, or coincidences—the sleeplessness of the king (vs. 1); the particular passage concerning Mordecai's service to the king being read, in spite of all the recorded material available (vs. 2); Haman's early appearance in the king's court (vs. 4); and Haman's assumption that the king is really asking for new ways to honor him (vs. 6). While the skeptic may well call this series of events "luck" ("good luck" for Mordecai, "bad" for Haman), the religious person is more likely to call it "Providence" or "the hand of God."³⁹

Moore's conclusion perhaps fits the narrative of MT Esther; it most certainly fits with that of LXX and AT Esther. But the fittingness of this conclusion only belies the circular reasoning he has used to reach his point. Moore, like many interpreters offering a similar view, first suggests that the coincidences here and elsewhere in MT Esther represent evidence that the author "believes in the active hand of Providence" at work within the narrative world; the sheer volume of inexplicable coincidences, in other words, is evidence of God's presence at work in them. Yet Moore's final sentence in this passage admits that, to the contrary, one must *assume* the existence of such divine work in the story in order to recognize that the author intended to indicate "the hand of God" at work in the coincidences in the first place.

Narratively speaking, the evidence to prove the existence of God within the world of MT Esther must come from elsewhere than coincidental historical beneficence on behalf of the Jews. We need something more concretely evident of divine presence, and that evidence may then be

wicked person sought, as expressed in Prov 13:21–22: "Misfortune pursues sinners,/But the righteous are well rewarded./A good man has what to bequeath to his grandchildren./For the wealth of sinners is stored up for the righteous" (also noted, by the way, in *ibid.*, 448).

³⁹ Moore, *Esther*, 66–67.

used to explain why and how seeming coincidental events have been shaped by that same God's hand. At this point in the Esther story, we do not yet know whether or how God is at work in these events, particularly in the version of the story contained in MT Esther. From the vantage point of the story's ending, true, we may indeed be able to look back over the narrative to see how God has been active in it; but reading forward from the beginning, the story has not told us who or what (if anything) is at work here assisting Mordecai and the rest of the Jews. There is a theological point here that will be essential to our later understanding of the narrative: one of the lessons of MT Esther may be that the divine presence can be discerned not in the events themselves but rather in the aftermath shaped by those events.⁴⁰

Haman returns home crestfallen, and it is not just his wife and advisors, but the reader as well, who suddenly begins to recognize the moral of this story: "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish seed, you will not overcome him; you will fall before him to your ruin" (6:13).⁴¹ This comment, spoken by a gentile and lacking any reference to the LORD⁴² or to any aspect of Israelite religion, has struck many Christian readers as the height of secularity or

⁴⁰ It may sound above as though I am belaboring a point, but I beg the reader's patience. Locating God in MT Esther is one of the most troublesome aspects of interpreting the story. Locating God in the wrong places (or by the wrong process) creates even further interpretive confusion.

⁴¹ I have emended the JPS translation here, replacing *stock* with *seed*. The Hebrew word here, *zera*, allows a range of meanings, all associated with descendants or offspring. *Seed* here will help clarify connections that I will explore in the coming chapters.

⁴² In my desire that this project attempt to bridge interpretive divides between Jewish and gentile biblical scholarship, I will observe Jewish tradition concerning the use of the Divine Name (usually transliterated from the Hebrew as YHWH and referred to as the Tetragrammaton) and not offer a pronounced transliteration. Following the tradition observed in most English translations of the Bible, I will use the phrase "the LORD" (the second word typed in capital letters) to indicate that a text specifically refers to Israel's God using this particular Divine Name. I have quietly made such emendations in the texts I have cited as well. If a particular context requires further clarification than this, I will use the Tetragrammaton.

ethnic parochialism within the text.⁴³ It appears to affirm that this is a story of conflict between Jews and gentiles, and that this conflict is one that a gentile cannot win simply because he is not Jewish. Because religious concerns, particularly those of covenanted Israel, appear entirely absent from the story, it seems then that only brute ethnic warfare remains, and only the strongest of ethnic combatants will overcome. If so, then Haman appears to be the only person in the room (within or without of the narrative world) unable to see the inevitable ending to a tale such as this, told by a Jewish writer and featuring a Jewish protagonist.

Not surprisingly then, the story reaches its climax when Haman arrives the next day for the second banquet and what seemed just a day earlier to be the high point of his life in court. But when the Persian king asks his wife this third time what favor she seeks, the fall of Haman and the rise of Mordecai are now in full motion and in full view of all the empire. Until this moment, Esther has hidden from even her husband that she is a Jew.⁴⁴ Now, facing both the king and Haman, Queen Esther makes her entreaty: “If your Majesty will do me the favor, and if it pleases your Majesty, let my life be granted as my wish and my people as my request” (7:3).⁴⁵ The meaning of Esther’s request is not nearly as obvious as later interpreters have contended. It is not an assertion of Jewish nationalism or ethnocentrism; it is not in fact even a clear assertion of her Jewishness.

Recall that when Haman first proposed the decree of genocide, he did not refer to the

⁴³ As an aside, I find it ironic that gentile exegetes frequently read this statement as devoid of any religious content but demand a religious interpretation of the story’s coincidences.

⁴⁴ The king is unaware that Esther is Jewish in the tradition shared by MT and LXX Esther. In contrast, Ahasuerus knows his wife is Jewish in AT Esther and at this point in the story only now realizes that Haman was trying to destroy his wife’s people (AT Esth 8:14).

⁴⁵ Christian repugnance to the violence in MT Esther typically hinges on how one interprets the meaning of Esther’s request to allow the Jews to defend themselves—and what their ensuing actions accomplish. As I hope to show here, it is not at all clear that Esther has asserted an argument based on ethnic superiority or the rights of the Jews as Jews.

Jews by name. The decree, once written, “was written according to Haman’s command [. . .] in the name of the king Ahasuerus” (3:12); in other words, it is not at all clear from the text of MT Esther that Ahasuerus knows at this point exactly what people Haman has set out to exterminate.⁴⁶ Esther’s request, then, is a plea for survival in the face of her people’s genocide, *whoever* these people may be. “[W]e have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated,” Esther reveals to the king. “Had we only been sold as bondsmen and bondswomen, I would have kept silent, for the adversary is not worthy of the king’s trouble” (7:4). The king is furious and Haman cringes in terror. Haman, of course, recognizes with these words that Esther is a Jew; after all, *he* of all people knows the true, anti-Jewish purpose of the decree he wrote. Clearly, though, neither the king nor Haman was aware that Esther is one of the people living under the irrevocable edict of (Jewish) destruction. Despite the true danger of this moment—for the reader should understand that Esther is not sure how the king will respond⁴⁷—comedy makes an appearance as well. As soon as Ahasuerus huffs out of the room in response to Esther’s denunciation of Haman as “the adversary and enemy” (7:6), Haman in turn falls onto Esther’s couch in supplication, only for the king to return at the same moment. An incredulous Ahasuerus, still comically one step behind the story, cries out, “Does he mean to ravish the queen in my own palace?” (7:8), and Haman shortly finds himself hoist with his own petard, impaled on the very stake he had prepared earlier for Mordecai.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 218.

⁴⁷ David J.A. Clines, *Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, JSOT Supplement Series 30 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1984), 15.

⁴⁸ Clines, in contrast to the reading above, gives much more credit to Ahasuerus’ perceptions: “It is hard to believe that Ahasuerus seriously believes Haman is trying to rape Esther” (ibid., 175, n. 3); rather, Clines instead believes that Ahasuerus “in his ‘own’ presence, in his ‘own’ house, *chooses* to see the queen (he might as well have said his ‘own’ queen) assaulted” and thus uses this pretext to execute Haman for a treasonous attempt to seize power through control of a royal concubine or queen (ibid., 16, emphasis added). This reading of the scene seems unlikely, mainly because Ahasuerus at no other point in

Once Esther's request is granted, the tables are turned not only on Haman, but also on the other anti-Semites of the empire. In quick succession (and now with titles of office attached clearly to their names), Esther reveals to the king her relationship to Mordecai and thus to the Jewish community, and "Mordecai the Jew" replaces Haman in service to "Ahasuerus the king" and joins with "Esther the queen" in scheming a way to circumvent Haman's irrevocable decree. This convergence of the titled characters occurs in 8:7; intriguingly, Haman's name appears in this verse as well, but his name lacks his usual title, "the Agagite."⁴⁹ This reversal begins the unfolding of the story best summarized in Esth 9:1: "the opposite happened." Mordecai supplants Haman. Haman (and not Mordecai) is executed. The property and office of Haman pass respectively to Esther and to Mordecai, and Haman's people (in this case, his sons) are now the victims of the new irrevocable royal decree drafted by Mordecai: "The king has permitted the Jews of every city to assemble and to fight for their lives; if any people or province attacks them, they [i.e., the Jews] may destroy, massacre, and exterminate its armed forces together with women and children, and plunder their possessions" on the very day originally discerned by Haman's cast lot (8:11–12). And with this, we witness yet another reversal, this time of Ahasuerus' earlier method of administration. In this case, an imperial crisis has been resolved through a domestic scene, a quiet dinner party and a husband's desire to fulfill his wife's deepest wish.

When the appointed day arrives almost nine months later, the Jews ably defend

the story seems able to pursue a train of thought as wily as this instantaneous decision would require. The narrative in fact has relied on a characterization of Ahasuerus in which he tends to trust others to interpret events for him and rarely knows what actually is happening.

⁴⁹ This is likely intentional. As we will explore in more detail in chapter three, the reference to Haman as an Agagite likely contains within it a reference to his role as an "Amalekite," the eternal enemy of Israel and Israel's God (Exod 17 and 1 Sam 15), whose power and authority in the empire has now been broken.

themselves, but given the history of misreading at precisely this point, the defensive nature of this violence must be stressed. As Fox notes, the narrative presumes that only what we today would call virulent anti-Semites are the victims of this Jewish defense. “The phrase ‘to make a stand for their lives’ (8:11) shows that their lives were in danger,” Fox says. “They are not fighting against Gentiles as such, but only against the deliberate persecutors of the Jews, ‘the forces of every people and province who afflict them’ (8:11), in other words, armed bands (‘forces’) of assailants [. . .] who are endangering themselves by their own hostility.”⁵⁰ With months of delay between the promulgation of the dueling irrevocable decrees and the day of destruction itself, coupled with the displacement of Haman by Mordecai, only an anti-Semite could remain convinced of the wisdom in attacking the Jews at this point in the story.⁵¹

By the reversal’s culmination, more than 75,000 anti-Semites lie dead, and the greatness of Mordecai (now prime minister) and the strength of Queen Esther shine over the Persian Empire. The Persian Empire of MT Esther has been rid (for the moment at least) of anti-Semitism. The story’s last chapter suggests that Ahasuerus prospers in this new order, and Mordecai serves as a beloved and respected intercessor on behalf of the Jews. The festival of Purim is instituted as a celebration among friends and family and for sharing one’s wealth with the poor (9:2–23). All’s well that ends well.

⁵⁰ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 222.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 110–11. It is important to note that Fox is Jewish, and Jewish readings of Mordecai’s behavior and the battle in MT Esther typically offer interpretations much more sympathetic to the characters and the plight of the Jews within the narrative. Clines, in contrast, offers a perspective more typical among gentile interpreters, arguing that Mordecai’s decree enables a “pre-emptive strike” against non-aggressors who *might* someday threaten the Jews because, as Clines sees it, “not a single non-Jew has the courage to obey the first decree” (Clines, *Story of the Story*, 21). Clines here asserts that the gentile opponents did *not* rise up against the Jews; he instead contends that the Jews sought out their gentile opponents and attacked them (not only pre-emptively but also apparently when the gentiles were defenseless). He does not explain how he infers this claim from the text. Fox’s reading is not only more sympathetic to the characters but more attentive to the text of MT Esther as well.



Or so it seems. Some troubling aspects persist within this reading, however. Even with the success of Mordecai's decree in preserving the Jews, we still have not witnessed a decisive divine intervention in the story. This problem emerges most clearly when the story is seen in the context of another familiar biblical story that likewise involves the irrevocability of Persian law, that of Daniel in the lion's den. In the early part of the book of Daniel, another sympathetic imperial ruler (this time "Darius the Mede") three times is reminded that "it is a law of the Medes and Persians that any ban that the king issues under oath is unalterable" (Dan 6:8-9, 12-13, 15-16). He therefore must cast Daniel into the lions' den because the young Jew has practiced his ancestral religion in violation of a royal decree demanding that the citizens of the empire address their petitionary prayer only to the king. As David J.A. Clines emphasizes, this decree is equal to Haman's genocidal decree in being driven by petty gentile bureaucrats bent on destroying a Jewish colleague, but the resolution in the Daniel narrative is very different from what appears in MT Esther: "In the Daniel story the decree of the king is in the end nullified by a higher authority than the Persian law: God sends his angel to shut the lions' mouths (6.22)," Cline notes. "But in the Esther story we have been given not the slightest encouragement to expect any divine intervention," a situation that leaves Mordecai and Esther to muddle through as best they can and rely on "a strictly legal means of escape from their den of lions."⁵²

No prophets spoke to Mordecai or Esther the assuring word of God. No angel came with a message from the LORD. God was not in the fire, not in the storm, not in the whirlwind; there was no theophany that arrived in time to clarify the divine plan or to explain the divine

⁵² Clines, *Story of the Story*, 19. Strictly speaking, Clines has overstated this point. While the reader hears Daniel attribute his deliverance to divine intervention ("My God sent his angel, who shut the mouths of the lions so that they did not injure me" [Dan 6:23]), we do not know whether Daniel actually *saw* this angel or has inferred its presence from the fact of his survival in the lion's den.

motivations. Further, MT Esther lacks overt reference to any aspect of Israel’s covenanted existence: there is no mention of the Temple, no mention of the priesthood, no mention of the Davidic kingship, no mention of Sinai, no mention of the Promised Land—indeed no mention even of the land of Israel.⁵³ MT Esther in fact is one of only two books in the Hebrew Bible that lacks any reference whatsoever to God.⁵⁴ This seeming complete lack of connection—at least on the story’s surface—to the LORD or to the history of Israel’s covenant with the LORD has suggested to many gentile interpreters that the story’s ending is a Jewish, rather than divine, restoration of order to the otherwise peaceful Persian Empire.

The Babylonian Talmud⁵⁵ suggests that a small minority of rabbinic authorities saw something profoundly unsettling in the story’s combination of Jewish violence with seeming divine silence. As told in Tractate Megillah through a midrashic encounter between Esther and the sages, a group of rabbis were troubled by the Esther story: “Said Rav Samuel bar Judah: Esther sent to the sages: Establish me for all generations. They sent to her: You are stirring up enmity against us among the nations of the world.” Rav Samuel cited in addition to this his father’s claim that such a book could not be inspired Scripture: “Said Rav Judah, said Samuel: The scroll of Esther does not defile the hands, meaning that Samuel thinks that Esther was not

⁵³ As Levenson notes, “One surprising aspect of the political thinking of the book of Esther is its complete lack of interest in the land of Israel” (*Esther*, 14). True, when Mordecai is introduced in MT Esther, there is mention that he is descended from a family of the tribe of Benjamin deported from Jerusalem at the time of “Jeconiah king of Judah” (Esth 2:5–6), and one so might argue that the reference to Jerusalem and to a “king of Judah” necessarily implies a connection to the Davidic kingship. In the narrative context, though, this seems much more likely to serve as little more than an historical marker.

Conversely, the references in the Esther story to Shimei and Kish of the tribe of Benjamin are much more important in terms of the religious or theological meaning of the text, as we shall see in the chapter three.

⁵⁴ The other is the Song of Songs.

⁵⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all translations of the Babylonian Talmud come from Jacob Neusner, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*, trans. Jacob Neusner et al. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009).

said through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”

Esther herself pre-emptively responds to the sages in the midrash, however: “I am already recorded in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia,” she reminds them, implicitly pointing out that these gentile records acknowledge her story without rancor or rage against the Jews. Other rabbinic authorities offer another angle:

R. Eliezer says: The scroll of Esther was said through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as is said, “And Haman thought to himself” (Est. 6:6). R. Aqiba says: Esther was said through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as is said, “and Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her” (Est. 2:15). R. Meir says: Esther was said through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as is said “and the thing became known to Mordecai” (Est. 2:22). R. Yosé son of the Damascene woman says: Esther was said through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as is said, “and they did not take any of the spoils” (Est. 9:15).⁵⁶

The cited references to inspiration found within the Esther story seem random, perhaps even forced, at first glance; but they are quite consistent in their collective point. Haman’s “thought to himself” in Esth 6:6 concerned how to honor one whom the king wishes to honor—Mordecai, as it moments later turns out to be. Esther finds “favor in the eyes of all” the gentiles around her from her entry into the Persian court. The “thing [that] became known to Mordecai” in 2:22 is the gentile plot against Ahasuerus, which Mordecai and Esther help to foil. And lastly, the Jews showed themselves favorably to the gentiles of the Persian Empire when they refused spoil in their defeat of the anti-Semites who attacked them. Far from “stirring up enmity,” the Esther story within its own pages (according to this set of rabbis) reveals a divinely inspired respect among the gentiles.

All the same, the relative silence over the next several hundred years among Christian interpreters of Scripture appears to confirm that the Christian tradition followed the lines of Rav Samuel and his father. Early Christian readings tend to look only at the story’s violence and

⁵⁶ *Meg.* 7a.

other elements isolated from the broader context of the story as a whole. Clement of Rome, in his *First Epistle*, offers one of the rare moments that a Church Father actually engages the Esther narrative (although it appears that he is discussing the Septuagint version rather than the story as found in the Masoretic Text): “To no smaller danger did Esther, being perfect in faith, expose herself, that she might deliver the twelve tribes of Israel, who were about to perish. For by fasting and humiliation she besought the Master, who overlooketh all things, the God of Ages, who, seeing the humiliation of her soul, delivered the people for whose sake she put herself in jeopardy.” St. Augustine, in a similar manner, makes only two fleeting references to the book of Esther throughout his works. In his *City of God*, he lists the book as an example of “historical” works from the post-exilic era of biblical writings (XVIII.36), while in his *Christ’s Grace and Original Sin*, he discusses the example of Ahasuerus’ apparent change of heart when Esther, unbidden, first approaches him on his throne (Esth 5:1). Augustine uses this example (among other biblical texts) to counter the Pelagians’ claim that the fallen human will is free to respond on its own initiative to God’s desires: “Let them read and understand, observe and acknowledge, that it is not by law and teaching uttering their examples without, but by a secret, wonderful, and ineffable power operating within, that God works in men’s hearts not only revelations of the truth, but also good disposition of the will” (I.25). Augustine here contends that Ahasuerus’ change of heart (present only in LXX Esther, by the way) illustrates how divine intervention is the true motivation for the good. Ahasuerus does not change his heart; God does.⁵⁷

These views are the exceptions that prove the rule. Overwhelmingly, the early Church teachers ignored the text, and even when “using” it, these early Christian interpreters often instead drew strained examples from the story in order to prove a moral or homiletical point at

⁵⁷ Ibid., 192–93; Paton, *Esther*, 101.

best tangentially related to the text. Such didactic examples would seem to work, however, only if the listener is familiar with the narrative in the first place. This leaves us in something of a quandary: the sheer lack of references to the Esther narrative in surviving early Church writings might serve as evidence, on the one hand, that little attention was paid to the story in the congregational setting. On the other hand, fleeting references by their very nature assume a high degree of cultural capital. The listener needs to fill in the details and make sense of the reference on his or her own. The Esther story in this case must have been familiar enough that figures like Clement and Augustine could assume their readers and listeners knew some basic form of the story to which they were referring.

This latter point seems more likely as we turn to the increasing usage of the Esther text in the medieval period. In these instances the medieval churchmen regularly drew on the narrative of Esther's unbidden approach to Ahasuerus and saw in this a typological or allegorical representation of how Mary intercedes on behalf of Christians before God. A medieval carol offers a fine representative example:

King Assuere was wrothe, inis,
Whenne Quene Vasty had done amys,
And of her crowne privat she is;
But, when Hester his yerde did kis,
 By hir mekenes
She changed his moode to softnes.

King Assuere is God Almyth,
And Quene Vasty synag[ogu]e hight,
But, when Vasty had lost hir light
Quene Hester thane did shyne full bright,
 For she forth brought
The Sonne of God, that alle hath wrought.⁵⁸

This translates roughly into modern English as:

⁵⁸ Cited in Carruthers, *Through the Centuries*, 195.

King Ahasuerus was full of wrath, indeed,
When Queen Vashti had acted amiss,
So of her crown she was deprived;
But when Esther his rod [i.e. scepter] did kiss,
 By her meekness,
She changed his mood to softness

King Ahasuerus is God Almighty,
And the synagogue is named Queen Vashti,
But when Vashti had lost her light,
Queen Esther then did shine fully bright,
 For she brought forth
The Son of God, who all has formed.

This Christian reading of the Esther narrative has upended the Jewish and gentile identities of the characters and has rather obviously turned the story into a markedly anti-Jewish polemic, the disobedient (gentile) Vashti of the original story here a symbol for the (Jewish) synagogue. Esther, by contrast, remains a Jew, but her Jewishness is now mapped as a type of the Virgin Mary along with whom Esther inexplicably now “forth brought/The Sonne of God,” i.e., Jesus of Nazareth.

This sort of allegorical reading of the Esther story had become so common by the late medieval period that the entire effect could be communicated with a fleeting (and what may seem to the modern reader jarring) reference to Jesus as Ahasuerus in another medieval carol addressed to Mary:

With lovely chere pray thy Sonne dere,
King Assuere, in blis so clere,
That we in fere to hym may appere,
O dulcis Maria.⁵⁹

Again, a rough translation into modern English might suggest:

With lovely manner, offer prayer to your Son dear,
[Who is] King Ahasuerus, [pray] with bliss so clear,
That we in fear before him may appear,

⁵⁹ Carruthers, *Through the Centuries*, 195.

O sweet Mary.

The complex theological maneuvers occurring here are quite impressive. Esther's approach to the king has been interpreted again as a type of Mary's approach to Jesus; yet in referring to Jesus as "Assuere" (i.e., Ahasuerus), the hymn also communicated the Christological assertion that Jesus is the same in being as "God Almyth" of other medieval carols. This high Christology is reinforced by the (here untold but assumed) Esther narrative itself, in which no person—other than Esther/Mary herself—may approach the (Divine) King unbidden. The believer is now dependent on the intercessions of Mary before a distant God/Jesus even as the Jews in the story are dependent on the success of Esther's intercessions. The sexual overtones of the Esther-Ahasuerus relationship are likewise tamed in the latter carol through reference to Mary's *dulcis* (i.e., sweet or soothing) disposition. She has become the chaste partner of Ahasuerus, neatly avoiding the tangled sexuality of the earlier carol in which Esther/Mary kisses the *yerde* (i.e., rod) of the king in order to bring him to a peaceful state.

The telegraphic nature of the reference in the latter carol strongly suggests that in some form the basic Esther story remained well known among at least some Christians as late as the medieval period. The meaning (and the inferred theological lesson) of the entire stanza depends on the listener being able to reconstruct the story through a single reference to Ahasuerus and then to map that story onto the interrelationships between Jesus, Mary, and the believer. That carols such as these were meant to be heard and sung in the broader community of the faithful only reinforces our awareness that, in marked contrast to the modern day, the story of Esther played an important function in the theological life and training of the average medieval Christian.

Indeed, the growing shrillness found in the readings offered by Reformation interpreters

may suggest that the Esther story was speaking to members of the Christian community in some way that the Reformers sought to repress.⁶⁰ Perhaps most famously, Martin Luther condemned the story with what would become the basic outlines of a much more overtly hostile stance toward the book. In the midst of denouncing the canonical value of 2 Maccabees, Luther widened his condemnation: “I am so hostile to [2 Maccabees] and to Esther that I wish they did not exist at all, for they Judaize too greatly and have much pagan impropriety.”⁶¹ He added that Jews “love the Book of Esther[,] which so befits their bloodthirsty, vengeful, murderous greed and hope.”⁶² Luther’s view shone brightly for centuries, illuminating in its fiery glare a host of distorted interpretations. Carruthers summarizes the concerns leveled at the story by an Anglican minister in 1837, finding in this rector’s condemnations “a good catalogue of [typical] accusations against it: it contains no promise to the Church, makes no mention of the Gospel, has no type or prophecy of the Messiah, does not once introduce the name of God or recognize his providence, reveals none of ‘those precious and fundamental doctrines’ found elsewhere in the Old Testament, and is not quoted in the New Testament.”⁶³

By the twentieth century, the Reformation perspective seems firmly planted within

⁶⁰ We will return to this point—and another range of Esther interpretations available to Christians—later.

⁶¹ Qtd. in Carey A. Moore, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah: The Additions*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 155, n. 5.

⁶² Qtd. in Edward L. Greenstein, “A Jewish Reading of Esther,” in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. Jacob Neusner (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 239, n. 2.

⁶³ The Rev. J.W. Niblock, qtd. in Carruthers, *Through the Centuries*, 13. The final concern in the list is odd, given that Ahasuerus’ vow to grant “even [. . .] half the kingdom” to Esther (Esth 5:3) clearly is repeated in Herod’s equally rash promise to grant Herodias’ daughter “anything you ask, even half my kingdom,” in the Marcan account of the beheading of John the Baptizer (Mark 6:17–29). The vow appears only in this Gospel and in a scene likely involving no eyewitnesses from among the followers of Jesus, suggesting it is most likely part of a historical set piece freely composed by the Marcan writer and perhaps meant to allude to the Esther story, rather than a record of a mere historical *datum*.

typical Protestant exegesis of the story. Wilhelmina Stitch, for instance, emphasized in her 1935 commentary on *Women of the Bible* that “a true Christian cannot be a Nationalist,” yet the Esther story (from her perspective) was “clearly written by a Nationalist gone mad [. . .] an example of what happens when people think Nationalism is a fine thing, forgetting that God, who is to be loved warmly and abidingly, has no enemies.”⁶⁴ In 1943, Charles C. Torrey cited similar sentiments among his academic peers, who saw in the book of Esther “[a]n almost grotesque expression of hatred of the Gentiles” and a “hatred of the heathen, probably unparalleled in ferocity.”⁶⁵ Following this line of interpretation, L. E. Browne in 1962 called the story “a picture of unredeemed humanity,” revealing only characters (including the Jewish heroes) who are “actuated by the basest motives of pride, greed, and cruelty.” Barry Walfish confirms that this view persists: “Many Christian scholars and not a few Jews, even in [the late twentieth] century, are offended by [the Scroll’s] particularistic, nationalist tone and especially by the bloody scenes of revenge and the joyful triumph of the Jews over their enemies.”⁶⁶ Such violence, Walfish decides, is “an embarrassment.”

With his well-known essay, “The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible,” Bernhard W. Anderson represents a disturbing zenith in this interpretive trend. Writing in 1950 after the horrors of the Shoah had been revealed (if insufficiently reckoned with), Anderson nonetheless emphasizes that “Christians are under no obligation to read all parts of Scripture either for instruction or for profit.” This applies “especially [to] the Book of Esther,” Anderson

⁶⁴ Qtd. in *ibid.*, 42–43.

⁶⁵ Charles C. Torrey, “The Older Book of Esther,” *Harvard Theological Review* 37, no. 1 (January 1944): 10.

⁶⁶ Qtd. in Carruthers, *Through the Centuries*, 10.

continues.⁶⁷ “If the Christian minister is faithful to [his] context, he will *not* take his text from Esther; and if the leader of a Church school class shows *any* discernment, he will not waste time trying to show that the heroes of the book are models of character, integrity, [or] piety.”⁶⁸ Anderson’s rejection of the Esther story, like that of the other views noted, rests in his understanding of its violence, but note in particular the stark choice Anderson poses for the Christian reader in his dismissal of the text. “The church should recognize the book for what it is,” Anderson unequivocally states: “a witness to the fact that Israel, in pride, either made nationalism a religion of complete indifference to God or presumptuously identified God’s historical purpose with the preservation and glorification of the Jewish people.”⁶⁹ Given his essay’s publication date, it is nothing short of shocking that Anderson is not more aware of the obvious connection to draw between Haman’s threat and the Nazi program of genocide. That he instead places the blame for a “religion of nationalism” on the Jews facing genocide—and apparently never notices the truly horrific irony of such language in a post-Nazi (i.e., *National Socialist*) era—is deeply troubling. The rise of German National Socialism may be one of the most distinct examples of “ma[king] nationalism a religion of complete indifference to God” available to history.

Anderson did not waver in these views, adding in his commentary on Esther in the 1954 *Interpreter’s Bible* that the book of Esther stands at “radical variance with New Testament Christianity” due to Esther’s emphasis on ethnic distinctions that Christianity supposedly transcends. In a chilling example of blaming the victim, Anderson suggests that the “will of the

⁶⁷ Bernhard W. Anderson, “The Place of Esther in the Christian Bible,” in *Studies in the Book of Esther*, ed. Carey A. Moore (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1982), 140.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

Jews to survive as a distinct people” is the cause of their persecution and that this desire is motivated by a Jewish hatred for outsiders: “It was literally impossible for them to tolerate anything non-Jewish and remain Jews.”⁷⁰ Decades later, David J.A. Clines, in an otherwise sympathetic reading of the story, wanders into language similarly reminiscent of Nazism when he states that MT Esther reveals the Jews as “the *master race* [. . .] who in the bloodbath of ch. 9 ‘get the mastery over their foes’ (9.1), finding that ‘no one could make a stand against them’ because ‘the fear of them,’ as if some numinous dread, had fallen upon all other races (9.2).”⁷¹



As the views of these hostile gentile readers appear to confirm, the book of Esther portrays Jews in a manner not likely to be well understood or well received outside the Jewish community. Gentile readers have gone to great lengths throughout Christian history to demonstrate that the violence and killing undertaken by the Jews in MT Esther is not accomplished—in fact, could not be accomplished—“in the name of God.” As we will see in the coming chapters, this is the problem that the book of Esther poses to the Christian story as it is understood today. Christian interpreters see the story’s violence as ethnic, nationalistic, prideful, or what have you, because they appear unable to fathom the implications that arise if the violence in the Esther story is religious or divine in its source. Likewise, we have seen (and will see later in more detail) that for many Christian interpreters, a deliverance achieved by the Jews’ own hands violates the primary Christian understanding of how the God of the Bible

⁷⁰ Cited in Carruthers, *Through the Centuries*, 43.

⁷¹ Clines, *Story of the Story*, 14, emphasis added. Of course, Clines’ language appears to invert the dichotomy of the master- and slave-races as posed by Nazi ideology. Even this reversal, however, draws close to the Nazi concerns: the Jews were perceived by Nazi ideologues as *trying* to act as the master race by displacing the *true* master race. I think we need to be acutely sensitive to any echoes of anti-Semitism in gentile biblical interpretation. As I hope to show, it is likely the case that Christian resistance to the meaning of the Esther story may be based on deeply ingrained anti-Semitic theological assumptions.

miraculously delivers his Chosen People. Apparently, a military victory—at least as portrayed in the Esther story—does not constitute a divine miracle. The problem grows worse as the theological implications deepen: if the Jews were delivered by God in this way, then salvation history does not work in the manner many Christian exegetes expect. Lastly, as we will see in chapter five, it appears that because the protagonists in the Esther story specifically are called *Jews* (in Hebrew, *yěhūdīm*), rather than *Israelites* (*běně yiśrā'ēl*), there may be a deeper and more profound challenge that the book of Esther brings to the Christian story. This portrayal of Jewish victory may be a sign of persistent divine favor and divine deliverance for the Jews. If so, it also is a portrayal that requires the Christian story to acknowledge the continuing status of the Jews as the Chosen People of God.

The Esther story creates a disturbing problem for the post-Reformation Christian understanding of Scripture, seen already by Martin Luther but vocalized by Torrey's contemporaries: "From the moral point of view [of post-Reformation theology,] the book has little to commend it to civilized persons."⁷² If the Esther story is nothing more than a portrayal of violent Jewish nationalism lacking any connection to the biblical God, then "[t]he compilers of the Hebrew canon made a serious blunder when they took in this book."⁷³ This conclusion reveals the paradox that the book of Esther poses for the Church. If the story is an ethnocentric, nonreligious tale of nationalism "gone mad," then the compilers of the biblical canon truly did blunder. The admission of defect in the structural integrity of the canon, even simply to challenge the place of one seemingly marginal text, undermines the stabilizing parameters that the canon offers to the Christian story, as we earlier saw articulated by Stanley Hauerwas and the Catholic bishops gathered at the Second Vatican Council. To label any version of the Esther

⁷² Qtd. in Torrey, "Older Esther," 10.

⁷³ Qtd. in *ibid.*

story as a canonical “blunder” challenges the coherence and integrity of the canonization process and that of the canonical Scriptures of Christianity themselves.

Esther remains, as Timothy Beal put it, “a particular problem” for Christian theology. It remains our work throughout the remaining chapters to understand where precisely that problem is located and what its resolution means for Christian thought about Scripture and, ultimately, about the Church’s relationship to Israel as well. If the Jewish and Christian understanding of Scripture is correct, we cannot today change the Scriptures to fit our personal needs. We instead may need to learn to submit our theological tools to the hard discipline of reading (and being read by) the Scriptures handed to us by the tradition. The delicate art of Christian theology lies in this place in which an ancient text can breathe new life into a modern tradition. We must learn to let the Esther story breathe in the Church and in our generation anew.

Chapter Two. A Set of Greek Correctives

“This is God’s doing,” says Mordecai near the end of the Greek versions of the Esther story. “The Lord has saved his people. The Lord has rescued us from all these evils” (F:1, 6b).¹ This view of the events in the Esther story may seem unduly pious, extending far beyond the meaning of the narrative told in the version familiar to most readers. As in MT Esther, the enemies of Israel in the Greek versions are defeated by the Jews in armed battle, and Haman and his sons are likewise hanged by officers of the state. No theophany alters the course of events. These narrative facts have not changed. Yet with numerous references to the Lord² and to “*his*

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations of material from the deuterocanonical “Additions” to the book of Esther come from Moore, *Additions*. Citations will be noted parenthetically in the main text. Emendations, when necessary, will be noted. From this chapter forward, I will use an additional set of abbreviations to clarify which version of the Esther story I am discussing. All citations of the book of Esther will use the following form:

AT xx:xx (a passage from AT Esther)

MT xx:xx (a passage from MT Esther)

LXX xx:xx (a passage from LXX Esther)

If a passage is cited only by a capital A, B, C, D, E, or F and a verse, the passage comes from the respective chapter of the Additions to the book of Esther, and it may be assumed that the versions of the passage in AT and LXX Esther are virtually identical in content, even if there is slight variance in the wording between the versions. When specific wording or content is important in its divergence, this will be noted. When a passage is quoted and followed by citations from two different versions, this means that the versions share the ideas or content quoted, but the material appears in different verses.

² English translation convention reserves the use of the form *LORD* (all caps) exclusively for translation of the Tetragrammaton, i.e., the Hebrew יהוה (YHWH). Because the Septuagint versions and the Alpha-Text of Esther (as we currently have them) are written in Greek, there is no place in which the Divine Name appears. However, the writers/redactors of other Septuagint texts consistently use the term κύριος to translate the Tetragrammaton in those places where the Greek is a direct translation of the Hebrew. We thus may assume that such references in the biblical Greek of the Septuagint—even outside these direct translations—likely indicate either a Hebrew (or at least Semitic) *Vorlage* in which the Tetragrammaton actually appears or (in the case of Greek additions to texts) that κύριος stands in for the

people,” the Greek versions move the Esther story firmly out of the realm of theological ambiguity and directly into contact with the covenantal traditions of ancient Israel.

Extant only in Greek recensions, the Septuagint (LXX) and Alpha-Text (AT) versions of the Esther story make free and regular reference to the God of Israel, typically naming him either *θεός* (*theos*, the word the LXX tradition typically uses to translate the Hebrew *Elohim*) or *κύριος* (*kurios*, the Greek term used by the LXX writers and redactors to translate the Tetragrammaton). The LXX and AT traditions likewise do not hesitate to ascribe divine motivation and intervention at key moments in the Esther story and to credit the God of Israel as the ultimate actor in the Jews’ deliverance. In this respect, Lewis Bayles Paton is surely correct in noting that “[t]here is scarcely a verse from which one or more words of [MT Esther] are not deleted” or altered in some way, despite the fact that LXX Esther appears to follow MT Esther rather closely³ and AT Esther follows almost all of the main strands of the Hebrew story.

But these minor variants, numerous though they are, do not represent the full extent of the LXX and AT expansions to the story. As I passingly noted in the last chapter, both the LXX and AT versions of the Esther story also contain six additional chapters of narrative information, often simply referred to as the “Additions.” While it is no doubt true that a theological shift of great significance lies in the Additions’ *overt* discussion of God’s work and the religious practices of the story’s Jewish characters, the difference between the basic Esther story and that of the Additions does *not* lie in a contrast between a “secular” Esther story and a “sacred” one. Such a distinction not only would be anachronistic when applied to texts of ancient Israel or post-exilic Judaism, but as I hope to show, it also is a mistaken reading of the various Esther

Tetragrammaton.

³ *Esther*, 33–34.

narratives. The Additions to the book of Esther are an interpretive lens—perhaps the oldest extant interpretive lens—used to read the Esther story within the covenanted community.⁴ Its age does not render the lens defective; quite to the contrary, it appears that the “corrective” offered by the Additions has been placed there to make visible that which is already present in hiding in the Hebrew book of Esther, and it is this quest for theological visibility that defines the major divergences between the Hebrew and Greek recensions of the Esther story that we possess today.



Interpreters have argued that MT Esther (or at least some prior Semitic version quite close to the Masoretic Text’s story) served as the *Vorlage*, or preliminary version, for both LXX and AT Esther.⁵ Both the LXX and the AT Esther stories clearly run longer than MT Esther,

⁴ André LaCocque has argued that LXX and AT Esther are divergent expansions of MT Esther, developed in order to speak to different religious audiences. What LaCocque says of AT Esther applies as well to his understanding of the LXX version: “[W]hat the extant Hebrew text kept deftly unsaid or understated for an internal use of the Jewish community is now spelled out and explicated in an epigonic work influenced by Greek mentality” (LaCocque, “Different Versions,” 320). For LaCocque, the divergences between LXX and AT Esther have been shaped by the needs of their intended audiences; the LXX was meant primarily for Greek-speaking Jews, while the AT was intended for Greek-speaking gentiles.

The relative merit of LaCocque’s understanding of the story’s redaction history will be discussed later. Suffice to say for now, virtually all modern critical interpretations of the Esther story agree that the Additions are, in fact, additions and not part of the original narrative, whatever shape the earliest Esther story took.

⁵ LaCocque rehearses and ultimately restates the traditional argument that MT Esther is the *Vorlage* of the tradition in “Different Versions” and in *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel’s Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). This view has faced considerable challenge in recent years. The major contemporary challenge has been offered by David J.A. Clines in *Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, JSOT Supplement Series 30 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1984), where Clines argues that AT Esther represents a translation and redaction of a separate Hebrew *Vorlage* that predates MT Esther. This view has been adopted in large part by Michael V. Fox in his *The Redaction of the Books of Esther* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996) and his *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), as well as by Jon D. Levenson in his *Esther*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1997). One classic variant of this view that does not receive adequate attention is that of Charles C. Torrey, offered in his “The Older Book of Esther,” *Harvard Theological Review* 37, no. 1 (January 1944): 1–40. Torrey here offers the intriguing argument that an Aramaic(!) *Vorlage* precedes all three extant versions of the Esther story. More on these issues will emerge as we move through the argument in this chapter.

each expanded in different ways and at different points but with the same seeming purpose: to establish more clearly a distinct set of religious motivations and actions among the Jewish characters in the story. This point, however, begs the question of origins. If we count the basic narrative and plot elements contained in the MT Esther narrative as *the* Esther story,⁶ it appears that there are at least two—and perhaps even three⁷—textual traditions that have been preserved in the MT, LXX, and AT versions of Esther. LXX Esther may be a free and paraphrastic translation and redaction of MT Esther (as St. Jerome appears to have assumed in his translation known as the Vulgate⁸), but AT Esther differs from the other two in enough substantive ways

⁶ For simplicity's sake, I have done just this in chapters two, three, and four of this argument. Doing so does not imply that I am arguing that MT Esther is the *Vorlage* of the other versions of the story; however, as I hope to show, I do think MT Esther best preserves the basic narrative of the Esther story as it became significant to the liturgical practice of Judaism and then of Christianity.

⁷ The question of how many textual traditions we have before us depends on how closely one believes LXX Esther depends on MT Esther.

⁸ St. Jerome's Vulgate is his translation of the Christian Scriptures into Latin, the "vulgar" or common language of the Church of his time. Jerome (ca. 347–420 CE) was one of the few pre-modern Christian biblical scholars committed to the study of the Christian Old Testament as *Hebrew* Scriptures—in other words, as texts written natively in Hebrew. Several books of the Greek Septuagint posed serious challenges for Jerome's work. Not only were some books of the LXX (Tobit, Judith, Maccabees, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Sirach) missing entirely from the Hebrew scroll collections of the Jewish community known by Jerome, but others—Daniel, Jeremiah, and Esther in particular—exhibited widely divergent texts in terms of order and content when compared with their Hebrew counterparts. Jerome's translation solution, ingenious from an academic standpoint but a disaster in terms of liturgical practice, was to translate the text of the Christian Old Testament into Latin directly from the Hebrew texts available to him, but then to separate the Greek books (and sections of books) that were absent from the Hebrew "canon" before him and to place them in a "second canon" at the end of his translation (hence the term *deuterocanonical* for these texts within the Roman Catholic tradition). A revision of Jerome's Vulgate remains the standard (or "typical") biblical text for ecclesial practice, liturgy, and personal spiritual enrichment in the Roman Catholic Church (John Paul II, "Scripturarum Thesaurus: By Which the New Vulgate Edition Is Declared 'Typical' and Is Promulgated" April 25, 1979, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_19790425_scripturarum-thesaurus_en.html).

Regarding the book of Esther in particular, Jerome literally plucked out the LXX chapters that did not share a corresponding Hebrew counterpart and left these decontextualized chapters existing on their own within his separated collection of deuterocanonical works. He then ignored in his translation the numerous minor variants, omissions, and additions that appear in the LXX chapters that correspond to those in MT Esther and chose for these chapters to translate solely from the Hebrew. Perhaps needless to say, this decision implies strongly that the LXX rests on the Hebrew version as its *Vorlage*. See Paton,

that it appears to some to have a different Hebrew *Vorlage*, one that David J.A. Clines has argued originally grew from a very different authorial intent and featured a radically different ending from what we see in MT Esther.⁹

Without losing track of our primary argument, it may be helpful to discuss at least some of the key discrepancies among the three traditions, at least so far as the basic Esther story is concerned, before we turn to the content of the Additions as a whole. We have already noted some of these: the language differences among the extant traditions, as well as their differing understandings of Esther and Mordecai's relationship. MT Esther states that Esther is Mordecai's cousin by birth and his daughter by adoption (MT 2:7), while the LXX in the exact same verse contends that she also is his fiancé or wife (LXX 2:7). In contrast, there is no mention in the AT of adoption or marriage in the connection between Mordecai and his cousin. It merely notes that Mordecai "was faithfully bringing up his uncle's daughter, Esther" (AT 3:7),¹⁰ and makes no attempt to clarify their relationship any further.

The three traditions offer conflicting dates for various events with the story, as well as conflicting motivations for characters' actions. The conflicting date arises because the versions disagree on the Persian king's identity.¹¹ MT Esther and the AT (as well as the Old Latin and the

Esther, 31–34.

⁹ *Story of the Story*, 139–74. I will discuss later some problems with this view, at least in its assumptions that there is a specific, non-Purim related written *Vorlage* underlying AT Esther.

¹⁰ Unless otherwise noted, all translations of AT Esther come from the appended text and translation offered in Clines, *Story of the Story*.

¹¹ For general discussions of the problems at stake in determining the identity of the Persian king portrayed in the versions of the book of Esther, see Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 339–46; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 131–39; Levenson, *Esther*, 23–27; Moore, *Esther*, xxxvi–xlvi, 3–4; and Paton, *Esther*, 51–54. Paton's commentary is particularly interesting in this respect. Writing in the early years of the twentieth century, Paton is able to note the variety of assertions about Ahasuerus' identity in the generations before him, but he also is able to rely on archaeological data that has connected the Hebrew of the MT as a clear transliteration of the Old Persian and so identified Ahasuerus ("as to leave no doubt") with Xerxes (53).

Vulgate¹²) name the king *Ahasuerus*, a name that appears to originate in a Hebrew phonetic transliteration of the Old Persian name *Xšayāršān*, known to modern readers by the Greek name *Xerxes I* or *Xerxes the Great* (MT 1:1; AT A:1).¹³ Xerxes I ruled from 485–465 BCE, which means that if he is the king described in the story, then the narrative in MT Esther appears to begin in 483 or 482 BCE, “in the third year of his reign” (MT 1:3), and Esther was proclaimed queen “during [or shortly after] the seventh year of his reign” (2:16), or about 478 BCE. Haman’s decree was promulgated early “in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus” (3:7, 12) and was undone by Esther and Mordecai only a couple months later that same regnal year. The self-defense of the Jews took place at the end of the twelfth year of Ahasuerus’ reign (9:1), roughly ca. 472 BCE. Despite its economic narration and main focus on a period covering only a few months of narrative time, this chronology reveals that the broad story in MT Esther covers a robust span of time, about nine years.¹⁴ Conversely, the LXX labels Esther’s royal husband as *Artaxerxes* (LXX A:1), an altogether different Persian king who reigned from 465 to 424 BCE. The Esther story then begins in 464 or 463 BCE because the preliminary events of LXX Esther begin in the *second* year of Artaxerxes’ reign (A:1). The other events of the text occur in time frames equivalent to those noted in MT Esther, all now just twenty years later and spanning about a decade’s worth of time within the narrative world.

The point of this chronological exercise is not to argue for the historical reliability of a given version of the story. Rather, it is to demonstrate that historical narrative—fictional, didactic, or otherwise—places events in a known historical context that in turn shapes the

¹² Moore, *Additions*, 174.

¹³ Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 345.

¹⁴ I am indebted on this point to Michael F. Fox (in his *Character and Ideology*) for his careful attention to the passage of time within the Esther narrative.

meaning of the story's events. In this case, the intention behind the changing identity of the Persian ruler may be something as simple as different redactors seeking to connect the good Persian king of the story with a particular ruler that the Jewish audience of his time would find favorable. Intriguing connections emerge, for instance, if the Persian king in the book of Esther is identified with Artaxerxes, as the LXX overtly states. Interestingly, this connection is also strongly implied in how the later editors arranged the Hebrew Bible. These editors gathered Esther, Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah together in the final canonical section of Scripture known as the *kētūbīm* (literally, the “writings”) and so separated them from the other texts that formed ancient Israel's collection of history and prophecy known as the Former and Latter Prophets.¹⁵

Thus, if the Ahasuerus of MT Esther is identified with Artaxerxes, then the events of Ezra and Nehemiah occur within the context of the events unfolding in the Esther story. Ezra the scribe is commissioned to travel to Palestine by the same king, “in the seventh year of the reign of king Artaxerxes” (Ez 7:7), roughly the same time that the LXX Esther tradition asserts that she was declared queen. Nehemiah would follow Ezra to Palestine in “the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes” (Neh 2:1) after serving as his personal cupbearer (1:11) and presumably while Mordecai remained in place as the king's vizier. This interpretive approach connects the Esther story to the book of Daniel as well. The later visions in Daniel are described by the author as taking place during the first year of the reign of Darius II, the illegitimate son of Artaxerxes (9:1).¹⁶ This implies that the earlier events of Daniel's life similarly overlap in some way with

¹⁵ It is likely that this textual arrangement arose due more to the history of canonization, rather than to any overt theological point intended by the biblical editors. The section of the Hebrew Bible known as the Writings was gathered as a collection only after the sections known as the Torah and the Prophets were already closed. Granted this, it nonetheless is an interesting intertextual connection within the Writings that Esther, Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah all relate stories of Jews in roughly the same time period, struggling with aspects of the royal court of the Persian Empire.

¹⁶ The author(s) and/or redactor(s) of Daniel displays a remarkably incoherent understanding of

the events described in the book of Esther, regardless of the confused royal references in the earlier chapters of Daniel.

True, if the Ahasuerus of MT and AT Esther is identified instead with Xerxes I, then this set of overt intertextual connections disappears, at least as far as the Esther story is concerned, but my argument here does not depend on the Ahasuerus-Artaxerxes connection because the display of this intertextuality also appears in the canonical arrangement of the Hebrew Bible, which sets these books in the order of Esther, Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. This arrangement appears to follow an “historical” narrative, the book of Esther describing the earliest events and Nehemiah narrating the latest. This arrangement suggests (in a manner similar to that accomplished by the final editor of the Deuteronomistic History) that a divine hand has shaped the history of the Jews under Persian rule, and in particular, that the work of Esther and Mordecai made possible the restoration of Jerusalem overseen by Nehemiah. Again, this is not to contend that such intertextuality was intended by the author of MT Esther (or the authors of Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah). Rather, I am simply noting that the final redactors of both the MT and LXX appear to share a strong sense of connection between the events of the Esther story and those of at least parts of Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah,¹⁷ a connection that they have displayed differently in each canon but that nonetheless proves fruitful for biblical exegesis.

The Esther narratives differ as well in their understanding of the motivations that

history. Here, the text correctly notes that Darius II succeeded Artaxerxes but inexplicably labels him as one “of Median descent” and ruling over “the kingdom of the Chaldeans” (9:1). The earlier parts of Daniel, if anything, exhibit even more historical incoherence: Daniel is exiled by Nebuchadnezzar of the Chaldeans (c. 634–562 BCE), but the succeeding Chaldean rulers in the text do not match any known historical record. The Chaldean Empire, in the book’s version of these events, ends with the assassination of Belshazzar and the ascension of “Darius the Mede,” a figure unknown to history (5:30–6:1). Darius is then succeeded by Cyrus the Persian (6:29), the historical figure known to have *conquered* the neo-Babylonian Empire and absorbed it into his own Persian Empire, which he ruled c. 539–530 BCE.

¹⁷ Clines, *Story of the Story*, 174.

precipitate Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman and the ensuing crisis. Central to all three stories is a court intrigue involving an attempt to assassinate the Persian king. In the MT version and in the *second* of two LXX descriptions of such a plot, Mordecai discovers the plot and conveys a warning to the king through Esther (MT 2:21–23; LXX 2:21–23); while in the AT, he communicates directly with Ahasuerus (A:9–15). In all three cases the Persian king has recorded in the royal annals an entry on Mordecai's loyalty and service to the king in exposing the plot. As we saw in the story summary in the previous chapter, this device will prove essential in the later reversal of Mordecai and Haman's fates.

LXX Esther, however, twice describes an attempted assassination of the king (A:12–17; 2:21–23). The second description, as noted above, is a paraphrastic retelling of the version of the same events described in MT Esther but with one crucial addition: the “chiefs of the bodyguard” of the king were upset and planned to kill the king “because Mordecai had been promoted” (LXX 2:21). To what had Mordecai been promoted and why? According to the LXX, the answer lies in the narrative's *first* telling of an assassination plot, which in the LXX is actually a prior and separate attempt against the king. Not coincidentally, it also is a fairly close rendition of the AT account of the story.¹⁸ In this version, Mordecai initially is someone who works with—and in

¹⁸ Michael Fox has nicely summarized the basic strands of the common view of the historical development of the Esther story textual traditions in his *Character and Ideology*, 254–59, with a helpful chart on 254. As Fox notes, this view of the story's historical development through its versions relies on arguments offered first in Torrey, “Older Esther”; Moore, *Esther*; and Clines, *Story of the Story*. Briefly, all of these authors contend that there is a separate Semitic *Vorlage* that lies behind both AT and MT Esther and that (outside the Additions) AT Esther better preserves the basic narrative as found in this text known as “Proto-Esther.” The Additions shared by AT and LXX Esther were (according to this view) originally found only in the LXX Esther tradition and were grafted onto a later recension of Proto-Esther, thus forming AT Esther.

If this understanding of the redaction history of the various texts were correct, however, we are unable to explain a particular issue with the doubling of the assassination plots in LXX Esther. According to the model put forth by Clines and Fox, Proto-Esther cannot contain an assassination plot because the only description of such a plot in AT Esther occurs in Addition A, which comes from the LXX tradition. Following this line of reasoning, MT Esther then added the assassination plot to the story, while the LXX Additions in turn added the second assassination plot, but (inexplicably from this view) AT Esther only

this case, dozes with—two previous chamberlains who guard the king. During their resting time, Mordecai overhears the two plotting “to lay hands on the king” (AT A:12) in order to put him to death (AT A:12, LXX A:13). Mordecai informs the king directly, and after a royal interrogation, the two confess and are executed. As a reward for his service, Mordecai is promoted to serve in the king’s court (LXX A:16); the AT adds that he was “to guard visibly every door” (AT A:16), a role that would obviously make him a threat to the later conspirators against the king and that also explains his location on stage when he first—and prominently—refuses to bow to Haman.

This promotion in itself does not yet explain why the second set of conspirators in LXX Esther wants to kill Artaxerxes. After all, if they were upset with Mordecai’s new role, the obvious point of attack would be against him, rather than against the king. The answer lies in an intriguing textual point present in both the LXX and AT versions of the story, in each of which the first narrative reference to Haman is oddly juxtaposed with a foiled assassination attempt. In

absorbed one of the two plots, even though the story in LXX Esther offers a coherent narrative rationale for the inclusion of both.

Serge Frolov has recently argued for a much simpler understanding of the Esther story’s redaction history. Through a thorough formal analysis of the four extant versions of what he calls the “Narrative of Botched Regicide” (one in MT Esther, one in AT Esther, and two in LXX Esther), Frolov demonstrates that the basic Esther story did in fact contain a foiled assassination plot in its earliest form. The description of the assassination plot (and Mordecai’s intervention to prevent it) was preserved in two Hebrew forms: one of these is extant in MT Esther, while the other is recoverable through text critical analysis of AT Esther that reveals a Hebrew *Vorlage* of a narrative similar to the one described in MT Esther but clearly a different composition. The difference emerges most distinctly when the AT Esther version is compared to the first assassination plot described in LXX Esther. The two versions not only share similar narrative elements but also reveal a high likelihood of an identical Hebrew *Vorlage*: the differences between them are easily attributed to legitimate translation choices made by two different translators. In other words, the later LXX tradition absorbed both *Hebrew* versions, but as separate regicidal plots. The LXX redactor/translator creatively edited both versions in order to harmonize them into the narrative of LXX Esther, using the AT version of the assassination plot to justify why the MT version occurred [Serge Frolov, “Two Eunuchs, Two Conspiracies, and One Loyal Jew: The Narrative of Botched Regicide in Esther as Text- and Redaction-Critical Test Case,” *Vetus Testamentum* LII, no. 3 (2002): 304–25].

If Frolov’s argument is correct, however, it becomes much more difficult to delineate the unique narrative elements of the hypothesized Proto-Esther. Frolov goes so far as to suggest that while “the AT is to a greater or lesser extent based upon a Hebrew version of Esther different from the MT,” his reconstruction of the stories’ redaction history “militate[s] against the claims that the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the AT was a ‘proto-AT’” (ibid., 324).

the LXX, the story abruptly breaks off from describing the treasonous plot and its unraveling, only to make an unexpected and simple declarative statement about Haman: “But Haman son of Hammedatha, a Bougaion, enjoyed great favor with the king” (LXX A:17). Haman enters the LXX Esther story at precisely the moment a violent act of sedition has been quashed, and he is angry at the figure who exposed it.

The implied connection is clear even if the reason for it is not. Haman was somehow involved in the plot Mordecai overheard during the afternoon doze.¹⁹ And even though Haman possesses privileged access to the king, he is apparently unable to block Mordecai’s rise. Lest the reader miss the point, the LXX narrator continues: “he sought to do harm to Mordecai and his people because of the two [chamberlains] of the king” (A:17). As will be the case with the two later unnamed chamberlains in LXX 2:21–23, Haman here sees some profound problem in the emerging political relationship between Mordecai and the Persian king. The hint offered here (and that will be developed later in the narrative) is that all of these figures—Haman and the four executed chamberlains—seek to overthrow the king. The tensions in the second assassination attempt described in LXX Esther, however, are more pointedly aimed at the king’s decision to promote Mordecai, as though the promotion itself poses a reason to remove the king from the throne. The LXX author appears to offer with this redaction a subtle hint of a deeper culture of anti-Semitism within the empire, suggesting the king’s sympathy to a known Jew is seen by this faction within the kingdom as a grievous fault in and of itself.

The AT offers a similarly abrupt entrance for Haman. He enters with no fanfare and with no narrative context, but AT Esther offers a stronger and blunter explanation for Haman’s rage against Mordecai. According to this version of the story, Ahasuerus seeks to reward Mordecai

¹⁹ Frolov, “Two Eunuchs,” 322.

for revealing the assassination plot and so literally “gave [to Mordecai], because of these things, Haman the son of Hammedatha” (A:17).²⁰ Haman remains in this version bent on harming Mordecai because he exposed the plot, but now he also appears to have suffered a direct loss of prestige and power; before these events he had “stood before the king” (A:17), but now he appears to be literally and figuratively handed over to Mordecai. This description of the events supplies motive not only for Haman’s rage at Mordecai, but also for Mordecai’s later refusal to bow before Haman. Mordecai here knows Haman to be a treasonous threat to the throne and (in the case of the AT version) sees him as a former underling promoted without cause or merit. As with the LXX version, however, AT Esther is firm in viewing Haman’s hatred of Mordecai as something more than merely a court rivalry or palace intrigue: Haman in both the LXX and the AT seeks “to injure Mordecai *and all his people* because he had spoken about the [chamberlains] to the king” (AT A:18, emphasis added). An ethnic hatred, an attempt to injure and destroy the entire Jewish people, lies at the heart of the assaults against Mordecai and the Persian king from the very opening chapter of the Greek versions of the Esther story.

AT Esther adds a delightful note of irony to this aspect of the story. Unlike either the MT or the LXX traditions, AT Esther states quite clearly that Ahasuerus is aware from the start of his relationship with Esther that she is Jewish. Mordecai, for instance, does not warn Esther in the AT version to conceal her “people or her kindred” from the palace workers, as he does in MT

²⁰ Frolov suggests that this odd statement arises in AT Esther because the Greek translator was unable to clarify in his Hebrew *Vorlage* whether Haman’s name (חַמָּן) was part of a compound direct object or the nominative subject of a succeeding clause in the verse. This translation difficulty arises because Hebrew, unlike Greek, does not decline nouns by case; the reader must rely on context or the optional use of a direct object marker in order to distinguish the nominative case from the accusative case (or any other case, for that matter). This is especially difficult in cases such as this where the context also includes an implied being verb. The AT translator chose to read *Haman* as a part of the accusative direct object phrase in A:17, while the LXX translator chose to read *Haman* as the nominative subject of the succeeding clause in the exact same place (LXX A:17). See *ibid.*, 309, 313–14.

and LXX Esther (MT and LXX 2:10), and once Haman's plot is revealed at the final banquet, Ahasuerus is incredulous at Haman's oversight: "Did he purpose to hang even Mordecai, who saved me from the hand of the [chamberlains]? Did he not know that Esther is of his [i.e., Mordecai's] family's race?" (AT 8:14). In this divergence from the MT and LXX versions, the AT adds further cause to the king's rage once he recognizes that Haman intends to kill the Jews with his genocidal decree (E:22–28). AT Esther shares with the other versions the fact that Haman is unaware of either Esther's ethnicity or her relationship to Mordecai; Esther's Jewish identity remains hidden from the general public. Or to put this in another and more significant way: Esther is still passing as Persian for much of the story in AT Esther, but (unlike the situation in MT and LXX Esther) her royal husband is one of the few individuals aware of her secret identity. Contrary then to the views of some gentile interpreters,²¹ her need to "pass" as another ethnicity suggests that even in the relatively bright world of ethnic relations in AT Esther, not all is well and easy for the Jewish community of the Persian Empire.

Haman therefore represents a force of disorder within the Persian court in each version of the Esther story, as well as the visible face of larger elements of lawlessness within the narrative world. LXX Esther offers a further adaptation of this plot device that likely would have helped the Greek reader or listener of the time to understand the issue at stake in Haman's plots. In the LXX, as we have seen, Haman is first (and mysteriously) called a "Bougaion," either a textual corruption or a term the meaning of which has been lost to us (A:16; 3:1). In the latter part of LXX Esther, however, Haman instead is titled "the Macedonian"; this reference firmly connects

²¹ For instance, Clines, *Story of the Story*, 128, 146–49. Charles Torrey goes so far as to suggest that Mordecai's request that Esther keep silent about her ethnic identity in the LXX is solely for dramatic effect and has no connection to any Jewish-gentile tensions in the Greek versions of the story ("Older Esther," 13. He later states, "According to the Story [AT Esther], what came so near to bringing about a great massacre was *not* that the Jews were hated 'From India to Ethiopia,' but simply that Haman hated Mordecai" (ibid., 18, emphasis original).

the LXX understanding to the AT Esther tradition, in which Haman is labeled “the Macedonian” at his first stage entrance (AT A:17). Both words of this title are significant. As a *Macedonian*, Haman’s ethnic identity would call to mind (in Jewish readers of the Hellenistic era) the rise of Alexander the Great. Although a Macedonian, Alexander brought Greek cultural riches to the world, often at the expense of the cultures he conquered. Alexander’s forces conquered the Persian Empire ca. 334–329 BCE, several generations after the purported events of the Esther story. For Judaism (especially that of the Maccabean era and the times described in the prophetic oracles of the latter parts of the book of Daniel), an allusion to a Macedonian threat spoke of Alexander’s conquest and the reign of his successors, one of whom was the source of an historical crisis as dangerous to the Chosen People as that embodied in Haman himself: Antiochus Epiphanes, a Seleucid king who arose decades after Alexander among the flotsam of minor empires that emerged in the wake of the intrigues among Alexander’s generals. Antiochus attempted to destroy Israel by suppressing the Chosen People’s observance of Torah through forced conversions and wholesale executions, all in the name of Alexander’s grand project of Hellenization, now run amok.²² Haman thus displays an open threat to the Persian social order

²² A colophon indicating that the Greek version of the Esther stories was indeed a translation is attached to many of the expanded versions of the Esther story that depend in some way on the LXX tradition. This includes all extant versions of LXX Esther, as well as the Ethiopic, Coptic, and Vulgate versions of the story (Moore, *Additions*, 252). As Moore points out, the colophon is missing from two of the three extant versions of AT Esther, suggesting to him that the colophon most likely first emerged in the LXX tradition. The inclusion of the colophon is important to my point here because it indicates that the Greek text to which it originally was attached was attested as “authentic” and appeared in the “fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra” (F:11). While this dating method is problematic because several Ptolemies were married to women named Cleopatra and likewise ruled at least four years, the style of the Greek and the theological emphases of LXX Esther, according to Moore, fit most likely with Ptolemies as early as 114 BCE or as late as 48 BCE (*ibid.*, 250–52). Any of these dates place the extant LXX and AT versions comfortably within the Hasmonean dynasty that arose from the Maccabean revolt against Antiochus’ rabid Hellenization policies.

More to the point, 2 Maccabees makes specific reference to a Jewish festival of the time known as “the Day of Mordecai,” to which the Maccabees attached the Day of Nicanor on the thirteenth of Adar, suggesting that the Jewish victory over Nicanor took place on the same day as the first of the two days of fighting described in the Esther stories (2 Macc 15:35–36). The Day of Nicanor (instituted in 160 BCE)

and Jewish existence, inscribed prominently in his gentilic (LXX 9:24; E:10). Conversely, labeled as “*the Macedonian*,” Haman is also singled out as representing a unique source of disorder: to destroy him and his power is to undermine a present and future threat to the rule of Persian kings—and to delay at least the eventual rise of Alexander the Great’s Hellenistic empire.



Ironically, it may well be the case that the Additions shared by AT and LXX Esther represent an attempt to harmonize these differences among the versions. When isolated as they are in the Vulgate, the six chapters appear to be an immense set of discrepancies among the versions, but this view changes when one looks instead at the narrative work that the Additions accomplish. The coherence between the LXX and AT traditions in these six chapters is extremely strong, a closer affinity than either tradition shares in the rest of its text with either of the other extant Esther story traditions. For most scholars, this suggests that Additions A–F originally appeared at some point in the narrative stream that resulted in what we today call LXX Esther and then were grafted at a later point onto AT Esther as well.²³ Typically labeled by

celebrated Judah Maccabee’s victory over a Seleucid military commander who (according to Jewish tradition) spit at the Jerusalem Temple and some of its priests while threatening to burn down the Temple in response to the Maccabees’ rededication of it and their attempts to restore Torah observance throughout the Promised Land (1 Macc 7:25–38; a somewhat different account appears in 2 Macc 15:1–39, serving as the culmination of the latter narrative). As in the AT and LXX Esther stories, the Jews in 1 Maccabees turn to prayer, reminding God of his past judgments against threats to his Temple and his people, and calling upon him to intervene here. This is followed by a profound Jewish military victory that, on its surface, displays no clear divine intervention (1 Macc 7:39–49). The similarities between the narratives in 1 and 2 Maccabees and in Esther will be discussed later in the argument.

²³ This seems to be the general consensus among modern textual scholars. See, for instance, Paton, *Esther*, 41–47; Moore, *Esther*, lxi–lxiv, and *Additions*, 153–54, 161–67; Clines, *Story of the Story*, 69–70; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 265–73.

Moore’s discussion is particularly helpful in briefly summarizing the main textual data in support of this claim. As he notes, none of the Semitic versions (MT Esther, the Talmud, Targums, or the Syriac translation), with the exception of a Hebrew translation of the LXX from the Middle Ages, contains the material of the Additions. Origen notes that the portions today known as Additions B, C, and E were

letters (rather than numerals) in order to avoid the confusion of conflicting numeric systems among the three versions, these large additions to the Esther story include:

- A. Mordecai's dream: an apocalyptic and highly symbolic dream that appears to foretell the story's key events; this section also includes the first (LXX) or only (AT) description of the assassination plot discovered by Mordecai;
- B. Haman's genocidal decree: a text purported to be written in Ahasuerus' name (and also in a bureaucratic style of Greek) that represents the content of the letter condemning the empire's Jews to death (a letter mentioned but never seen by the reader in MT Esther);
- C. The prayers of Mordecai and Esther: in each case, the respective petitioner emphasizes his or her dependence on the God of Israel, as well as his or her adherence to the covenant; Esther's prayer, in particular, stresses her strict adherence to Jewish ritual, filling in a major textual lacuna in MT Esther;
- D. An expansion of Esther's preparations before, as well as the initial steps of, her unbidden approach to Ahasuerus' throne room that initiates her plan to defeat Haman and the decree of genocide;
- E. Mordecai's counter-decree: as with chapter B above, this chapter also purports to show a document only mentioned in MT Esther, this time the decree that

absent from the Hebrew texts of his day although Moore does find it "curious" that Origen does not clarify whether the materials of Additions A, D, and F were present. Jerome, as we have noted, did not find any of the Additions in the Hebrew texts available to him, and Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* lacks a retelling of the material in Additions A and F, suggesting at least that Josephus did not find them essential to the standard story or that they perhaps were missing from the texts available to him (*Additions*, 153–54). Taken together, this textual data strongly suggests that Additions A and F (two of the Additions most likely drawn from Semitic *Vorlagen*) were nonetheless rarely if ever considered part of any significant liturgical tradition that included the Esther story; Additions C and D were questionable; and (as we shall see) Additions B and E bear stylistic evidence that they are "unquestionably Greek compositions" in origin and so not part of any pre-Masoretic tradition of the narrative (*ibid.*, 155).

Mordecai offered in Ahasuerus' name allowing the Jews to defend themselves; this text also condemns Haman and affirms Ahasuerus' support of the Jews;

- F. Mordecai's interpretation of his dream: returning to the dream of chapter A, Mordecai offers an interpretation of his dream that not only preserves the apocalyptic sense of the dream itself but makes clear that this apocalyptic reality undergirds the entire Esther narrative.

As might be evident, the Additions as a whole are attempts to fill seeming gaps within the basic story.

This redactional work appears not only intentional but also artistic in its arrangement. Taken together, the Additions exhibit a strong sense of narrative parallelism, as the descriptions above indicate. With the Additions in place in the LXX or AT, the entire basic Esther story has been framed by Mordecai's apocalyptic dream and its interpretation (Additions A and F), both of which show some evidence of a relationship akin to that between an independent text and its commentary.²⁴ Additions B and E, written in a stilted bureaucratic Greek that Moore calls "bombastic, artificial, and convoluted,"²⁵ demonstrate a writing style that strongly suggests they also were originally composed in Greek. This stylized Greek does not allow likely (or even at times) coherent "reverse translation" back into Hebrew, suggesting that neither chapter has a

²⁴ Moore and Fox see enough internal inconsistencies to suggest that Addition A was originally a freestanding Semitic apocalyptic dream (separate from the Esther tradition entirely) that was interpreted and redacted by the composer of Addition F (see Moore, *Additions*, 179–81, 248–49; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 264–73). Intriguing questions remain with this view, however: If, as most scholars suggest, Addition F is but a somewhat sloppy interpretation of an originally freestanding text now known as Addition A, why were either of them added to the Esther story in the first place? And why were *both* of them added to the redaction stream of LXX and AT Esther? These questions suggest that Addition F may be an attempt to harmonize Addition A with the rest of the Esther narrative. If so, then Addition F entered the recension stream of the Esther story versions only after Addition A was added.

²⁵ *Additions*, 191.

Semitic *Vorlage*, unlike the rest of the LXX or AT versions.²⁶ Further, given the high degree of stylistic similarity, most scholars argue that chapters B and E were written by the same author/redactor. At least in terms of how the LXX and AT traditions have arranged these chapters, Additions C and D are overt theological expansions that lie at the heart of the narrative of Esther's movement from the role of a passive royal object to that of a royal—and regal—actor shaping the events around her.

Additions B and E are the easiest passages to describe and explain. Given that they seem to have been written by the same author, their purpose and placement likely does not have a long history of development within the traditions. The texts are quite “secular” in nature and do little more than add a sense of historicity to the narrative and (in the case of Addition E) also offer gentile approval to the Jews' actions and the feast of Purim.²⁷ Addition B, the text of Haman's genocidal decree, is placed early in the story when Haman's plan is set in motion. Addition E is similarly and logically placed in the second half of the story when Haman's plan is undone by the kings' counter-decree that was written by Mordecai. This parallelism fits the flow of the story; the placement of Additions B and E, however, also draws attention to the chiasmic nature of the narrative, in which many of the events of the story's opening are undone by inverted or opposed repetitions in the second half, most notably in Haman's rise in the first half contrasted with his fall in the last part of the story and Mordecai's corresponding rise. This is but a particular example of the overarching repetition that drives the narrative: the threat to Jewish existence in the first half that is countered by Esther's saving work to preserve the Jews and the Persian Empire in the second half of the tale, a deliverance that turns the tables on the very

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 193–94, 237–38. Fox is less sure of the Semitic origins of Additions A, C, D, and F: see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 254–57, 265–66.

²⁷ Torrey, “Older Esther,” 27.

figures who sought to destroy the Jews and undermine the empire.

Additions C and D, in contrast, offer clarifications of the religious impulses and stakes involved in the core Esther story, but they also help to explain why and how Esther is able to make her change of character. These additions clarify in an overtly theological manner why Mordecai refuses to bow before Haman.²⁸ LXX Esther, following the other alterations its author made to the story, places his resistance not in an act of insubordination, and not even in the political intrigues that we have seen shared among the versions in their telling of the basic Esther story. Rather, Mordecai's refusal to bow in Addition C is an act of obedient submission to God, as Mordecai emphasizes in his prayer:

You know all things; you know, Lord, that it was not because of insolence or arrogance or vanity that I did this: that I did not bow down before arrogant Haman; for I would have been quite willing to kiss the soles of his feet for the salvation of Israel. But I did it in order that I might not put the glory of a man above the glory of God, nor will I bow down to anyone except you who are my Lord, nor will I do this out of arrogance. (LXX C:5–7)

We are reminded of Levenson's earlier noted point that neither the Bible nor Jewish tradition prevents a Jew from bowing to another person.²⁹ Mordecai's explanation here for his refusal does little then to align his reasoning with either the Bible or Jewish practice.

This discrepancy is not without significance, however: if anything, Addition C seems to suggest that Mordecai *exceeds* the requirements of Torah with his refusal. This view runs counter to the typical Christian reading. Far from an act of prideful insubordination or ethnocentrism,³⁰

²⁸ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 271; Levenson, *Esther*, 83–88.

²⁹ Levenson, *Esther*, 67. Levenson was discussing MT Esther, but his point only draws more attention to the problematic nature in Addition C of Mordecai's justification for his action.

³⁰ Paton states that "Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman [in MT Esther] is quite inexplicable" (*Esther*, 196), and while he might not label this act as intentionally prideful, Paton does contend that Mordecai's refusal, coupled with his claim that he cannot bow to Haman because he is Jewish, results in Haman's decision to annihilate the Jews because he fears other Jews might act likewise.

Mordecai's refusal to bow here becomes an act of zealous submission to God. Because of this, the reader of Addition C may no longer question Mordecai's behavior on religious grounds or mistake his refusal for an act of ethnic pride. This "corrective" lens shows that, as we saw with Daniel in our earlier discussion, the Mordecai portrayed in Addition C is a hero of the faith, one willing to risk the wrath of a human ruler before he would allow the Divine King to be dislodged from his rightful place of glory.

Esther's religious observance appears similarly heroic in Addition C, where immediately after her seeming hesitance to approach the king (LXX and MT 4:9–17), the young queen begins a transformation into a different woman. Before she approaches the king in order to overcome Haman's plot, Esther exchanges her royal garments "and put on clothes appropriate for distress and mourning" and "covered her head with ashes and dung" (C:13), and she turns to God, offering a prayer full of Old Testament echoes. In particular, the early portions of Esther's prayer are filled with allusions to the book of Deuteronomy and the early portions of the Deuteronomistic History, particularly the era of Israel's judges. She opens her prayer with an acknowledgment that "[m]y Lord, only are you our king" (C:14). Displaying her understanding that the divine kingship is the only one that matters to Israel, Queen Esther significantly submits to God's rule in a way that stands in stark contrast to the royal aspirations of the Israelites in the book of Samuel. There, the people demanded of the elderly Samuel, Israel's final judge, that he "appoint a king for us, to govern us like all other nations" (1 Sam 8:5). The LORD tells Samuel in response that "it is not you that they have rejected; it is Me they have rejected as their king,"

Mordecai, in other words, elevates his personal needs above those of even his people's existence (ibid., 200). Bernhard Anderson calls Mordecai "opportunistic" and "governed by calculating expediency [that] had as its [only] object the preservation of the cultural and racial integrity" of the Jewish people ("Place of Esther," 34–35). These interpretive stances are contradictory, of course, except in their shared claim that Mordecai, rather than Haman, is the ultimate source of the trouble in the Esther stories.

merely another addition to the ongoing rebellion against divine rule that the LORD has encountered since liberating Israel from Egyptian slavery (1 Sam 8:7–8). The Israelites had forgotten yet again what Moses had told them in the book of Deuteronomy, that Israel is “a people consecrated to the LORD your God” and that it was not due to any merit in Israel but only “because the LORD favored you and kept the oath He made to your fathers that the LORD freed you with a mighty hand” (Deut 7:6–8).

Esther, however, has remembered these lessons in Addition C: “All my life I have heard in my father’s tribe [AT delightfully has ‘from my father’s book’] that you, Lord, chose Israel from all the nations, and our fathers from all their predecessors, for a perpetual inheritance” (C:16). She later begs the Lord to “[r]escue us by your hand” (C:25), knowing that he will treat Israel “just as [He] has promised” (C:16). She knows too that the saving hand of God has been stayed up to this point, and she understands why: “we have sinned against you, and you have handed us over to our enemies because we extolled their gods. You were in the right, Lord” (C:17–18). With this, the young queen has offered a precise synopsis of the theology driving the book of Judges in the Deuteronomistic History:

The people served the LORD during the lifetime of Joshua and the lifetime of the older people who lived on after Joshua and who had witnessed all the marvelous deeds that the LORD had wrought for Israel. [. . .] And all that generation were likewise gathered to their fathers.

Another generation arose after them, which had not experienced [lit. “did not know”] the LORD or the deeds that He had wrought for Israel. And the Israelites did what was offensive to the LORD. They worshiped the Baalim and forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They followed other gods, from among the gods of the people around them, and bowed down to them; they provoked the LORD. They forsook the LORD and worshiped Baal and the Ashtaroth. The LORD was incensed at Israel, and He handed them over to foes who plundered them. He surrendered them to their enemies on all sides, and they could no longer hold their own against their enemies. In all their campaigns, the hand of the LORD was against them to their undoing, as the LORD had declared and as the LORD had sworn to them; and they were in great distress. (Judg 2:7, 10–15)

What remains unsaid in the basic theology of Judges noted here is the method of God’s unfailing deliverance: “Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from those who plundered them. [. . .] When the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD would be with the judge and would save them from their enemies during the judge’s lifetime; for the LORD would be moved to pity by their moanings because of those who oppressed them and crushed them” (Judg 2: 16, 18).³¹

The hope of this deliverance is made clear in the rest of Esther’s prayer. After reminding God of his choice of Israel as his inheritance and acknowledging that “we have sinned against you,” Esther then asks God to “make [her] persuasive” before the king (C: 24), and she grounds the worthiness of her request in her observance of Torah:

You know everything[, Lord,] so you know that I hate the pomp of the wicked, and I loathe the bed of the uncircumcised [. . .] I loathe that symbol of my exalted position which is upon my head. When I appear at court[,] I loathe it like a menstrous rag[;] I do not wear it when I am not at court. Your maid servant has not dined at Haman’s table, nor have I extolled a royal party nor drunk the wine of libations. From the day I arrived here until now, your maid servant has not delighted in anything except you, Lord, the God of Abraham. (C:25b–29)

In all this, a contrasting picture of Esther emerges from that found in a surface reading of the basic Esther story. There, Esther’s Jewish identity was so slight as to be invisible. True, in the early sections of AT Esther (those not part of the Additions), Mordecai did not ask Esther to hide her Jewishness, and Ahasuerus is aware that Esther is Jewish. Esther’s ethnic identity therefore is marginally more public in AT Esther than it is in MT Esther, but it nonetheless appears that even a high-ranking court official like Haman does not know the queen’s ethnic identity and cannot

³¹ I have altered the JPS translation here. The JPS translates the Hebrew שֹׁפֵט and שַׂרְפָּיִם as *chieftains* and *chieftain*, respectively. Most readers will be more familiar with the traditional rendering of these words and *judges* and *judge*, even if the traditional rendering might not fully reflect the full nuance of the role that these figures play as religious, political, moral, and military leaders.

recognize it by her public behavior. Unlike any of these, the Esther portrayed in the Additions has been consciously observant throughout her time in the palace, and she regrets any signs in her life that might be misread as outward contradictions of her Jewish identity.

Most interesting for a story known for God's hiddenness is Esther's plea midway through her prayer: "Remember, Lord, *reveal yourself in this time of our afflictions!* Give us courage, King of the gods and Lord of all governments" (C:23, emphasis added). The Lord in this theology, as in the theology of the book of Judges, is revealed precisely in the time of Israel's afflictions by exercising his rulership over all things. Israel's victories over its oppressors are each a revelation of God. The last portion of the previous quote reflects a pious euphemism, yet another "corrective lens" within the Additions, this time emphasizing Esther's supreme commitment to the Oneness of Israel's God. She is likely alluding to the Deuteronomic reminder to Israel that "the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords" (Deut 10:17), a firm statement of monolatry but perhaps too fuzzy in its seeming tolerance of polytheism for Jews of the Hellenistic era. In summary, Esther's prayer in Addition C places her understanding of God's relationship to Israel squarely in line with that of the great Deuteronomistic History, and the writer of this Addition has envisioned Esther herself as a new judge raised up to liberate God's people through military battle and return them to him.

While Addition C functions to emphasize Mordecai and Esther's religious zeal and covenantal observance, Addition D in contrast makes overt the Divine Presence guiding the story's events, as well as the efficacy of the protagonist's prayers. The communal fast among the Jews now ended and

[o]n the third day, when she had finished praying, [Esther] took off the clothing of a suppliant and dressed herself in splendid attire [literally, "put on her glory"]. After she had called upon the all-seeing God and savior, she, looking absolutely radiant [. . .], stood before the king. [. . .] Raising his face, flushed with color, [the

king] looked at her in fiercest anger. The queen stumbled, turned pale and fainted, keeling over on the maid who went before her. But *God changed the king's spirit to gentleness*[. . .]. (D:1–8, emphasis added).

Esther's radiant beauty overtly emerges in response to her prayer, and the God of Israel has even used her fasting effectively. While the fast has added to her beauty, it also has weakened her physically, and in witnessing her stumble, Ahasuerus/Artaxerxes finds his heart changed. Not only does he refuse to condemn Esther's unlawful approach, but the king also finds himself disposed to hear Esther's request favorably.³² God has heard the Jewish prayers, and he has acted—subtly no doubt and indirectly—but nevertheless, this is a divine intervention directly acknowledged in the narrative. The LORD has not forgotten his people.

In the version of the story told through the Additions, this divine deliverance was foretold. Addition A describes an apocalyptic dream that came to Mordecai almost a decade before the emergence of Haman's threat. The dream opens in a chaos of “confusion, thunders, and earthquake and tumult upon the earth” (AT A:3; LXX A:4). In the midst of the uproar, two dragons advance upon one another, ready for battle. In their battle cries, “every nation made ready for war” (AT and LXX A:6). Against whom precisely the nations will fight is unclear in the AT, but the LXX draws the battle lines distinctly: “every nation got itself ready [. . .] that it might fight against the righteous nation” (LXX A:6), which will prove to be Israel, according to Mordecai's interpretation in Addition F. The members of the righteous nation “were prepared to die” in the face of the vast upheaval against them (LXX A:8). In both the AT and LXX the righteous people cry out, and from their crying comes forth “a tiny spring, a mighty river, a veritable flood” (LXX A:9), and as “light and sun arose,” the river(s) swallow up the supposedly

³² So strongly was St. Augustine convinced that LXX Esther affirmed that divine intervention was the primary operator guiding Esther's approach to the king and his response to her (as we saw in the previous chapter's reference to his *Christ's Grace and Original Sin*) that he could use this passage to assert that the Pelagian understanding of human free was unbiblical.

great and exalt the humble (AT A:9; LXX A:9–10). The dream is cryptic on its own and less than clear in its connection to the basic Esther narrative. It is no wonder that some readers have questioned whether it was originally composed as an addition to the Esther tradition or was instead a freestanding apocalyptic narrative that only came to be connected to the Esther story after its composition.³³

The interpretation of the dream that Mordecai offers in Addition F does little to dispel the reader's sense of confusion. In the aftermath of Haman's fall and Mordecai's rise, Mordecai recalls his nearly decade-old dream and says that it has been fulfilled in the events of the Esther story. He is quite clear on at least one point of interpretation: "The two dragons represent Haman and me" (AT F:54; LXX F:4). This is an odd assertion. Biblical apocalyptic thought typically reserves the images of dragons and beasts as symbolic of those forces in creation opposed to God and divine order; connecting Mordecai to such an image might suggest that he too is a force of disorder within the narrative world. Even more troubling, the dragons (so prominent in the dream's opening) disappear completely from Mordecai's interpretation once he connects them with Haman and himself. This leaves as protagonists only the tiny stream that is Esther (according to the interpretation offered in LXX Esther) or, in the competing interpretation of AT Esther, the "the sun and the light which appeared to the Jews [as] a revelation of God; this is the judgment" (F:54). The difference here is likely one of contrasting theological views: was it Esther who has brought about her people's salvation, or was it the God of the Jews who has served as the primary mover of history?

These conflicting stances on the story's protagonist appear to hinge on the similarly conflicting meanings the LXX and AT traditions assign to the spring and river(s) noted in

³³ Moore, *Additions*, 179–80; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 266.

Addition A. In the LXX, the spring and the river are joined as one entity, the spring its source and the river its outcome. In all its manifestations, this entity represents Esther (F:3), who is portrayed allegorically as growing from a hidden Jew (the spring) to a great power of Jewish salvation (the mighty river at flood stage). In AT Esther, however, Mordecai's interpretation of his dream offers a very different reading: here, Esther is only "the tiny stream" appearing early in the dream, while "[t]he river is the nations that gathered to destroy the Jews" (F:2). This interpretation flatly contradicts the content of Addition A in AT Esther, in which "the rivers [rather than the tiny stream] were exalted" (A:7) and so clearly are aligned with divine order. AT and LXX Esther agree that Esther is the "tiny stream" out of which salvation will emerge; they do not share the same the same willingness to credit Esther's growth to human agency. The power of salvation resides solely with the God of Israel in AT Esther.

The LXX and AT interpretations of the dream are unsatisfying and lack connection to the primary events of the text. The meaning of the actual conflict between Mordecai and Haman has disappeared from the dream and its interpretation, rendering one of the key events of the basic Esther story invisible in terms of its theological significance. The basic Esther story has spent much of its narrative energy displaying a battle between two courtiers, and the Additions up to this point have suggested that, at least on the spiritual level, Haman and Mordecai are two primal figures—dragons, if you will—locked in combat over the continued existence of God's covenant as embodied and practiced in the Chosen People. To argue that this battle itself is nothing more than symbolic—within even the narrative world of the story itself—of the story's true conflict appears tone deaf to the basic narrative's movements.

Perhaps, however, the writers and/or redactors of the Additions to LXX and AT Esther have perceived a point much more profound that might first appear. As Mordecai's refusal to

bow before Haman has proven in the Additions to be but a symbol of a deeper spiritual life in Mordecai, so too Mordecai's interpretation of the apocalyptic dream suggests that the entire conflict between Mordecai and Haman is but a prelude or catalyst setting in motion a deeper spiritual battle that extends far beyond the immediate narrative facts. The dream points out something obvious in the basic Esther story in all its versions, whether MT, LXX, or AT: if the Jews are to be saved, Mordecai must give way to Esther. Mordecai's leading role in the human drama ends as soon as Esther asserts her own subjective authority. Likewise, the forces unleashed against the Jews are not stopped with Haman's execution. In the basic Esther story, the conflict that the Jews must survive only *begins* in a very real sense once the conflict between Mordecai and Haman has been set aside. As in the dream, Mordecai and Haman never directly confront one another. They stand ready for battle, but it is the work of Esther that ends Haman's personal threat against Mordecai, and it will be Esther (assisted by Mordecai, true, but still mainly Esther) who will maneuver events so that the counter-decree can be promulgated. As the Additions portray this, Mordecai and Haman are but "dragon-pawns" within a much larger conflict; the real battle in the narrative offered by the Esther Additions is that involving Esther and/or God facing the forces arrayed against God's people.

This is precisely where the confusion between the AT and LXX versions of the dream's interpretation proves most instructive as a corrective. In the LXX interpretation, the dream reveals that Mordecai must be set aside so that Esther's actions might shine, while the AT interpretation instead says that it is the "revelation of God" that brings judgment on God's enemies. *These are not contradictory answers.* In fact, the Greek recensions together suggest that what we witness in the change of character and authority of Esther, in the deliverance that comes to the Jews through battle, is precisely that "revelation of God," the very divine self-revelation

that Esther requested in her prayer (AT C:24, LXX C:23). Michael Fox notes this awareness in the Additions as well, but he is troubled by it. Mordecai's role, as interpreted by the dream, "is to present himself for battle with the other dragon. Yet the dragons do not actually fight, and so the good dragon cannot be said to win the battle."³⁴ Fox likewise notes that Esther "is the tiny spring from which issue the mighty waters that punish the powerful. This is an image of power, but as the symbolism shows, Esther is the *device* of salvation, not its *author*."³⁵ This leads Fox to the conclusion that Esther is somehow marginalized in her own story. He concludes, "The overall effect of the Additions on character in the Esther story is to minimize its importance. Instead of Israel's future being dependent on one wise man and one brave woman, its history is now a drama which must turn out the way its Author scripted it."³⁶

The latter is an odd conclusion to draw, even within the more overtly religious presentations of the narrative world of the Additions. Fox has pointed out only a page earlier in his argument that "[t]he true human heroes [in the Additions] are the people of Israel, for in the cosmic drama it was their outcry that turned the tide against the dragon of wickedness. [. . .] Salvation rests on faith, the faith of the Jewish people as a whole; the protagonists are merely individuals chosen for particular roles in the drama."³⁷ Yet inexplicably, Fox then adds another theological claim that he appears to see as a necessary corollary: "Mordecai's dream shows that they would act out and hence *must* act out. This too was determined in advance, outside the

³⁴ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 271.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 271–72, emphasis added.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 273.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 272.

visible dimension of human events.”³⁸ As he presents it here, Fox offers an overly deterministic understanding of prophecy that does not accord with the Esther story or the broader biblical vision. At other points in his discussion, Fox seems more sensitive to the delicate interplay between human choice and a view that history is on a particular trajectory. Here, however, he seems to overstate the element of historical determinism in the Greek versions of the Esther story at the expense of the narratives’ shared portrayal of authentic human choice and action among the story’s protagonists. In reducing Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews to figures acting out a pre-written historical script, Fox’s reading undervalues precisely what the Additions seem to be asserting: the covenant between Israel and the LORD is a partnership, a work of cosmic restoration that requires the actions and responses of both partners, as in the book of Judges. The dream is a promise of what could happen in the narrative world; had Israel chosen not to respond by crying out for God’s assistance, or had Mordecai or Esther refused to act, the prophecy would not have become reality.

None of these arguments rest on the requirement (or even the assumption) that the same author(s) composed chapters A, C, D, and F; indeed, the mutual contradictions within these sections suggest the overwhelming likelihood that the Additions have entered the Esther story at different points in the narrative’s development. All the same, the Additions form a superstructure around the narrative of the basic Esther story, one that shows an artistic and theological intentionality in the redactor or redactors’ work. A sort of chiasmic order emerges when one observes the intention of each of the six Additions:

A: the apocalyptic dream foretells a deeper meaning for the story’s events

B: the details of the genocidal decree reveal the full extent of the threat to the

³⁸ Ibid.

Jews

C: the revelation of Mordecai and Esther's "hidden" covenanted existence

D (C'): the revelation of God's covenanted work in support of his people

E (B'): the details of the counter-decree reveal that the Jews must participate publicly and overtly in their salvation

F (A'): the apocalyptic dream, now interpreted, reveals the deeper meaning of these events.³⁹

Regardless of who wrote what material of which Addition, the final redactor(s) deserves credit for layering a clear theological message onto the Esther story through the organization of these Additions. The darkness and confusion of Mordecai's dream, the genocidal decree, and the otherwise secret religious lives of Mordecai and Esther (seen in Additions A–C) give way to divine light and power: the Chosen People act liturgically, God responds to and acts with them, and Mordecai's decree enables the defeat of the impending genocide (Additions D and E). The mysterious decade-old dream stands in Addition F as an apocalyptic revelation of the *true* meaning of the events in the narrative world. The Additions serve to make the violence in the story's climax something divinely mandated, likely even divinely wrought, but in cooperation with the Lord's Chosen People.



Perhaps most intriguing of the supposed discrepancies among the versions is the question of whether the *Vorlage* for AT Esther contained any reference to the feast of Purim. If we are to

³⁹ This chart represents a reworking of a diagram and observations offered by Levenson in *Esther*, 29–30. Using a V-shaped structure that showed an A-F, B-E, C-D symmetry, Levenson notes that his discussion of the symmetry between C and D is less than satisfactory because he has described them in terms of prayers offered (C) and prayers granted (D), even though those prayers have not been granted in full at this point in the story. The above chart, describing a chiasmic model of hiddenness and revelation, hopefully resolves the problem.

believe the redactional reconstruction offered by Torrey, Clines, and even LaCocque, the connection of Purim to the original Esther story is at best tenuous and late in the story's redactional history. Charles Torrey argued as early as 1942 that several textual problems in the Greek versions disappear if one recognizes them as mistranslations of two Aramaic (rather than a single Hebrew) *Vorlagen*.⁴⁰ What appears to be a "twofold Semitic tradition of the Esther narrative" underlying LXX and AT Esther is in fact a *single* Aramaic *Vorlage*.⁴¹ This recension of the hypothesized Aramaic narrative was in turn split into two redactional streams. One stream originated in a version of the Aramaic Esther story that (for religious reasons) had all the specifically religious language stricken from the text, most likely so the text could be read aloud by Purim revelers without risk of accidentally dishonoring the Divine Name or Person.⁴² This Aramaic redaction eventually became (via further redaction and translation) MT Esther. The second narrative stream noted by Torrey retained the religious language of the Aramaic original and was translated into Greek, becoming in the process what Fox later calls "proto-AT Esther."⁴³ This version was in turn "built out" by absorbing the material from LXX Esther that we now call

⁴⁰ "Older Esther," 5–9. I am following Torrey's argument here because Clines, in *Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (his monumental reconstruction of the redaction of the Esther story in all its versions), appears to follow the essential outline and main implications of Torrey's argument. See in particular Clines, *Story of the Story*, 74–84, to compare Clines' understanding of the reconstruction noted here and following. (A clarification about the differing dates in reference to Torrey's work is in order: Torrey states that he wrote his article in 1943 in order to expand on ideas that he noted in an earlier 1942 work. "The Older Book of Esther," however, was published in January of 1944.)

⁴¹ "Older Esther," 9, 30.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 11. This is, by far, the most common popular explanation offered for the lack of religious language in MT Esther. For discussions of the relative merit of this position, see Carruthers, *Through the Centuries*, 21–27; Paton, *Esther*, 94–96; Anderson, "Place of Esther," 35–36; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 238–40.

⁴³ Torrey, "Older Esther," 7, 12–17; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 254–62.

the Additions to Esther, thus becoming AT Esther as we have it today.⁴⁴ LXX Esther, according to Torrey, is merely an expanded idiomatic translation of MT Esther that over time absorbed the material of the Additions in order to clarify the theological language and ideas originally present in the Aramaic original but now redacted from MT Esther.

Why was all this work necessary? Torrey's answer is both simple and elegant: "The Book of Esther combines two distinct motives, the one literary, the other historical. There is, first, an exciting story, very skillfully constructed; joined to this is the account of the origin of the feast of Purim."⁴⁵ The problem, though, is the conflict between these motives. "[T]he aim of at least one writer of the Esther narrative (whether the original author or not) was *purely* literary," asserts Torrey, "not to promote the observance of a feast day, nor to record the triumph of the Jews over their enemies, but merely to tell a good story for its own sake."⁴⁶ In this "*purely* literary" version (of proto-Esther or proto-AT Esther), there is no day to celebrate a great Jewish victory because

[i]n the basal Story of Mordecai, Esther, the great king, and the villain Haman [. . .] there is indeed (in our present text) a day appointed, the day for the massacre of the Jews by Haman's order; but the massacre does not take place, the Jews are not molested, nothing happens on that particular date. The real turning point is the day when Esther faced the tyrant, or when sentence was pronounced against Haman; for the Story is one of deliverance, not of victory.⁴⁷ The people in general had no active part in this turn of events [within proto-Esther], and there can hardly be long-enduring enthusiasm for the observance of a day on which something did *not* take place.⁴⁸

The problem then is that this "purely literary" tale is not equipped to support the work of

⁴⁴ Torrey, "Older Esther," 15.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14, emphasis original.

⁴⁷ Torrey's distinction here is quite interesting; he appears to suggest the two—deliverance and victory—are mutually exclusive. This may prove to be a central problem in many gentile concerns with the violence practiced by the people of God in Esther and more broadly throughout the Bible.

⁴⁸ "Older Esther," 17–18.

underwriting an annual celebration of a people's triumph over a national (or even cosmic) enemy.

Torrey's underlying concern emerges more clearly when one explores just how he defines a "purely literary" tale. Such a story, properly done, apparently may offer only aesthetic delight, must limit its didactic intentions, and should be "a good story [told] for its own sake; a story of universal appeal, to be enjoyed not only by the Jews but also by the members of every other nation."⁴⁹ Torrey then adds a summary of his points thus far in his argument:

As has just been said, the brilliantly conceived little drama [i.e., proto-Esther] naturally ends with the execution of the arch plotter, the annulment of his circular letter, and the elevation of Mordecai. Here, if the Esther story should be dramatized for popular entertainment, the curtain would fall, and THE END would be written. The three chapters which follow in the Hebrew and in the standard Greek [i.e., LXX Esther] are taken up with the vengeance of the Jews on their enemies, the hanging and exposure on the gallows of the ten sons of Haman (not mentioned in the previous story), the slaughter in Susa and the provinces, and the institution of an annual feast; matters very interesting and important to the Jews, *but of no interest or importance to the rest of the world.*⁵⁰

The survival of the Jews is "of no interest or importance to the rest of the world," according to Torrey. This declaration—offered in 1943, one must recall—is nothing short of astounding when seen in hindsight and in light of the events taking place at the time in Nazi Germany. It at the very least says much concerning the latent (and overt) anti-Semitism alive in the United States and in biblical studies at the time Torrey was writing. Even more to our immediate point, however, is the reality that it is likely this view, more than anything in the texts themselves, that has driven Torrey's (and later, Clines') argument that proto-Esther and proto-AT Esther did not include a battle of Jewish self-defense.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 14. As we continue in later chapters, the appeal to "universal understanding" or "universal principles" will become an increasingly important aspect of Christian discussions of the problem of violence—and the continuing problem of how Christianity relates to Judaism.

⁵⁰ Ibid., emphasis original.

We see this when we turn to scholarship written after the work of Torrey and Clines. Fox and Levenson, for instance, see proto-Esther's "purely literary" story somewhat differently from Torrey.⁵¹ Fox emphasizes that Purim revelers, even in their cups, are not likely to blaspheme, and in any case, the Scroll is read by a (non-drinking) lector *before* the festivities begin.⁵² If one were to blaspheme, in other words, one would likely do so regardless of the status of God's presence or name in a given religious text. Fox also argues persuasively that the proto-AT did include a battle between the Jews and the enemies who massed against them on the thirteenth of Adar, as well as a celebration of that victory. He bases this claim on the fairly simple and obvious point that we still possess evidence of this part of the story in the extant AT 8:33–38. These verses describe Esther's request to smite the enemies of the Jews and Mordecai's decree to celebrate the Jewish victory over Haman. If (as appears to be the case) these verses are not derived from either the MT or LXX and do not reflect an attempted alteration of the religious dimension of the text, then the only remaining answer is that they were an original and integral part of the original ending of the Esther story.⁵³

What is more, this original story makes clear that the enemies assembled are not simply "the gentiles" or the empire as a whole. As Fox points out, "Even in the proto-AT, where Mordecai and Esther alone secure the victory (the Jews merely punish their enemies *after* the victory), Mordecai calls upon the people to celebrate their salvation."⁵⁴ The Jews in proto-Esther and proto-AT engage in battle with enemies who have gathered *illegally* because there are no

⁵¹ It is not coincidental to this point that both Fox and Levenson are Jewish.

⁵² *Character and Ideology*, 239.

⁵³ Fox, *Redaction of Esther*, 38–42.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

dueling immutable decrees originating from the king; Haman's decree has been countermanded by both the king and Mordecai. Only a gathering of rabid anti-Semites would stand publicly to fight as enemies of the Jews in this version of the story. Purim may not yet be named, but the events it celebrates, and the celebration itself, appear already in this earliest strata of the Esther story.

This does not mean that there did not exist a separate, non-Jewish festival onto which the Esther story was melded in order to create the Jewish holiday. Paton, Moore, and LaCocque, for instance, are confident (to varying degrees) that a Babylonian and/or Persian festival (perhaps celebrating the New Year) lies at the original liturgical heart of feast of Purim.⁵⁵ Levenson, wisely hesitant to step beyond the data available to us, acknowledges that the etymology of the holiday's name offered in MT Esther is at best "opaque" and suggests that both the name and the festival itself "have another origin, one independent of the book of Esther. Like so many other institutions, these also have been reinterpreted, reshaped, and revalorized as they have come into Judaism."⁵⁶ One might add, as does Moore, that this process remains vitally active and alive in Christianity as well.⁵⁷ Establishing the origin of the festival, however, does little to clarify the meaning of the versions of the Esther story. We have *no* extant text of *any* version of the Esther story that does *not* connect the story in some way with the feast of Purim.⁵⁸

The presumed redaction history of AT Esther requires (at the very least) that the

⁵⁵ Paton, *Esther*, 77–94; Moore, *Esther*, xlvi–xlix; LaCocque, "Different Versions," 312–14.

⁵⁶ Levenson, *Esther*, 128.

⁵⁷ Moore, *Esther*, xlix.

⁵⁸ Recall that proto-AT Esther is, for now at least, only a hypothetical reconstruction of an Esther narrative that lacks the connection with Purim. The extant versions of MT, LXX, and AT Esther all connect the Esther story with the institution of Purim—or at the very least, with a festival that looks remarkably like Purim.

Additions were added to an already-existent story of Jewish military self-deliverance, in order to connect that story to the Purim celebration. We do not know much else. We remain unable to explain why the earliest versions of the Esther story lacked any overt references to the God of Israel; the recovery of a proto-Esther narrative only appears to affirm that the references to God in AT and LXX Esther came later in the redaction history. The attempt to recover a proto-AT or the “original” Esther story is (and has been) a rich academic exploration,⁵⁹ but it is not likely to result in definitive answers concerning the origins of Purim as a Jewish festival or why *all* the extant traditions of the Esther story connect the events of the story to the feast of Purim. That this connection exists—and exists universally across the traditions—must remain central to any interpretation of the extant Esther traditions.



The numerous minor additions made to the original Esther story, as well as the sections of material known today as the six chapters of Additions to the book of Esther, contain much that is confusing in its details. The sheer volume of inconsistencies and outright contradictions within all this material attests to the fact that the Esther story has gone through a substantial history of redaction and interpolations. What remains constant amidst this flux, however, is that these changes reinforce the liturgical connection between Purim and the Esther story, affirming that the story is one of deliverance *and* victory for the Jewish people. The Additions affirm that what we today call anti-Semitism remains dangerously alive among elements of even the most benign gentile community. Anti-Semitism is also a face of forces arrayed against the divine order itself. While it is demonstrably false that *any* extant version of the Esther story claims “that [all] the gentiles of Ahasuerus’ kingdom [. . .] were deadly enemies of the Jews and eager for an

⁵⁹ Or perhaps not, if Frolov’s contentions about the questionable nature of proto-Esther are correct. See Frolov, “Two Eunuchs.”

opportunity to slaughter them,” or that “[t]he Jews were ‘hated’ everywhere,”⁶⁰ it is nonetheless true that Haman in the Additions is not an isolated individual. He represents larger, cosmic forces arrayed against Israel and Israel’s God. The Additions in particular make plain that the threat against Israel is also implicitly a threat against the wellbeing of the gentile kingdom. The disorder represented by Haman threatens to annihilate the Jews and, at minimum, destabilize the Persian Empire. Deliverance of the Jews is indeed “salvation for the Persians,” as AT Esther puts it (8:31).

Last and perhaps most important, the Additions make clear that Israel’s God is acting within the narrative world portrayed in the Esther stories. Mordecai’s dream proves true, Esther and Mordecai’s prayers are answered, and within the story, the narrator and various characters overtly credit changes in history to the God of Israel. Vitally, though, we must keep in mind that the Additions are a corrective lens that—even within the respective narrative worlds—allows only the covenanted community to see and discern these divine actions. For all intents and purposes, the events narrated in AT and LXX Esther play out “on the ground” (so to speak) in much the same manner as they appear in MT Esther. Mordecai alone knows the content of his dream, and even he is not given its interpretation until *after* the events of the story have played out. Mordecai and Esther pray in private, unseen by eyes other than those of the reader. Like Joseph in the book of Genesis, Mordecai credits the Lord with his people’s deliverance, but there is no theophany even within the Additions. The God of Israel remains invisible and mysterious in his movements. Only through eyes guided by the covenant can markers of his power be discerned in the events of history. It now remains to be seen whether the corrective lens offered by the Additions is a means by which to see that which is already present in MT Esther—or whether the Additions instead are rose-colored glasses in their divine hopes.

⁶⁰ Torrey, “Older Esther,” 18.

Chapter Three. A Gentile Warning and a Revelation

The great reversal of Jewish fortunes appears to begin in MT Esther with Haman's first (and rather spectacular) misstep in his plan to destroy Mordecai. Apparently convinced that his genocidal decree against the Jews would bring Mordecai to his knees, both literally and figuratively, Haman is only further enraged when Mordecai remains intractably seated at the palace gate whenever he passes by (MT 5:9). After conversing with his wife and friends, Haman is convinced that he cannot wait for Mordecai to die with the other Jews, and he sets off to the palace to seek his nemesis' immediate execution (5:10–14). As we have seen, when his attempt to convince the king to have Mordecai impaled results instead in a royal command that Haman shower his enemy in public accolades, Haman returns home confused and humiliated, "his head covered in mourning" as the Hebrew literally states (6:12).

After he relates this turn of events to his wife and advisors, they offer a rather unexpected conditional statement: "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish seed, you will not overcome him; you will fall before him to your ruin" (6:12–13). Their statement is peculiar, especially given that it is pronounced by group of gentiles sympathetic to Haman. It also, though, is something of a revelation, not just within the narrative world of MT Esther but also *about* the narrative world of the story. In this cryptic reference, we shall discover a clue to the ways in which God may be perceived to be at work in MT Esther. Crucially, that work will be revealed (indirectly, true, but revealed nonetheless) through his people Israel, the Jews of MT

Esther. And through them, we will see that the view of God's work in history as revealed in MT Esther is more similar than one might expect to the view portrayed in LXX and AT Esther.



Few interpreters of MT Esther have paid much more than cursory attention to this assertion of Jewish destiny placed in the mouths of hostile gentiles. Adele Berlin, for instance, contends that these words of warning are “more for the benefit of the audience than for the character being addressed.”¹ Carey Moore concurs and takes the point even further, baldly stating that “Zeresh is expressing here the views of the author, not her own.”² Frederic Bush similarly argues that the author of MT Esther has simply (and, from Bush's perspective, unrealistically) injected “his own convictions” into the mouths and minds of Haman's associates.³ If such views were accurate assessments of the statement's meaning within the narrative, then the moment violates narrative continuity in a manner that demands critical attention.

From a literary perspective, it is true that a prophetic or oracular warning within a story speaks to more than one audience. It is addressed first to the recipient proper within the narrative world and then to the observer residing outside the narrative world (i.e., the reader or listener). This dual nature is one of the sources of delight in the experience of storytelling: readers or listeners frequently possess knowledge that allows them to understand foreshadowing or moments of warning in ways that the characters cannot know themselves, especially if the given character is resistant to the warning or omen, as is the case here. Yet Berlin's point, as with those

¹ Adele Berlin, *Esther*, The JPS Biblical Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 63.

² Moore, *Esther*, 66.

³ Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 416–17, 420.

of the rest of interpreters noted here, is not this elementary observation concerning narrative functions. Instead, these biblical scholars are claiming that the warning offered by Haman's associates has only *one* audience: it is *not* meant for Haman but is a violation of narrative continuity aimed expressly at the reader. Haman's associates, according to this view, are not addressing Haman but instead are aware of the audience reading MT Esther and are addressing *it*, ignoring Haman entirely.

This is an example of what modern literary studies calls "breaking the fourth wall" or "metafictional commentary" within a narrative. Bugs Bunny regularly acts in a similar manner in Warner Brothers cartoons when he pauses in the midst of some scheme to explain to the audience how easy it will be to fool his opponent. Elmer Fudd or Daffy Duck, in these cases, appears completely unaware of the statements Bugs makes to the audience. Woody Allen uses the very oddity of this situation to great effect in his 2009 film, *Whatever Works*, in which the members of the narrative world are confused by the fact that the main character repeatedly addresses an audience (the movie viewer) that none of the other characters can see. As one can see from the latter example, this sort of violation of narrative continuity works effectively only if it appears regularly and frequently in a narrative. Otherwise, it is most likely a narrative (or interpretive) problem. What is more, the warning in MT Esther (if it is nothing more than the author's personal theology foisted onto a character) also smacks of just the sort of rabid nationalism or ethnocentrism that many Christian interpreters have projected onto MT Esther.

Lewis Paton is somewhat more sympathetic in his view of the moment's coherence with the larger narrative, but he remains only marginally interested in it, noting that most scholars of his time find in the statement little more than a minor prophetic moment or else liken it to the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy, warning an actor of the implications of the path he has

chosen.⁴ This stance, however, simply perceives the warning as a different type of narrative incoherence, in this case that which emerges if a supernatural intervention occurs in a story otherwise devoid of any awareness of supernatural knowledge or activity, as Paton contends is the case with MT Esther.⁵ “The book is not irreligious,” Paton opines, “but it is non-religious. The author believes in God, but he has no such consciousness of his presence as appears in the Prophets and the Psalms.”⁶ Yet inexplicably (at least from Paton’s perspective), the author allows a group of gentiles to speak as though they were Hebrew prophets.

We are back then to the same problem. Given that so many interpreters view the warning (implicitly or explicitly) as some sort of violation of how the narrative world within MT Esther works, why then do none of them bother to grapple sufficiently with the oddity of it? Perhaps they have missed the even larger point that this scene is an example of a recurring motif that appears in other biblical narratives.⁷ One wonders whether Berlin, Bush, and Moore would treat similarly the other instances in the biblical traditions of gentiles imparted with divine foreknowledge or wisdom. For while admittedly unusual, it is not unheard of in the biblical

⁴ Paton, *Esther*, 256.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 95–96.

⁷ In earlier thought about this concept, I was tempted to use the term *type-scene*, drawn specifically from the work of Robert Alter. As he discusses in his *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), Alter borrowed the concept from Homeric studies. Alter defines the type-scene as “a series of recurrent narrative episodes attached to the careers of biblical heroes [or, as I would add, stock biblical characters] that are analogous to Homeric type-scenes in that they are dependent on the manipulation of a fixed constellation of predetermined motifs. [. . . T]he biblical type-scene occurs not in the rituals of daily existence but at the crucial junctures in the lives of the heroes” (51). I would add that such scenes also occur in transitional moments for Israel, who (as a people) serves as one of the two major protagonists in the Hebrew Bible—the other, of course, being God himself. Alter does not catalog the type-scene I am exploring in this chapter, and I am not sure that the narrative material discussed here rises to the full stature of a type-scene, but I remain dependent in this section on Alter’s basic idea that a recurring narrative structure can add a constellation of meaning to a biblical text.

traditions for a gentile (even a hostile gentile) to serve as a spokesperson on behalf of the divine will at the moment that God has intervened in history on behalf of Israel.⁸ Perhaps the most memorable example comes from the book of Numbers and is set in the time immediately following Israel's exodus from Egypt.⁹ The prophet Balaam, though not hostile to Israel, had been hired by the Moabite king Balak to pronounce an efficacious curse against the Israelites at one of their wilderness settlements (Num 22–24). Despite Balak's promises of riches and power in exchange for the curse, Balaam states after a prophetic trance, "How can I damn whom God has not damned,/How doom when the LORD has not doomed?" (Num 23:8). Balak's attempt to turn history against Israel is countered by the LORD: "My message [from the LORD] is to bless:/When He blesses, I cannot reverse it./No harm is in sight for Jacob,/No woe in view for Israel" (23:20–21). Indeed, the trajectory of divinely-wrought history is precisely the opposite of what Balak sought; Balaam's efficacious words instead promise that "A star rises from Jacob,/A scepter comes forth from Israel;/It smashes the brow of Moab,/The foundations of all children of Seth" (24:17).

True, Balaam quite literally traveled a difficult route in order to understand this message from the LORD. When Balak's envoys first arrived in Pethor to request Balaam's assistance in cursing Israel, the LORD clarified the situation immediately: "Do not go with them," the LORD commands. "You must not curse that people [i.e., Israel], for they are blessed" (Num 22:12). The envoys leave empty-handed but return twice more, offering increasing rewards and seeming to sway Balaam off the path established in the first discussion with the LORD.¹⁰ The LORD appears

⁸ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 79–80.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁰ R.W.L. Moberly, "Elisha and Balaam: The Enabling and Disabling of Discernment," in *Prophecy and Discernment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 138–43. Moberly's project

to allow Balaam to set off to curse Israel although he includes a warning with his permission: “If these men have come to invite you, you may go with them. But whatever I command you, that you shall do” (Num 22:20). As most readers likely already know, there is an ensuing conflict involving the angel of the LORD blocking the path on which Balaam rides his donkey, an increasingly irate Balaam who cannot fathom his donkey’s refusal to follow the path, and the miraculous speech of the donkey who apparently discerns God’s will better than the great prophet. Balaam is chastened and appears to give up his potential windfall for trying to curse Israel and instead speaks the exuberant blessings over the encamped Israelites that we saw above. The story is not a mockery of Balaam as a false prophet or diviner; rather, it is a lesson in how “the impure in heart fail to see God” but that the pure in heart can be used to discern and speak the divine will.¹¹

Such insight is not limited to gentile prophets nor only to those who are pure in heart. Gentiles from other walks of life also at times speak in biblical narratives as though the LORD has imparted knowledge to them in the very midst of a divine alteration of history’s trajectory, a crucial element of this recurring motif. In a narrative set decades after the Balaam incident, Rahab the prostitute in Jericho protects the Israelite spies sent by Joshua to reconnoiter the Canaanite territory because, as she puts it,

I know that the LORD has given the country to you, because dread of you has fallen upon us[. . .]. When we heard about [your victories in the wilderness], we

in this book is to “make sense of the biblical text in its received form, without as such engaging with the debates of historical-critical analysis (while still accepting their validity)” (ibid., 148–49). The Balaam story in Numbers 22–24 is usually seen by modern biblical scholarship as a composite text that has been poorly redacted and so shows signs of conflicting accounts. Moberly offers a fine discussion that instead treats the received form as a coherent narrative in its own right and so explains the changing views offered by the LORD as part of a larger biblical discussion of the nature of prophetic discernment. I am dependent on Moberly’s excellent reading in this section of my argument.

¹¹ Moberly, “Elisha and Balaam,” 147.

lost heart, and no man has any more spirit left because of you; for the LORD your God is the only God in heaven above and on earth below. (Josh 2:9–12)

As is the case with Haman’s wife and advisors in MT Esther, the biblical text in the book of Joshua offers no evidence that prior divine knowledge has been granted to Rahab. She appears simply to *know* the fact that the LORD is with Israel and is already in the process of overcoming Israel’s enemies.

In the book of Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar (the Babylonian king credited in the Bible with the destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon’s Temple) professes the greatness of Israel’s God even as he is trying to kill that same God’s servants:

Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, who sent His angel to save His servants who, trusting in Him, flouted the king’s decree at the risk of their lives rather than serve or worship any god but their own God. [. . . *T*] *here is no other God who is able to save in this way.* (Dan 3:28–29, emphasis added)

These examples show that this motif carries with it the ring not just of a warning, but rather that of an axiom of history itself: it does seem that one inevitably falls—and falls to one’s ruin—if one enters into conflict with “the seed of the Jews,” as Haman’s compatriots put it in MT Esther. This lesson appears to be the culminating point of this particular biblical motif. Presenting it through the words of an (at least potentially) hostile gentile opponent serves to re-affirm the strength of God’s commitment to Israel and his power over the peoples of all nations.

The statement of divine protection is tempered in MT Esther by another overlooked aspect of Zeresh’s warning: the conditional nature of the warning offered in MT Esther. Frederic Bush (one of the few scholars to attend to this point) at first appears to reject the conditional nature of the first Hebrew clause in 6:13. Bush suggests that the clause should be read as a causal statement and so translated as “Since Mordecai [. . .] belongs to the Jewish race.”¹² Bush does

¹² Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 416.

not reject the conditional nature of the *syntax* of the statement, however. “The first Hebrew clause, *formally a conditional clause introduced by the particle ׀א, ‘if,’ cannot be a real conditional,”* Bush contends, “since Haman has already told his wife and friends that Mordecai is a Jew (5:13). The clause, then, is really causal in meaning, and it is clearer in the English to translate it so.”¹³

Even without this acknowledgement of the syntactical issue to qualify his interpretive decision, one can question Bush’s decision to translate the clause in the way he suggests. His qualification, in fact, draws attention to the problem. The Hebrew conjunction ׀א (*’im*) appears 1,060 times in the Hebrew Bible,¹⁴ and in the vast majority of instances, the particle introduces the protasis of a real conditional clause, meaning that it indicates an actual question about the state of the world to which the speaker expects a positive answer.¹⁵ Put more simply: as the introductory conjunction of a dependent clause containing no other syntactical cues, *’im* should be assumed to mean “if” and represents a real (yet implied) question posed by the speaker.¹⁶ Further, a causal meaning is almost impossible to derive from the particle. Bush’s own translation lacks a causal sense; he translates the clause as “*Since* Mordecai [. . .] belongs to the Jewish race.” This use of *since*, however, is not so much causal as it is emphatic. According to

¹³ Ibid., 416–17, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), sec. 31 n. 31.

¹⁵ See, for instance, *ibid.*, sec. 31.6.1b, 32.2.1b, 32.2.3a–b, 34.7, 38.2d, etc. If *’im* is meant to indicate a different state of affairs (i.e., a question of fact or rhetorical question, a simple subordinate clause, oaths or wish exclamations, or even a simple polar question), specific syntactical constructions are required, none of which appear in Esther 6:13 (*ibid.*, sec. 18.1c, 39 n. 21 & 72, 40.2.2a–d, 40.3). See also Paul Joüon, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. T. Muraoka, reprint (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2005), sec. 167f.

¹⁶ W. Gesenius and E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, trans. A.E. Cowley, Second English (New York: Oxford University Press, 1910), sec. 104.c; Waltke and O’Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, sec. 31.6.1.

Bush, it is an attempt by the speaker to stress a fact known to the audience. It might be rendered more idiomatically as “*Given that* Mordecai [. . .] belongs to the Jewish race.” Concerning other examples of this sort of emphatic or asseverative use of *'im*, Paul Joüon contends that such a translation decision is “a facile panacea for textual or exegetical difficulties of all sorts” particularly if the translator has not made clear “why an emphatic utterance is called for in the context in question.”¹⁷ None of the grammarians noted here list MT 6:13 as an exception to typical rules, or even as an unusual example, of biblical Hebrew syntax. All of them (with the exception of Bush) appear to presume that the question posed by Zeresh should be interpreted (and translated) as a conditional statement expecting an affirmation of the state of affairs described by the speaker.¹⁸

All this is a long way of saying that Bush’s translation decision leads him (and his readers) to miss the deeper meaning of this passage. A comparison with a similar statement made by a character in the book of Judith proves insightful. In the book of Judith, Achior the

¹⁷ Joüon, *Grammar of Bib. Hebrew*, sec. 164g. Joüon does allow the possibility that *'im* can indicate a temporal clause, but he would then expect *'im* to be translated as “when,” not as “since” or “given that” (ibid., sec. 166p). This translation option would render Esther 6:13 as logically incoherent; the statement would become something along the lines of “When Mordecai is(?)/becomes(?) one from Jewish seed, then you will no longer be able to get the better of him and will surely fall before him.” The statement then envisions some time in an indefinite future in which Mordecai would become Jewish.

¹⁸ Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi devote an entire section of their grammar to the uses of *'im* in the Hebrew Bible [*A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 143–46]. Not only do they make the by-now expected point that the default meaning of *'im* is equivalent to the use of *if* as an introduction to a conditional dependent clause in English, but they also indicate no evidence of a causal or emphatic use of *'im* in biblical Hebrew. Indeed, the closest meaning that they find to Bush’s usage is what they call the “concessive” use of *'im*: in other words, instead of “given” or “because,” Arnold and Choi suggest that the only relation of *'im* to causality is a statement of *non-causality*. In this case, Esther 6:13 then would be translated, “Even though Mordecai [. . .] is of Jewish seed, you will surely fall to your ruin before him.” This reading could be an intriguing second layer of meaning added to the prophetic moment of Zeresh’s warning. As hostile gentiles, Zeresh and Haman’s advisors may foresee that Haman *must* fall before Mordecai and yet find this distasteful or unbelievable. Even here, though, the context of the story at this point at best only allows *both* a concessive and a conditional reading. The concessive reading in this case would not preclude the conditional sense.

Ammonite military ruler possesses an unexplained ability to perceive Israel's protected status in history, much as we saw in the earlier biblical examples. Despite having no direct connection to the Israelites, Achior seeks to warn the Assyrian forces of the risk they face in an assault against the Judeans holed up in the city of Bethulia and blocking the Assyrian path to Jerusalem (Jdt 1–4).¹⁹

During a meeting of the Assyrian war council to evaluate the plan of attack against Bethulia, Achior begins his overview of the Israelite threat with a succinct account of Israel's salvation history: the choice of Abraham by God, the Israelites' sojourn in Egypt, their liberation led by Moses, their conquest of Canaan, and their eventual punishment with exile (Jdt 5:5–19). He ends his summary with the Israelites' return to the Promised Land; more importantly, Achior notes, "they have returned to their God" (5:19). Achior then warns Holofernes that his intended assault against Israel will fail unless the Israelites have sinned:

So now, my master and lord, if these people [i.e., the Israelites] are inadvertently at fault, or if they are sinning against their God, and if we verify this offense of theirs, then we will be able to go up and conquer them. But if they are not a guilty nation, then let my lord keep his distance; otherwise their Lord and God will shield them, and we will be mocked in the eyes of all the earth. (Jdt 5:20–21)

The safety of the Israelites, according to Achior, is dependent on God, who will intervene in history to fight for and protect them *if*—notice the conditionality that Achior's statement adds to the context of the biblical motif we are discussing—they have not turned away from him.

This conditionality matches that of the statement offered to Haman by Zeresh and his

¹⁹ As in the versions of the Esther story and in the book of Daniel, the historical data in the book of Judith is at times wildly inaccurate. Here, for instance, Nebuchadnezzar "ruled over the Assyrians in the great city of Ninevah" (Jdt 1:1), but in a time of war, he seeks to mobilize "all the inhabitants of Persia" and its imperial client states (1:7–11), suggesting that the author of Judith has created a composite enemy empire representing the worst aspects of the Assyrian, neo-Babylonian, and Persian Empires. Because the story mentions only "the Israelites who lived in Judea" (4:1), it is likely that a post-exilic setting similar to that of Esther and the latter parts of Daniel is intended, making the comparison between Judith and MT Esther even more relevant.

advisors in more ways than one. Crucially, as is the case with Achior’s awareness of the strength of the Assyrian army, the unknown issue for Haman’s associates is *not* whether Haman has begun to fall.²⁰ Of this, they are quite sure. Their confidence on this point should be something of a surprise for the attentive reader. When we keep in mind the limited, finite knowledge available to the gentiles within the story’s narrative world, there is little reason to presume that for them Haman’s fall is either a sure thing or even something that has begun.²¹ The palace incident between Ahasuerus and Haman is a setback and embarrassing, no doubt, but it has not undone any of Haman’s plans: the irrevocable decree of genocide remains in place, and Haman retains his place in the royal court. Indeed, he fulfilled Ahasuerus’ request to the letter in rewarding Mordecai and so appears to remain in the king’s good graces. From the gentile perspective, then, it is difficult to understand how Haman’s wife or advisors could know with assurance that Haman has begun to fall—before Mordecai or before anyone else, for that matter. Nonetheless, this is exactly what Haman’s associates claim to know with certainty.

Instead, their implied question—again, as it is for Achior in the Assyrian war council—is one about the status of the Jew (or Jewish community) before them: “if Mordecai [. . .] is of Jewish seed.” In terms of the motif we are discussing, the issue is whether this warning in MT Esther indicates an awareness of divine intervention in history on Israel’s behalf as it does for Achior in the book of Judith. The Hebrew in MT Esther, אַם מְזַרַע הַיְהוּדִים מִרְדֵּכָי, can be rendered more literally: “If Mordecai is from the seed/descent of the Jews.” It is certainly odd at this point for any character in the story to question Mordecai’s ethnicity and most certainly anyone who is complicit with Haman. Mordecai is not passing as Persian (as he has commanded Esther to do);

²⁰ Levenson, *Esther*, 99.

²¹ Paton, *Esther*, 256.

quite to the contrary, his ethnicity is so well known that he has told Esther to keep secret in the harem not only *her* Jewish identity (the Hebrew here is עַם, ‘*am*, lit. her “people”), but also her relationship to Mordecai (the Hebrew has מוֹלֶדֶת, *môledet*, lit. her “family descent, parentage, or familial origins”). Esther observes Mordecai’s warning so carefully that, at least in MT Esther, her Jewish identity is not explicitly revealed even to Ahasuerus until *after* Haman is taken away for execution (8:1).

It perhaps goes without saying by this point, but recall too that Mordecai’s Jewishness is so well known within the narrative world that it has precipitated Haman’s rage and the genocidal decree. Mordecai was the one who told the king’s courtiers that he could not “kneel or bow low to Haman” because “he [i.e., Mordecai] was a Jew” (3:2, 4); Haman was so incensed that he found it insufficient to vent the wrath of his wounded pride on Mordecai alone. Instead, “having been told who Mordecai’s people were, Haman plotted to do away with all the Jews, Mordecai’s people, throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus” (3:6). Given this, the conditional aspect of Zeresh’s warning is surely odd if (and again, I emphasize *if*) it is a reference to Mordecai’s ethnicity. On this point, Bush’s translation concern is surely well placed. Perhaps, however, the implied question is not one of ethnicity but one of something else indicated by the term *Jewish* within the narrative world of MT Esther.

Indeed, with its focus on Mordecai’s Jewishness, the warning draws the reader toward an intriguing constellation of narrative issues at the heart of MT Esther. Why does Haman seek to destroy all the Jews of the Persian Empire? Comic exaggeration is one possible reason, but exaggeration to this degree would not be necessary to make the narrative point that Haman is an anti-Semite. The very extremity of his action disrupts the narrative. As David J.A. Clines notes, “The narrative raises the suspicion that we are not being told the whole truth about Haman, since

it can hardly be feasible at the Persian court to plot genocide every time a subordinate steps out of line.”²² We saw in the previous chapter that the extant AT and LXX versions of the story offer an answer to this question. Haman participated in a plot (perhaps even two plots) to overthrow the king; he rages because Mordecai exposed the plots, and he fears that his Jewish nemesis could reveal that Haman himself was complicit with the disgraced chamberlains. AT and LXX Esther also at the very least hint broadly that hatred of the Jews drives the second assassination plot. The plotters in each story’s second assassination attempt seem aggrieved (as does Haman) that the Persian king has rewarded and promoted a Jew.

Nothing so clear exists in the MT Esther narrative to explain Haman’s motives. Then again, much remains hidden in this version of the Esther story. Esther herself is actually Hadassah, a Jewish girl passing as Persian (MT 2:7). After Esther has ascended to the throne, Mordecai reveals the assassination plot to her, and she in turn exposes it to Ahasuerus (2:21–23). And while Esther “spoke to the king in the name of Mordecai” (2:22), the reader never sees Ahasuerus speak directly to Mordecai of the plot, and (at least prior to the king’s late-night perusal of the royal annals) Ahasuerus never clearly acknowledges that he knows Mordecai was the primary informant. Esther’s report in Mordecai’s name is recorded in the Persian king’s annals (2:23), but here too we do not know with clarity that Ahasuerus personally oversaw that this information was recorded or whether this was accomplished by another minor piece of the vast, anonymous bureaucratic workings of the Empire. In other words, it may not be surprising that Ahasuerus asks later in the narrative whether Mordecai has been rewarded for his service to

²² *Story of the Story*, 147. True, Clines is discussing what he calls the “Pre-Masoretic Story” at this point in his argument, but his point addresses even the MT version of the story if one leaves out a crucial point that MT Esther tells us about Haman. Indeed, the very point we are about to discuss is, according to Clines, the addition to the narrative in which “everything is explained, both on Mordecai’s side and on Haman’s” (ibid., 147–48): the fact that Haman is a descendant of Amalek.

the king (6:3): that moment may be the first time that Ahasuerus is informed directly of what Mordecai had done for him.

Ahasuerus does not know that his wife is Jewish, that she is related to Mordecai, or even that Haman's genocidal decree has been aimed to eradicate the Jews. Similarly, no one in the story appears aware that the narrative's major crisis takes place during Passover. Haman issues the genocidal decree on "in the first month on the thirteenth day," the day before Passover (MT 3:12). The phrasing of the date specifically echoes Lev 23:5 (which places the start of the Feast of Unleavened Bread "in the first month on the fourteenth day") and likewise draws on the institution narrative of the first Passover in Exodus 12, which commands the Israelites to slaughter the Passover lambs in "the beginning of months" upon "the fourteenth day" (Exod 12:2, 6). This date likewise means that the Jewish fast on Esther's behalf falls in the very midst of the Passover celebration, as do Esther's two banquets with the king and Haman.²³ Yet not a hint of observance of the Passover celebration is noted within the narrative world itself. Clearly, these veiled references to Jewish life and practice are present and significant to the story, but their significance remains clouded. When it comes to matters Jewish in MT Esther, much remains hidden.



Something negatively related to Jewish life is much more visible, however, and this element has clear bearing on the warning Haman received. Upon Haman's promotion, we hear in MT Esther, "[s]ome time afterward [after Esther has been chosen as queen], King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite" (MT 3:1). The latter epithet becomes Haman's key identity in MT Esther: as his opponent is "Mordecai the Jew," Haman will

²³ Levenson, *Esther*, 70, 73; Moore, *Esther*, 43.

henceforth be “Haman the Agagite.”²⁴ This epithet is odd not only within the context of MT Esther itself, but in the larger biblical context as well. *Agagite* is a gentilic of unknown reference in the biblical canon except for two interesting notes, one of which appears in the first book of Samuel.²⁵ There, the prophet gives the then-young king Saul this message:

I am the one the LORD sent to anoint you king over His people Israel. Therefore, listen to the LORD’s command: “Thus says the LORD of Hosts: I am exacting the penalty for what Amalek did to Israel, for the assault he made upon them on the road, on their way up from Egypt. Now go, attack Amalek, and proscribe [וְהָרַקְתָּם] all that belongs to him. Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses.” (1 Sam 15:1b–3)

The LORD in this narrative has laid Amalek under *ḥērem* (Hebrew root: חָרַם), frequently translated as “the ban” or “the curse to destruction.” In this case, the root appears in the verb *proscribe*. The Hebrew text states literally that “you will cause/devote to *ḥērem* all that belongs to him [Amalek]” (15:3). Saul, however, does something different:

Saul destroyed Amalek from Havilah all the way to Shur, which is close to Egypt, and he captured King *Agag* of Amalek alive. He proscribed all the [other] people, putting them to the sword; but Saul and the troops spared *Agag* and the best of the sheep, the oxen, the second-born, the lambs, and all else that was of value. They would not proscribe them; they proscribed only what was cheap and worthless. (1 Sam 15:7–9, emphasis added)

This difference between the LORD’s plan and Saul’s execution of it proves to be Saul’s undoing, and *Agag*, king of Amalek, foils the divine plan and ruptures the LORD’s relationship with Saul.

²⁴ I need to return briefly to a point I discussed in chapter two that is likewise helpful here. In the process of updating and adapting Haman’s ethnic designation by altering this epithet in their translations, the Greek authors of AT and LXX Esther lost a deeper theological connection to the larger biblical canon that is preserved in MT Esther. Carey Moore suggests that this was an intentional change in the tradition, shifting Haman’s gentilic marker from that of “the Agagite” to that of a “modernized” enemy who would be readily recognizable to a Greek-speaking Jew and so a clear term of reproach, i.e., “the Macedonian” (*Esther*, 35–36). Torrey neatly points out in a brief note that there may be textual evidence for such a change. Noting that at least one text of AT Esther has *ρωγαίος* where the LXX has *Βοργαίον*, he suggests that the latter is simply a copyist’s attempt to make sense of the former, which itself is a mistaken copy of *Αγαγίος*, a Greek transliteration of the MT term *Agagite* (“Older Esther,” 13, n. 7).

²⁵ The other reference to *Agag* appears in Balaam’s prophecies in Numbers 22–24, specifically at 24:7. Not coincidentally, a reference to Amalek also appears in this cluster of prophecies at v. 20.

This Agag appears to bear a significant textual and symbolic relationship to Haman, who is the *Agagite*.

Hērem means different things at different points in Israelite history. Since first Friedrich Schwally and then Gerhard von Rad popularized the use of the phrase “holy war” as a near synonym for aspects of this term, there has been a tendency in popular biblical discussion to understand the concept in near monolithic terms.²⁶ In contrast, Susan Niditch presents a particularly convincing argument that two conflicting ideologies are at work in the biblical portrayal of *hērem*. First is the view of *hērem* as “God’s portion” of the spoils of war, a generous reward given to the divine warrior who made victory possible. As Lev 27:28 makes clear, “every prescribed thing (*kol hērem*) is totally consecrated to the Lord” and may not be sold or redeemed. This fits, as Niditch notes, with much of the broader ancient Near Eastern understanding of *hērem* as “something inviolable,” “consecrated for destruction,” or even the odd sense (for us) of

²⁶ Academic discussions of “holy war” in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures abound, most of them drawing (directly or, more often, indirectly) on the seminal work of Gerhard von Rad in *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, trans. Marva J. Dawn (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000). Von Rad’s text has spawned other well-known discussions including Millard C. Lind, *YHWH Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980), and Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Von Rad took up the term unhesitatingly from Friedrich Schwally’s earlier work of the same title as von Rad’s own [Friedrich Schwally, *Der heilige Krieg im alten Israel* (Leipzig: Deiterirch, 1901)], but Schwally actually drew the term from his studies in *Islamic* culture and practice. Thus, both Schwally and von Rad neglect to address the single most problematic part of their shared argument: there is *no* term for “holy war” in biblical Hebrew. Ancient Israel no doubt understood at least some of its warfare as uniquely guided and uniquely assisted by God. I am not nearly as comfortable as the scholars above, however, with the idea that there existed for ancient Israel a category of “holy warfare” distinct from that of “secular warfare” or “state warfare.” Such a dichotomy appears anachronistic and perhaps theologically incoherent. It may be a categorical distinction that can be drawn by post-apostolic Christianity or even early Islamic religious thought, but I am not so sure it is a view coherent with the canon of the Hebrew Bible.

While at first glance the Hebrew word *hērem* appears to be the linguistic source for von Rad’s discussion of “holy war,” von Rad himself separates the two terms, seeing *hērem* as the “highpoint and the conclusion of the holy war . . . the consecration of the booty to YHWH” (49). This distinction leaves von Rad with no direct linguistic link between the concept of “holy war” and the canonical biblical texts.

sacredness that is simultaneously associated with being “accursed.”²⁷ Thus, in Num 21:1–3, Israel promises the Canaanites of Arad to God as *ḥērem* in exchange for an Israelite victory.²⁸ Similarly, “God’s portions” are promised in Deut 2, Josh 6 and 10, and 1 Sam 22. The Mesha inscription offers a similar view on *ḥērem*, noting that King Mesha offered up seven thousand people to Chemosh in exchange for a victory over Israel.²⁹

In most cases of *ḥērem* understood as “God’s portion,” the human community is killed in an offering to God that typically stands alongside a portion reserved for the human victors: at least some material booty is reserved for the human beings who have petitioned and served with God.³⁰ In a manner similar to the rest of the Israelite sacrificial system, this view of *ḥērem* appears to offer humans to God *precisely because* they are the “best part” of the spoils of war. This “best part” can vary with the situation and with the degree to which Israel’s God demands his share. Niditch connects this type of *ḥērem* with child sacrifice³¹ and notes that while we may not be comfortable with such a view today, this strain of biblical *ḥērem* ideology may represent a high respect for the human being. The human person must be highly regarded by God (and by the Israelite victors) if one is to offer the person as the portion of spoils worthy to be God’s reward.

As Niditch emphasizes, this “God’s portion” strain of *ḥērem* runs into conflict with another strain: that of the *ḥērem* as divine justice. The understanding of *ḥērem* appears to reach

²⁷ Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible*, 29.

²⁸ *Hērem* here is used in its verbal form; *ḥērem* appears in the biblical texts as both a sacred act (i.e., a verb) and as the resulting portion offered to God in the wake of that act (i.e., a noun).

²⁹ Cited in Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible*, 31.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 34–35.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 42–46.

its most clear articulation in the Josianic era. We see in the Josianic reforms a rigorous critique of human sacrifice with an emphasis in the Deuteronomistic History (a document most likely collected and/or redacted during Josiah's reign) that the peoples of Canaan were driven out of the Promised Land at least in part because they willingly made human sacrifices.³² From this theological stance, human sacrifice—to the LORD or to any other god—would be an abomination. An example of this new Josianic understanding appears early in the Deuteronomistic History: the internal punishment of the Israelites in Josh 7.

The Achan story in Joshua 7 reveals layers of redaction in the book of Joshua; the source story envisions *ḥērem* as a sacred portion worthy of high esteem, while the redactor from the Josianic era labels the earlier view abominable. In the narrative, Achan son of Carmi violates the *ḥērem* that the LORD had decreed against Jericho by keeping booty for himself (and so appearing to interpret *ḥērem* as “God’s portion” of the spoils). This violation of God’s *ḥērem* leads God to declare all Israel now under *ḥērem*, reinforcing the Josianic-type understanding: a divine command for restoration of holy order. As the LORD puts it to Joshua and the other Israelite leaders, “Israel has sinned [. . .] therefore, they have become proscribed” as *ḥērem* because of the “outrage in Israel’s midst” (Josh 7:15). That which is proscribed or condemned to destruction here is most decidedly *not* “God’s portion”; it represents the eradication of that which violates God’s holiness. *Ḥērem* in this second sense is the very antithesis of sacrifice. Neither God nor Israel benefits materially from this destruction. That which is *ḥērem* is never preserved; it is a thing accursed and worthy only of the burning pit.

Saul as portrayed in 1 Sam 15 has exercised the pre-Josianic understanding of *ḥērem* in his assault on Amalek. By saving Agag and the best of the cattle from *ḥērem*, Saul finds himself

³² Ibid., 57–59. Compare Deut 12:29–31; 2 Kgs 23:10.

accursed, even as he was saving these things for sacrifice before God, because he has envisioned something abominable (i.e., Agag) as worthy of offering to the LORD. The Deuteronomic Historian drives this point home clearly. Samuel was quite specific in his statement of the divine command: Saul and his forces were to destroy utterly all that belongs to Amalek, to spare neither women nor children, nor even the animals that the Amalekites own. “But I did obey the LORD!” Saul exclaims when confronted by Samuel. “I performed the mission on which the LORD sent me: I captured King Agag of Amalek, and I proscribed Amalek, and the troops took from the spoil some sheep and oxen—the best of what had been proscribed—to sacrifice to the LORD your God at Gilgal” (15:20–21). Obviously, Saul’s summary of his mission’s objectives does not match what the reader saw outlined just a handful of verses earlier.

Reading through the lens of Niditch’s definitions, we see that from the perspective of the Josianic redactor, Saul has substituted the “God’s portion” understanding of *ḥērem* in place of the commanded divine justice that the LORD spoke through Samuel. His action leads an already skeptical God to break for the last time with Saul: “The word of the LORD then came to Samuel: ‘I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned away from Me and has not carried out My commands.’ Samuel was distressed and he entreated the LORD all night long” (15:10–11). Samuel’s entreaties proved futile. Although not overtly stated in the text as it was in the book of Joshua, the outcome of Saul’s action appears to be similar to that of Achan’s pilfering: Saul to some degree appears to fall under the rule of *ḥērem*. As the Deuteronomistic History will show, Saul from this point on leads a life hounded by God, one that ends in his own destruction and his family’s ruin, both seemingly necessary to restore the divine order that his actions have disrupted.

Ancient and modern exegetes alike have noted another connection that emerges from the

unusual genealogical data that the text of MT Esther supplies for Mordecai. Mordecai enters the narrative in chapter two: “In the fortress of Susa lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite[, who]³³ was exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon” (MT 2:5–6). This genealogy as written is both improbable and incomplete. Based on typical Hebrew syntax, the pronoun אֲשֶׁר (*’ăšer*, the ambiguous *who* that is indicated in verse six) must refer either to Kish as the last named antecedent noun that matches the number and gender of the main verb connected to the relative pronoun; or else to Mordecai, who is the main subject of verse five and so also likely the person referenced by the adjectival phrase “a Benjaminite.”

If verse six refers to Mordecai, then he is necessarily more than 110 years old during the events of the present time in MT Esther, given that he was part of an exile that took place no later than 597 BCE.³⁴ Such an age in a post-exilic work like MT Esther would be highly unusual; human lifespans are much shorter than those of the major figures in the stories describing the times of the early judges or even those of the patriarchal age, much less those of the primeval history. We are centuries past the era (and even the date of composition of the narratives) in which figures like Abraham, Jacob, Moses, or Joshua regularly lived beyond the age of one hundred. In the post-exilic period, one is elderly upon reaching the age of sixty or seventy—and

³³ The translator of this passage in the JPS Tanakh, in an attempt to make sense of the genealogy, has at this point chosen an eisegetical interpretation rather than a simple exegetical translation. The Hebrew text offers only the relative pronoun אֲשֶׁר (*’ăšer*), which can indicate a range of meanings: *who*, *which*, and *that*. The conjugation of the verb immediately following the relative pronoun requires a third person masculine singular subject but does not clarify beyond that. The JPS translator has replaced the ambiguous relative pronoun with *Kish* and then rendered the connected dependent clause in the original Hebrew as a separate sentence in his or her English translation.

³⁴ Levenson, *Esther*, 57; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 29.

would be considered blessed to reach a lifespan of eighty years (as Ps 90:10 notes with sadness: “The span of our life is seventy years,/or, given the strength, eighty years;/but the best of them are trouble and sorrow./They pass by speedily, and we take flight”). This is not a claim regarding the historicity of either the Esther text or those texts that record the events of the patriarchal age; instead, it is a question of verisimilitude within the narrative world.³⁵

The *who* of verse six grows even more confusing as we explore further its references to Mordecai specifically as “son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite.” Mordecai’s genealogy here appears to overlap with that of Saul. According to the books of Samuel, Kish the Benjaminite was the father of Saul, the first king of Israel (1 Sam 9:1), while Shimei was a descendant of Saul who cursed David as a usurper when David fled Jerusalem after his son Absalom had seized the throne in a coup (2 Sam 16:5–13; 19:16–24). Shimei apparently saw in this a case of *lex talionis*, a punishment fitting the crime that David had inflicted upon the house of Saul. And while David spared Shimei upon his return to rule over Israel, this clansman of Saul later was executed at King Solomon’s order (and in accordance with David’s deathbed wishes) shortly after Solomon began consolidating his own reign in the wake of David’s death (1 Kgs 1:8–9; 2:13–46). Mordecai’s genealogy thus links him to names associated with an immediate

³⁵ While one cannot rule out the possibilities that the writer (or redactor) at this point did not notice and/or did not care to this degree about historical verisimilitude within his story, the story does appear to assume a basic narrative universe in which characters live and act in accordance with the everyday experience of its original, contemporary readers. MT Esther claims to be neither a saga of an ancient world of exceptional humans nor a world along the lines of Central American “magic realism” in which random unexpected realities suddenly emerge in the world. Marriageable characters who are the age of the ancients is unexpected in this universe. (Sadly, the possibility of a government-sponsored pogrom has not been such an impossible reality throughout much of Jewish history.)

For a somewhat lighter discussion, see Moore, *Esther*, 26–27. Moore’s point is slightly different in his discussion of this problem but reaches the same conclusion. Discussing the problematic genealogy but focusing instead on Esther’s age, Moore notes that she then “captivated the king and outstripped all her competitors” while in her sixties. With this, Moore rather delightfully puts the genealogical problem in a most concrete form and offers an inadvertent double entendre when he notes that Esther “outstripped” the other women competing for the king’s favor.

ancestor and an immediate descendant of King Saul.

The life of Saul, however, predates the exile (much less the era of the Esther story) by close to half a millennium, which renders Mordecai's genealogy incomplete by hundreds of years.³⁶ Likewise, Saul's name itself is missing from the very genealogy seemingly meant to connect Mordecai in some significant way to the story of Saul's ill-fated reign. The references to Kish and Shimei place Mordecai almost directly—but not quite—in the genealogical place of Saul, as though history were folding back upon itself. While this connection to Saul is confused and incomplete in its expression, the events of MT Esther appear to overlay those of Saul's reign, cleverly allowing the author of MT Esther to draw upon the ancient biblical context in order to understand the events of his own narrative, perhaps even to use the events of his story as a recapitulation of the Saul story, but this recapitulation is strangely clouded within the narrative world.

For instance, in MT Esther, Mordecai's decree does allow the Jews to take booty (MT 8:11), much as is done in these early narratives of *ḥērem* noted by both Niditch and von Rad. Most telling, however, is that the Jews do not take any booty on either day, even though it has been offered to them (MT 9:10, 15). If the connection with Saul's story is intentional in MT Esther, then this refusal serves as an obvious correction of what Saul once did wrongly. Mordecai has given permission to the Jews to do so (as they were not allowed under Samuel's orders from the LORD), but the Persian Jews acting under Mordecai have scrupulously refused their rightful share. This fits as a nice parallel with the concept of Mordecai as the zealously observant Jew that we saw in the Additions to LXX and AT Esther.

This refusal of the Jews to take booty in the Esther narrative is problematic for Niditch.

³⁶ Levenson, *Esther*, 56–58; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 29.

Because the people have not been set aside as God's portion, there necessarily should be a portion of the booty given back to God in thanksgiving for granting victory to the Jews. Because no booty whatsoever is taken by the Jews in the story, no such "God's portion" exists in MT Esther (or the other extant versions of the story, for that matter). Niditch's concern seems to lie in her belief that the Jews in the Esther story settle for the role of "good citizens," in contrast to that of participants in sacred warfare.³⁷ This point is confusing because Niditch appears to be arguing either that the violence in the Esther story is not in accord with divinely sanctioned warfare elsewhere in the Bible, or else that the Jews in MT Esther are not violent enough to rise to the level of true sacred warfare. Either way, Niditch argues that the violence in MT Esther does not fit the biblical model of sacred warfare. I suspect she reaches this odd conclusion because (as she stresses in her final chapter) Niditch contends that the most recently written portions of the Hebrew Bible move Israelite and Jewish thought toward nonviolence as the normative stance for Jews. The lateness of the composition of MT Esther calls such a deduction into question.

However clouded these intertextual references appear to be, understanding them seems essential to a proper interpretation of MT Esther, and the genealogical data seem to be the key. Alone among all the characters in MT Esther, only Mordecai and Haman are provided with any sort of genealogical background. Ahasuerus, in contrast, is simply the present king of the Persian empire; his royal advisors (like those of Haman) have no history beyond that contained within the story itself. Even Esther herself, the story's title character, is known simply as an orphaned daughter of Abihail and an unnamed mother (MT 2:15); the only known history of these parents is that Abihail was Mordecai's uncle. Despite the story's overall indifference to characters'

³⁷ Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible*, 122.

origins, Mordecai and Haman are not only provided with genealogies but are then identified by those genealogies in their epithets. The latter point is clearly a significant sign. “Epithets in the Bible are not incidental identifiers,” Michael Fox emphasizes, “but clues to the development of the story and integral to it.”³⁸ And even if those genealogies are less than fully coherent, they do point to a narrative recapitulation of the encounter between Saul and Agag. But in both cases, the vital names (*Saul* and *Amalek*) are missing from the respective genealogies. This may mean, as Ibn Ezra (a twelfth-century Jewish commentator) and others suggest, that there is no authorial intention to imply direct descent from Saul or Amalek among the characters in MT Esther.³⁹ While Ibn Ezra’s implied caution against over-interpretation is duly noted, his answer is less than fully satisfying all the same. Seen within the broader constellation of concepts and figures tying MT Esther to 1 Samuel 15, something more substantive emerges from the odd genealogies.

Agag the king of Amalek lived after Saul’s attack, an open challenge to the *hērem* ban under which the LORD had laid all of Amalek. In some mysterious way, damage to the divine order was done through Agag’s survival, and even though Samuel himself later executed the Amalekite leader, the damage persists. The biblical text never directly explains how the Amalekites collectively survived Saul and Samuel’s assaults, but they did, and the cost to Israel and to God remains high. Saul’s reign was rejected, and according to at least part of the rabbinic tradition, Agag lived long enough to ensure Amalek’s progeny would survive this encounter with the LORD’s people. As Mordecai reminds Esther in Targum Sheni:

[R]emember that you come from the descendants of King Saul of Israel; and it was told to the king of Israel to destroy the memory of the dynasty of Amalek from beneath the heavens. But he had pity on Agag, their king, and kept him by

³⁸ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 186.

³⁹ Cited in Levenson, *Esther*, 56–57. Levenson appears to concur with Ibn Ezra: “We should not assume that Mordecai is a *descendant* of Saul, only that the two are to be thought of together” (56).

his side. That very night a woman became pregnant from him, and Haman arose from his descendants, who has been seeking to buy all of the Jews and to uproot them completely. As a consequence of your ancestor having pity on their king Agag, he became a stumbling block for it.⁴⁰

The enemy of Israel survives to fight another day, and Amalek survives precisely because Saul failed in his execution of *ḥērem* as divine justice, a fitting judgment against Israel's failed first king, at least from the perspective of the Josianic redactor.

In contrast to this rabbinic stance, Yairah Amit has argued that there existed a “Saul polemic” among Jews in the Persian period that was part of a larger debate about the relative merits of the Davidic and the Saulide royal houses, expressed in the biblical texts especially through the hostile reworkings in Chronicles of parts of the Deuteronomistic History in order to portray Saul in an unflattering light.⁴¹ Amit contends that the book of Esther was written by someone “who at that time was concerned to legitimize the House of Saul.”⁴² She admits that a literal attempt to revive the Saulide kingship during the Persian period “seems almost delusional,” given that there no longer existed even then a continuous genealogy of the House of Saul. Instead, the “hidden polemic” in the book of Esther “expressed the tensions between the Judeans and the Benjaminites [of the Persian period], the disappointment in and disillusionment about the House of David, and a protest against the claim that the Davidic dynasty was the only

⁴⁰ Targum Sheni 4:13. Grossfeld, *Two Targums*. A similar story is credited to pseudo-Philo and recounted by Louis Ginzberg in his *Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 902, n. 66.

⁴¹ Yairah Amit, “The Saul Polemic in the Persian Period,” in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, ed. Obed Lipschits (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 647–61. While it is clearly true that the Chronicler seeks whenever possible to portray the Davidic household and David himself in a flattering light, Amit's argument that the Chronicler portrays Saul in a more negative light than does the Deuteronomistic Historian seems a stretch. In order to do so, Amit must also contend that any negative portrayals of Saul or the House of Saul in the books of Samuel and Kings are post-exilic redactions or else have been misread by modern readers, an exercise that quickly begins to sound like begging the question (see, for instance, pp. 648–53).

⁴² *Ibid.*, 655.

legitimate option to power.”⁴³

As Joseph Blenkinsopp has recently argued, there is compelling evidence in the biblical texts and in the archaeological record of a re-emergent conflict between the tribe of Benjamin and the tribe of Judah already in the immediate aftermath of the Babylonian conquest. Before the exile, the prophet Jeremiah was highly critical of the attempts by the Davidic kings to throw off Babylonian rule, yet he found favor and protection in Benjaminite territory among the members of the family of Shaphan, a “prominent statesman” who was most likely himself of the tribe of Benjamin.⁴⁴ Gedeliah, the governor appointed by the Babylonians to oversee the now-annexed Judean kingdom, was from the family of Shaphan and had an administrative center in Mizpah of Benjamin, an area that Blenkinsopp notes shows no archaeological patterns of destruction from the era of the revolt against Babylon ca. 597–596 BCE.⁴⁵ It would appear that the Babylonian authorities showed decided favor to the Benjaminites, especially given their tribal support of acquiescence as a policy toward Babylonian authority. Blenkinsopp also contends that the Babylonians likewise installed the authorized cult center of the province in Bethel, a town near Mizpah and likely considered a Benjaminite enclave at that point in Israel’s history.⁴⁶ The relocation of the administrative and the cultic centers of the region outside of Judean territory

⁴³ Ibid., 658.

⁴⁴ *David Remembered: Kingship and National Identity in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 13, 30. Oddly, Blenkinsopp refers to Jeremiah as “the Benjaminite prophet” (ibid., 13), which is likely an instance of imprecise language on his part. Jeremiah actually was a Levite, a descendant of Abiathar, a scion of the Aaronic priesthood banished by Solomon to the Benjaminite town of Anathoth (and suppressed as a priestly family) in reprisal for Abiathar’s support of Adonijah as successor to David (Jer 1:1; 1 Kgs 1:5–2:27). The Deuteronomistic Historian also sees in this act a fulfillment of God’s judgment against the house of Eli, who oversaw the troubled priesthood at Shiloh in the age of the Judges (1 Sam 2:12–3:18).

⁴⁵ *David Remembered*, 30.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 32.

would seem to indicate a decided shift toward Benjamin and a possible reason for the Benjaminites to find hope in a revival of Saulide rule.

This view of the historical circumstances in the aftermath of the Babylonian crisis helps us to understand why Amit posits a conflict between the Judeans and the Benjaminites of the Persian period, the latter group wary of the prestige given to the tribe of Judah through the elevation of the province name *Yehud* and the ethnic term *yēhūdî* as the defining terms by which all Israelites came to be known by the Persian period.⁴⁷ The change in imperial rule, in other words, appears to have been accompanied by a corresponding demotion of Benjaminite influence in the province. Blenkinsopp is not so sure of intertribal hostility in the Persian period, however, suggesting that the use of “Judah and Benjamin” as a unit in the latter parts of Chronicles and in Ezra-Nehemiah signals “[t]he eventual settlement of this intertribal conflict.”⁴⁸ Given all this, Amit’s argument appears far too speculative to serve as a basis for interpreting MT Esther, especially given in addition the clouded nature of the references to this polemic in the narrative itself. As Blenkinsopp summarizes, “We cannot rule out the possibility that some Benjaminites of that time entertained hope for the restoration after many centuries of the short-lived dynasty of Saul under the aegis of the Babylonian or Persian imperial power. But the bottom line is that evidence is lacking, and what little we do know would seem to render such hopes illusory.”⁴⁹

From the biblical perspective, the reason for a recapitulation of the conflict between Saul

⁴⁷ Amit, “Saul Polemic,” 657; Levenson, *Esther*, 57. Levenson offers a discussion of how *yēhūdî* comes to define all Israelites and so should be translated as *Jew* in MT Esther. Amit suggests (with no concrete evidence) that other Israelites of the time resented the prestige of Judah. On an anecdotal level, this was no doubt true, but Amit bears the obligation to show a larger cultural movement at work that was influential enough to shape a “Saul vs. David” polemic and that was well known enough at the time to justify “hidden” uses of it in the shaping of the biblical canon.

⁴⁸ *David Remembered*, 35.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.

and Agag is much more simple. Saul's unfinished business with Agag is actually unfinished business between the LORD and Amalek. Even in the case of 1 Sam 15, the narrative describes at most a proxy battle. The engagement between Saul and Agag is an historical counterpart to the ongoing cosmic warfare waged between the LORD and Amalek, a set of skirmishes that date back in the biblical narratives to the time of Israel's exodus from Egypt. Shortly after fleeing Egypt and not long after witnessing the destruction of Pharaoh's forces at the Sea of Reeds, Israel was attacked by Amalek at Rephidim (Exod 17:8). The attack seems to have been a surprise assault from the rear, likely aimed primarily at noncombatants.⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, this is the incident to which the LORD alludes in 1 Sam 15. On the day after the Amalekite attack on Israel, Moses sent the Israelite army into battle, led by Joshua. The battle was won by the Israelite forces but clearly involved as well some sort of divine intervention, according to the Exodus narrative. During the battle, Moses stationed himself on a nearby hill overlooking the battlefield, equipped with the staff that had been divinely empowered when Moses first met the LORD on the mountain in Midian (Exod 4:1–5, 19–20). According to the Exodus account of the battle, “whenever Moses held up his hand [with the ‘rod of God’ in it], Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed” (17:11).

As the battle waged on throughout the day, Moses grew tired and eventually required that Aaron and Hur stand on either side of him as he sat on a large rock, the two of them supporting his extended hands (and the rod) to bring about the victory (17:12–13). Joshua “overwhelmed [וַיִּתְּלֶשׁ] Amalek and his people with the sword” (17:13). The Hebrew root here is *תלשׁ*, which connotes simply defeat of an opponent with a sense of weakening or enfeebling him; it is not an act of eradication or utter destruction. The LORD, in other words, did not—perhaps, as we will

⁵⁰ This point is stated overtly in Deut 25:17–19, as we shall see shortly.

see momentarily, *could* not—demand *ḥērem* of Joshua as he later would of Saul. Quite to the contrary, the Exodus account contends not only that the battle is far from finished but also that it *must* be engaged again in the future:

The LORD said to Moses, “Inscribe this in a document as a reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!” And Moses built an altar and named it Adonai-nissi. He said, “It means, ‘Hand upon the throne of the LORD!’ The LORD will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages.” (17:14–16)

According to this admittedly confusing set of statements, one point emerges quite clearly: Amalek has established itself through this encounter as fundamentally opposed to the divine plan. The LORD had rescued his chosen people from slavery to Pharaoh, not simply to liberate them but instead to set them back in their proper covenantal relationship: “Let my people go to worship me [lit. ‘that they may serve me’ וַיַּעֲבֹדֵנִי]” (Exod 9:1). The goal of the escape from Egypt is not merely a release of slaves from captivity; rather, it is a righting of cosmic order. The LORD has claimed that Israel is *his* servant, not Pharaoh’s. The LORD’s people have been set on a journey that begins with Passover and ends only with the ratification of the new covenant between God and Israel at Mount Sinai. From a canonical perspective, Amalek’s assault threatens to derail the work of Sinai, to damage God’s people and their relationship with him.

Amalek remained a thorn in Israel’s side long after that first encounter, regularly participating in the destabilization of Israel’s covenanted existence. Amalek was there among the Canaanites at the edge of the Promised Land when Moses sent his first reconnaissance team to explore the land; the spies returned fearful of the land’s inhabitants and (except for Joshua and Caleb) doubtful of the LORD’s ability to conquer the Canaanites (Num 13). Later, when a group of Israelites try to enter the Promised Land without Moses or the LORD, Amalekites are among the Canaanites who drive them away, as Moses predicted they would (Num 14). In his final

words to them as they stand a second time at the edge of the Promised Land, Moses reminds the next generation of Israelites of the need to destroy Amalek:

Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear. Therefore, when the LORD your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget! (Deut 25:17–19)

Israel did not heed Moses' command or its implied warning. Once in the Promised Land, the Israelites ignored Amalek, and the threat returned. First, Amalekite raiders accompanied Midianites on their attacks against Israelite settlements in the time of Gideon (Jdg 6). Then, as we saw in the earlier discussion of *hērem*, there is a sense in which one can claim that, from the perspective of the Deuteronomistic History, Saul's suicide rests in part on his refusal to destroy Amalek when given the chance; his shattered life is a sign of the LORD's rejection of his chosen anointed one in the wake of Agag's survival (1 Sam 28:16–19; 31:1–7). And almost three hundred years later, Hezekiah apparently sends five hundred men of the tribe of Simeon in an attempt to destroy the remaining Amalekites still within the Promised Land, yet Amalek still remains (1 Chr 4:41–42).⁵¹

A later Psalmist notes what seems to be one of Amalek's powers of self-preservation in a lament offered in Psalm 83:

O God, do not be silent;

⁵¹ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 42. Fox points out that the Chronicles passage has traditionally been read as indicating that the Simeonites finally eradicated Amalek. Were this the case, this would suggest (as Fox points out) that the Esther author likely was unaware of the Chronicles account or that Chronicles had not yet achieved canonical status in the Esther author's community. Yet as Fox also notes, the Chronicler never verifies that Amalek was destroyed in Hezekiah's day, and like the comic book villains who seem to escape every inevitable death they encounter, it appears that here too, Amalek survives until all the bodies are finally accounted for. One might also note that, even if the author of MT Esther had been aware of the traditional reading of Chronicles or its source material, the unending apocalyptic sense of the battle with Amalek in Exod 17:16 likely trumped the Chronicler's account.

do not hold aloof;
do not be quiet, O God!
For Your enemies rage,
Your foes raise up their heads.
They plot craftily against Your people,
take counsel against Your treasured ones. (Ps 83:2–4)

He later warns God that these enemies have “made an alliance against You” (v. 6). The alliance is a litany of peoples who have been arrayed against Israel through the biblical traditions: Edom, the Ishmaelites, Philistia, and Assyria, among others. Lurking at the heart of the Psalmist’s list is Amalek, almost as though hidden (as we saw above) in the midst of all these other enemies (vv. 6–9). This seems to be part of Amalek’s power in the biblical narratives set after Exod 17: Amalek lurks within and beside the natural enemies of Israel, empowering them and chipping away at Israel’s covenanted existence.

The rabbinic attention to textual details reveals just how profound a threat Amalek presents to God’s presence in the world. Exod 17:16, as noted above, offers a coda to the story of Joshua’s battle against Amalek. Moses builds an altar commemorating the event that is named “Adonai-nissi,” in Hebrew, יהוה נסִי, literally, “The LORD is my banner.” Moses’ explanation of the altar’s name involves a seeming *non sequitur*: כִּי־יָד עַל־כַּס יְהוָה מִלְחָמָה לַיהוָה בְּעַמְלֵק מִדֵּר דֵּר. Literally, this verse suggests that the altar’s name means something along these lines: “On account of [his] hand upon the throne of the LORD, there will be war between the LORD and Amalek from age to age.” The rabbinic tradition noted in at least one place that the Hebrew words translated as “the throne of the LORD” (כֶּסֶּ יָהּ *kēs yāh*) in this passage are both *defective* spellings; the LORD’s throne (כֶּסֶּס *kīssē*) and the LORD’s name (יהוה)—the latter the very presence of the LORD himself—are incomplete in this verse. As one Amoraic midrash emphasizes,

Rabbi Levi said in the name of Rabbi Aḥa bar Ḥanina: As long as the descendants

of Amalek are in the world, neither the name [i.e., YHWH] nor the throne is complete. When the descendants of Amalek will have perished, both the name and the throne will be complete. What is the reason? “The enemy is no more—/ruins everlasting,” etc. [a reference to Ps 9:7]. What is written thereafter? “But the LORD abides forever;/He has set up his throne for judgment.”⁵²

As Levenson notes, Rabbi Aḥa not only comments on the meaning of the Exodus passage, but he connects it with an enthronement psalm celebrating the LORD’s rule over creation. Crucially, though, Levenson points out that for the rabbi, “the psalmist did not commemorate; he prognosticated. Specifically, he predicted the eschatological annihilation of the Amalekites.”⁵³

The full meaning of the Exodus verse is elusive, but the general point is clear. Amalek’s attack upon Israel has likewise been an assault on the dominion of God, and because of this, the LORD has set himself in fundamental opposition to Amalek. Amalek’s hand has caused some sort of cosmic disruption that remains unhealed until Amalek and the LORD’s people face their final battle. Levenson summarizes:

If *kēs* means “throne” [in Exod 17:16], then it lacks the final letter of the ordinary word for “throne” (*kīssē*). Similarly, the name of YHWH here lacks the last two consonants that it usually (but not always) shows. Rabbi Aḥa interprets the apocopated terms as an indication of the unfinished quality of God’s nature and his mastery over the world. As long as Israel’s ancient and by now archetypal enemy endures, YHWH is not altogether YHWH, and his regal power is not fully actualized. Rather, he is omnipotent cosmocrator only *in potentia*. His power and his majesty, not yet fully manifest, will become so when, acting in accordance with Psalm 9, he blasts his enemy from the world.⁵⁴

It is almost as though in the course of Joshua’s victory, the LORD himself—or at the very least, his presence and authority within the created order—was wounded in the battle with Amalek.

This might explain why Israel, rather than the LORD himself, must blot out Amalek.

⁵² Cited in Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence*, revised edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 37.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.



We now see why (again, at least from the perspective of the larger biblical canon) Mordecai cannot bow to Haman. We also see why Haman responds so vehemently to Mordecai's refusal. The conflict between Mordecai and Haman is a recapitulation of this ancient and unfinished work between Israel's first king and Agag, and ultimately between the LORD and Amalek. Something larger than an ethnic designation is at stake in the conflict between Haman the Agagite and Mordecai the Jew. As we have seen in other parts of MT Esther, these gentilics may be indications of a divine conflict underlying the events of the Esther story. "The Agagite" contains in his name a clouded reference to Amalek, a representative of the chaotic and disruptive forces arrayed against the LORD in the Hebrew Bible. Conversely, "the Jew" contains in his name a clouded reference to Israel, the chosen representative and partner of the LORD at work in the world.

Failure to carry out the divine work against Amalek leaves the wholeness of Israel and the reign of God broken in the world. It may in some way leave God's presence and authority in the world broken as well. Saul's failure left an unhealed schism, a confusion and disorder in the midst of God, Israel, and creation. This sense of woundedness or brokenness may express itself in MT Esther precisely in the clouded awareness of divine purpose running throughout our discussion of the story up to this point. Mordecai and Haman then are indeed descendants of Saul and Agag, but even they are not able to understand fully the meaning and purpose of their conflict within the narrative world of MT Esther. The divine restoration of cosmic order may be at hand, but its presence is unclear because the throne of the LORD remains damaged, itself clouded, and unfinished. God's presence is likewise murky, veiled, perhaps even hidden. Might this be part of the lesson of MT Esther, expressed here through its narrative style? Amalek has rendered the LORD less than fully visible, less than fully present, in a chaotic and threatening

world. If so, then the broken genealogies offered in MT Esther reveal that it has fallen to Mordecai's family to right that which his ancestors (and by extension, Esther's ancestors) have failed to do—and which they now face again in the person and work of Haman.⁵⁵ This in part is what it means to associate Mordecai with the House of Saul. It also helps us to understand at least part of the meaning of the warning posed to Haman by his wife and his advisors.

Lurking within Haman himself is Amalek, just as Amalek has lurked within so many of Israel's enemies in earlier biblical narratives. Haman need not be conscious of this fact within the narrative world of MT Esther; in truth, the clouded nature of Jewish life and practice in the narrative shows that this cosmic warfare is all but unknown to the story's characters.⁵⁶ This lack of awareness within the narrative world does not preclude the reader from recognizing this cosmic narrative underlying the events of the story. The warning that Haman receives from his wife and advisors fits a recurring biblical motif of the enemy gentile who is granted knowledge of a divine plan—already in motion—to change the course of history. Ironically, given this story's place in the canon of Israelite Scripture, these gentile advisors may be the only characters in MT Esther who *know* Israel's God has begun to act to save his people. Their question is not whether the LORD can or will act. As we saw earlier, they are sure that Haman has begun to fall. The question for them, as it is for us, is whether Mordecai, before whom Haman has begun to fall, is Jewish. It is the nature and practice of Jewish life and liturgy that remains clouded for them and for us. But the warning that is given to Haman is a clear sign that the cosmic battle

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ As we have seen, this is not the case for Mordecai in the AT and LXX traditions. Additions A and F give to him an apocalyptic awareness, but again, as I noted in the previous chapter, Mordecai is the only character granted this knowledge even in these Greek recensions of the Esther story, and he remains only hazily aware of his dream's meaning until after the events of the basic Esther story have already taken place. The characters in all of the versions of the Esther story, in other words, lack any clear sense of the cosmic meaning of the events in which they are participating.

with Amalek has been re-engaged by Israel's God. History, until this time, seems to have been on the side of Amalek, but the LORD has promised that Amalek will remain at war with the LORD and with Israel until Amalek's final defeat. MT Esther likely only offers a nod toward this rich theological and canonical context, but as we have seen with the other references to Jewish life and divine order in the Esther story, even a nod is significant. Haman's advisors see this and offer their revelation to Haman and to us.

Chapter Four. Seeds of History, Seeds of Holiness

In his 1940 novel *The Power and the Glory*, the Catholic writer Graham Greene offers a portrayal of an unnamed “whisky priest” travelling as a fugitive among the destitute communities in the southern Mexican states of Tabasco and Chiapas in the 1920s at the height of the Mexican Revolution. In Tabasco, the revolutionary government was led by Tomás Garrido Canabal, a socialist dictator and vehement opponent of the Catholic Church.¹ Canabal instituted strict anti-Catholic laws that closed parishes in the state, forced priests to marry, and led to the execution of lay and ordained Catholics who were found practicing their religion in violation of state law. He also founded several anti-clerical and anti-Catholic organizations, the most notable of which was the “Red Shirts,” a near fascist paramilitary group that plays a role in *The Power and the Glory*. The unnamed lieutenant who acts as the primary antagonist in Greene’s novel is based on Canabal and, like him, wishes nothing more than the total destruction of the religion that he opposes with an equally powerful faith, although a faith driven by a very different set of beliefs.²

The dynamics between the whisky priest and the culture surrounding him in Greene’s

¹ John Updike, “Introduction,” in *The Power and the Glory*, Special Fiftieth Anniversary Edition (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), xii–xiii, xv.

² Much of this background material is readily available in Graham Greene’s non-fiction account of his time in Mexico, *The Lawless Roads* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006 [1939]). This narrative served as the basis for *The Power and the Glory*, not only offering the historical data that underlie the novel’s events but even serving as the source for specific scenes and characters in the novel.

novel offer a helpful vantage point on the question of Jewishness in MT Esther. During the Mexican Revolution, it was often dangerous in Tabasco and Chiapas to display one's Catholic identity in public. Many Catholics "passed" as quiet supporters of the government and survived in a sort of theological silence. The whisky priest is forced into a public faith by the nature of his vocation, a vocation that for whatever reason he decides to live, rather than to deny or instead to flee as do the vast majority of other priests in the region.

We see a similar situation in MT Esther, not just in Haman's persecution of Mordecai, but earlier in the story as well, when Mordecai warns Esther to hide her ethnicity and her familial connections while she is in the palace. Esther, as we have already noted, passes as a typical Persian woman throughout much of her story, strongly suggesting that there is some perceived danger in the public expression of a Jewish identity. The dark edges of this world show up as well at the story's end when at least 75,000 anti-Semites thought it was appropriate to rise up in force against the Jews even though Haman had been deposed and executed. Their actions defy reason and appear within the narrative world as an expression of pure hatred. The persecution of the Jews in the Persian Empire might not be open and constant in MT Esther, but it is pervasive and far-reaching.

Like the whisky priest, Mordecai in MT Esther seems compelled to enact his religious identity publicly, and he suffers for this decision. In both stories God appears to have abandoned his people to their own devices, even as they are dying because they are in some way identified as *his* people. The narrative world of MT Esther, unlike those of AT and LXX Esther, describes a place in which all overt signs of God's presence have disappeared, often even those markers within one's own life. Like Greene's novel, the biblical narrative recounts a story of people connected to a religious practice that appears to have been blasted from their world. The

common signs of the religious community's vitality are gone, and the practice of that community is scattered and fragmented at best.

One "moral" of Greene's novel (if I may oversimplify a rather profound narrative) lies in a narrative fact that is shared by both *The Power and the Glory* and *MT Esther*: one cannot judge the nature and meaning of a vocation—an intentionally lived religious life—solely from the limited vantage point of everyday experience. In such a world as the ones found in these two narratives—worlds in which a powerful and raging hatred of the religion lies all too near to the surface of common life—the ways in which a life fits with divine power and within the divine plan are mysterious and cryptic. The religious life (even in a religion as dependent on grace as Christianity claims to be, and so much more so in Judaism) is one evaluated on the basis of transformation and change: Has the world conformed more clearly to the divine plan through an individual's choices in life? Has divine order increased in the world through one's actions? Such results often do not arise in the places or among the persons where we normally expect to find them; as Greene's novel shows, the transformative divine power is sometimes communicated in and to the world by means of vessels far less than holy. It is a lesson not far different from that offered by *MT Esther*, and this sense of a vocation, even one lived haphazardly and at times in little more than fragments, may help us to understand what it means to be Jewish in the narrative world of *MT Esther*. The answer, it turns out, lies in the nature of a seed.



The problem in *The Power and the Glory* is not one of faith opposed by reason or by materialism; rather, it concerns a conflict between opposing faiths. Regardless of how he views himself, the lieutenant is a man of faith. His faith emerges early in the novel. Walking through a plaza in the decrepit state capital, the lieutenant encounters a group of children at play, pretending to be revolutionaries. He shows the children his unholstered gun, letting one boy hold

it; as the other children excitedly gather about him, the lieutenant is moved:

They were breathless with interest. He stood with his hand on his holster and watched the brown intent patient eyes: it was for these that he was fighting. He would eliminate from their childhood everything that had made him miserable, all that was poor, superstitious, and corrupt. They deserved nothing less than the truth—a vacant universe and a cooling world, the right to be happy in any way they chose. He was quite prepared to make a massacre for their sakes—first the Church and then the foreigner and then the politician—even his own chief would one day have to go. He wanted to begin the world again with them, in a desert. [. . . H]e went on alone across the plaza to the police station, a little dapper figure of hate carrying his secret of love.³

His faith in this vision draws people to the lieutenant. It is no coincidence that the lieutenant is rarely alone in any of the novel's scenes. He is a dark and ruthless figure, but he moves about the novel's people with ease and without fear. He is comfortable and commanding in his place in the world, a world he is viscerally reshaping through his single-minded faith, a faith that will require hostage-taking, executions, and an almost fanatical repudiation of any sort of weakness, but despite this—or as Greene suggests in his novel, perhaps precisely because of this—the lieutenant is a man of this world, not one cut off from it.

In contrast, the faith of the whisky priest appears something much more fragile and ineffectual. Throughout the novel, the priest is frequently alone, the last remaining vestige of the hierarchical Church left in the areas where the Red Shirts have purged all references to religion, executed religious leaders, and converted local religious buildings to secular use. While the poor villagers at first welcomed his persistent pastoral work, they come to shun him by the eighth year of his fugitive ministry, and his trails (and trials) are walked along an increasingly solitary path filled with a sense of loss, often even a sense of religion as little more than a series of empty gestures. By the standards of typical Catholic observance, he is a bad priest. An alcoholic who

³ Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, Fiftieth Anniversary Edition (New York: Viking Penguin, 1990), 71.

has fathered an illegitimate daughter, the whisky priest is acutely aware of his defects, as he explains when the lieutenant finally captures him. The lieutenant is mystified why the last priest in the region also appears to be one of the worst Catholics. Puzzled, he asks the whisky priest, “But why did you stay?” He offers an unexpected reply: “‘I’m not a saint,’ the priest said. ‘I’m not even a brave man.’”

He continues,

The fact is, a man isn’t presented suddenly with two courses to follow. One good and one bad. He gets caught up. The first year—well, I didn’t believe there was really any cause to run. Churches have been burnt before now. You know how often. It doesn’t mean much. I thought I’d stay till next month, say, and see if things were better. Then—oh, you don’t know how time can slip by. [. . .] Do you know I suddenly realized I was the only priest left for miles around?⁴

The whisky priest then looks back over the years just before the oppressions began, and he is reminded that another priest in his early years expressed concern that he lacked a “firm character.” The whisky priest came to learn the truth of this insight over his years as a fugitive servant of God:

That other priest was right. It was when he left that I began to go to pieces. One thing went after another. I got careless about my duties. I began to drink. It would have been much better, I think, if I had gone too. Because pride was at work all the time. Not love of God. [. . .] Pride was what made the angels fall. Pride’s the worst thing of all. I thought I was a fine fellow to have stayed when the others had gone. And then I thought I was so grand I could make my own rules. I gave up fasting, daily Mass. I was drunk and lonely—well, you know how it was, I got a child. It was all pride. Just pride because I’d stayed. I wasn’t any use, but I stayed.⁵

⁴ Ibid., 257. These comments echo the thoughts of many Jews in the time shortly before the Shoah under Hitler. It is surprising that Greene’s 1940 novel appears to understand religious persecution better than many of the gentile biblical scholars that we encountered in chapter one who were writing at the same time or even in the years after the Shoah. This is not in any way to suggest an equivalence between the Nazi attempt to eradicate all Jewry and the localized suppression of the Catholic Church during the Mexican Revolution. Rather, my point is that narrative sometimes communicates (even to its own author) profound truths in a manner better than simple factual reporting or persuasive argumentation.

⁵ Ibid., 257–58.

This negative view of his work, one might guess, is not shared by Graham Greene or by many of the characters in the novel. Virtually every character whom the whisky priest encounters over the length of the novel is transformed in some way by the meeting. A middle-aged man long estranged from his family make the first gestures toward reconciliation. A young English expatriate shelters the priest, and in their brief talks about his vocation, she senses for the first time a deeper meaning in her life. A pious and self-righteous lady arrested for possessing a religious trinket comes to understand that there may be more to the divine presence than a defense of the old ways of an inflexible tradition. Children are baptized. The Eucharist makes present God himself in shacks and barns spanning the Mexican countryside.

By the story's end, even the lieutenant who captured the priest is moved to pity and ultimately to question the purpose of the brutal regime he serves. The lieutenant spends many hours talking with the priest after his capture, and he develops a grudging admiration for the honesty of the little man. He even tries to allow the whisky priest to receive a final confession and absolution in prison, offering safe passage to another priest who is too fearful to respond. After the whisky priest's execution, the lieutenant feels unexpectedly different:

The lieutenant came along the pavement; there was something brisk and stubborn about his walk, as if he were saying at every step, "I have done what I have done." He looked at the boy holding the candle with a look of indecisive recognition [this is the same boy who several chapters earlier in the story wished to see the lieutenant's pistol]. He said to himself, "I would do much more for him and them [the other children], much more; life is never going to be again for them what it was for me," but the dynamic love which used to move his trigger-finger felt flat and dead. Of course, he said, it will come back.⁶

The trajectory of Greene's novel suggests quite the contrary; the lieutenant's faith has been shaken to its core by his encounter with the whisky priest. The driving vision of a godless world

⁶ Ibid., 293.

has been undone to some degree, and the “love” created by this faith has been emptied of meaning.

The novel ends with a scene involving the same young boy, whom the reader has seen throughout the novel listening to his mother read the saccharine hagiography of a “good” Catholic priest who served in the same region of Mexico and who died in overt service and witness to the Church, publicly proclaiming his faith in boldness and without fear from his childhood until the very moment of his execution. The boy has listened with skepticism to this sentimental narrative throughout the novel, but his view of the Church is changed during a brief time that the boy’s family hides the fugitive whisky priest. Later, the boy is awakened in the middle of the night by a persistent knocking on the front door, and he finds a stranger standing there seeking shelter. The man is nervous and pale, and as the boy tries to shut the door, the stranger catches it:

“If you would let me come in,” the man said with an odd frightened smile, and suddenly lowering his voice he said to the boy, “I am a priest.”

“You?” the boy said.

“Yes,” he said gently. “My name is Father—” But the boy had already swung the door open and put his lips to his hand before the other could give himself a name.⁷

A new unnamed priest has arrived in their land. God, it seems, has not forsaken his people, even in a landscape and story destitute of all signs of divine presence. God does not appear, it is true, but God’s work has been done.

How is it that a man like the whisky priest—whose life is so broken and so lacking in outward manifestations of Catholic practice—can at the same time serve so powerfully as the carrier of divine presence in the world around him? This question brings us closer to the issues we saw in the previous chapter surrounding Zeresh’s warning in MT Esther: “If Mordecai,

⁷ Ibid., 295.

before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish seed, then you will not overcome him; you will fall before him to your ruin” (MT 6:13). We confirmed there that the warning’s implied question is an absurd one if it is concerned only with Mordecai’s ethnicity. But as I suggested at the end of the previous chapter, there may be a meaning to the concept of *Jewishness* in MT Esther that, when seen from the context of the broader canonical setting, is larger than just an ethnic designation, and the wording of the warning may point to this larger meaning.

The Hebrew word translated as *seed* in MT 6:13 is זֶרַע, *zera’*, a term common throughout the Hebrew Bible and indicating roughly the concept of seed, stock, or offspring.⁸ This, for example, is the term used in the references to “seed-bearing plants” in Gen 1. It also is the term the LORD God⁹ uses in his punishment of the serpent in the story of the temptation in the garden as related in Gen 3; there, the LORD God promises to put enmity between the serpent and the woman, “and between your offspring [*zera’*] and her offspring [*zera’*]” (Gen 3:15). *Zera’* can refer to the sowing of seed at planting time (Judg 6:3); to the collective descendants of a group (Isa 1:4 calls Israel a “brood [*zera’*] of evildoers”); or even to a family, as is shown in Jeremiah’s reference to the LORD’s delivery of Israel’s “folk [Hebrew זֶרַעְךָ, lit. ‘your seed’] from their land of captivity” (Jer 30:10). In these ways, *zera’* appears literally dozens of times throughout the Hebrew Bible, used by biblical authors across genres and historical periods; and represented in the Torah, most of the Prophets, and many of the Writings.

Among the 224 instances of *zera’* in the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible,¹⁰ a most

⁸ Levenson notes in passing the potential significance of *zera’* in MT Esther but only relates it to the LORD’s covenant with Abraham (*Esther*, 99).

⁹ Representing most likely a fused JE source, the narratives in Gen 2–3 combine the two most common names for Israel’s God, *YHWH* and *Elohim*, resulting in the quaint *YHWH Elohim*, translated here as “LORD God.”

¹⁰ As counted by Walter C. Kaiser, “Zera’,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R.

unexpected set of referents emerges. Obviously, as noted above, *zera'* often refers to the literal seed of plants and to the metaphoric seed of animals and humans. In the latter case, the “seed” might be either actual offspring or semen, as in the regulations in the book of Leviticus that refer to various human bodily emissions. When, however, the biblical writers and redactors use *zera'* to refer to human offspring, the context always involves a particular familial relationship mediated in some way by God. Thus, for instance, the descendants of Adam and Eve, as well as those of Noah, are called *zera'* in the divine commands to populate the earth. After these general statements concerning the human race (located only in the book of Genesis), virtually every other reference to human *zera'* in Genesis and in the rest of the Hebrew Bible refers to descendants of either Abraham or Israel.

A small set of exceptions exists. In Job, the Psalms, and once in the book of Proverbs, the term *zera'* is used to discuss collectively the descendants of certain human character types. Over the space of seven instances,¹¹ these texts describe offspring of the LORD’s enemies (Ps 21:11); the offspring of the righteous (Ps 37:25–26; also Prov 11:21) in contrast to the offspring of the wicked (Ps 37:28; also Job 21:8); the descendants of the man who fears the LORD (Ps 112:2); and the descendants of the man whom God reproves (Job 5:25). As I suggested above, each of these instances represents a human relationship mediated (positively or negatively) by God. The difference here, though, is that these instances appear to speak of a *type* of person or a form of human life, rather than of a particular *familial line*.

Laird Harris, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 252–53.

¹¹ Notice that these first seven unusual uses of *zera'* all come from the Wisdom tradition and, more importantly, three of the seven examples come from the same single text, Ps 27. An eighth instance, Isa 57:3–4, might fit with this set of examples as well. It appears to offer a stock contrast (typical of the Wisdom tradition) between the righteous and the “children of iniquity,” but the context of the prophetic oracle suggests that this may be a criticism of groups within Israel, rather than an assessment of righteous or unrighteous humanity as a whole in the manner of the Wisdom literature.

Two other uses of *zera'* in the Hebrew Bible appear genuinely random, one in Genesis and one in Isaiah. Like the Wisdom examples, neither of these instances refers to Abraham or to Israel; but unlike the examples from the Wisdom tradition, each of these describes a familial or communal relationship mediated by God. The first occurs in the story of Lot's daughters who each make their father drunk in order to become pregnant by him after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:32–34). This use of *zera'* might (in a most unlikely stretch) barely fit with the usages referring to Abraham's seed because Lot and his descendants are at least related to Abraham even if not directly part of the family line by which the covenant will be transmitted. This candidly seems unlikely. The second reference is a use of the stock phrase “seed of evildoers” in the book of Isaiah, a phrase that typically (and recurrently) is used by the LORD to describe Israel but in this case is used to describe Babylon (Isa 14:20). This use has no ready explanation.

All the other references to human *zera'* in the Hebrew Bible appear in contexts discussing the descendants of Abraham or of Israel. These usages include collective references to Abraham and his seed or to the seed of Jacob, as well as statements concerning particular tribal or familial lines within Israel, such as the seed of Aaron or the seed of David, or even to the seed of Esau (the latter indicating a tribal line within the descendants of Abraham).¹² The term reaches its apogee in Isaiah's description of the “holy seed” that will be the remnant who will restore Israel in days to come (Isa 6:13). Even in the case of various negative statements, the use of *zera'* refers to Israel or some tribal or familial subset. The “seed of evildoers” and the “offspring of

¹² For examples of references to the descendants specifically of Abraham, see, Gen 12:7; 13:15–16; 28:14; Josh 24:3; Isa 41:8. For descendants specifically of Jacob/Israel, see Gen 46:6–7; Isa 45:19, 25; Ps 22:24; 1 Chr 16:13; 2 Chr 20:7. There is another form of this usage, in which the *zera'* is referred to as the collective descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: see Exod 32:13; 33:1; Deut 1:8. In contrast, Jer 49:10 demonstrates a usage of *zera'* to refer to Esau's descendants.

treachery” in Isaiah are both references to Israel.¹³ Various individual families are condemned in the biblical texts, including that of Saul the first Israelite king, David’s murderous general Joab, Elisha’s servant Gehazi, and Shemiah the Nehelamite. In each case, these are Israelites whose *zera’* will be punished after them.¹⁴

This more limited meaning of *zera’*, at least in reference to human offspring, appears very much context specific within the canon of the Hebrew Bible. This is not to say that *zera’* cannot or could not refer to human offspring in a more general sense; rather, this survey suggests that the writers and redactors of the Hebrew Bible only used the term in such contexts, most likely because of the understanding among the biblical redactors of the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants as inherited covenants following the family lines of Israel. This qualification helps us to understand the form of *zera’* in Zeresh’s warning. Here, the specific phrase is מִזְרַעַע (*mizzera’*): *zera’* appearing in a genitive construct chain (lit., “from the seed” of *x*). In such a form (or when *mizzera’* is used with a possessive ending), the meaning within the larger canonical context becomes more precise. In all of these cases (a limited set of twenty-four occurrences¹⁵), the biblical phrase is used almost exclusively in contexts that indicate a descendant in the line of an inherited vocational office, one who is therefore eligible to fulfill a given work or duty related to that office.

We encounter the first example of *mizzera’* early in the final form of the canonical arrangement of the Torah. There, in the book of Genesis, *mizzera’* includes a reference to the

¹³ See, for instance, Isa 1:4; 14:20; or 57:3.

¹⁴ See 2 Sam 4:8; 1 Kgs 2:33; 2 Kgs 5:27; Jer 29:32.

¹⁵ According to a word search of the Masoretic Text using the Accordance software version of BHS-W4. The form appears eight times in Leviticus; four times in Ezekiel; three times in Jeremiah; twice in MT Esther and twice in Daniel; and once each in Genesis, Numbers, 2 Samuel, 1 Kings and 2 Kings.

duty among Abraham's descendants to participate in the covenant with the LORD:

And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days. As for the homeborn slave and the one bought from an outsider who is not of your offspring (Hebrew, מִזְרָא, *mizzera* ' with a second-person masculine singular possessive ending, lit., "from your seed"), they must be circumcised, homeborn and purchased alike. Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact. (Gen 17:12–13)

At least for the biblical redactors, *mizzera* ' here defines who among Abraham's descendants is potentially included within the covenant. Birth within Abraham's family is insufficient of itself, however; one must further be a child of the covenant, a male marked in his flesh as a sign of the everlasting covenant. Circumcision was neither unique to Israel in the ancient world nor considered an element of the religious cult before the Babylonian exile, but it acquired covenantal significance during the transformations of Israelite religion during the exile, which fits with the likely source of Genesis 17 in the work of the Priestly source author.¹⁶ The language of 17:13, however, is intriguing. As E.A. Speiser points out in his translation notes, the typical translation of the verse's second half, "Thus shall my covenant be marked in your flesh," has interpolated a verb into a Hebrew phrase lacking an actual verb.¹⁷ The phrase instead relies on an implied verb of being and reads literally, "Thus shall my covenant *be* in your flesh," an intriguing formulation that at least suggests that circumcision is not simply a symbol, but even a literal embodiment of the covenant between Abraham and the God of Israel. This concept of embodiment through circumcision offered by the Priestly writer enables even the slave brought into the household to become part of the cultic unity of the Israelite family.¹⁸ All the same,

¹⁶ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 265.

¹⁷ E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*, second edition, Anchor Bible Commentary (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1964), 125.

¹⁸ Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 266.

circumcision is not the same as one being *mizzera*‘ Abraham. Circumcision—the acceptance of one’s status as part of the covenant—is a duty performed by those who are *mizzera*‘ Abraham.

This view of covenantal duty potentially expressed in offspring continues in the Priestly source’s discussion of the levitical priesthood, and again, *mizzera*‘ only appears in a specific and meaningful context:

No man among the offspring [*mizzera*‘, lit. “from the seed”] of Aaron the priest who has a defect shall be qualified to offer the LORD’s offering by fire[. . .]. (Lev 21:21)

[N]o outsider—no one not of Aaron’s offspring [*mizzera*‘, lit. “from the seed” of Aaron]—should presume to offer incense before the LORD[. . .]. (Num 17:5)

Each of these examples demarcates in some fashion those who may participate in the Aaronic priesthood or the levitical duties associated with it. We see a similar usage in Ezekiel, where the LORD offers instructions for the sin offering that shall be given “to the levitical priests who are of the stock [*mizzera*‘] of Zadok, and so eligible to minister to me” (Ezek 43:19). These same levitical priests, Ezekiel later notes, “shall not marry widows or divorced women; they may marry only virgins of the stock [*mizzera*‘] of the House of Israel, or widows who are widows of priests” (Ezek 44:22). In each of these cases, *mizzera*‘ appears in a context that indicates membership in the family assigned to the covenantal office of the Israelite priesthood. It is not itself the covenantal duty; rather, *mizzera*‘ indicates those eligible to perform the given duty on Israel’s behalf.

In similar fashion, the term is used by the authors or redactors of the books of the Former Prophets and the book of Daniel, but in these cases the term does not appear in contexts that refer to Abraham’s descendants or the levitical priesthood; rather, these contexts designate individuals belonging to the Davidic royal house who have been raised up to preserve Israel. Any male descendant of the Davidic royal line is a potential heir to the throne since ancient Israel did not

practice primogeniture in determining royal succession.¹⁹ Even with the loss of first the Israelite and then the Judean kingship, the biblical traditions maintain hope in the restoration of Davidic rule and its work to shepherd Israel; for this reason the biblical writers track David’s descendants for generations beyond the fall of Jerusalem. For example, a group of Judahites assassinated Gedeliah, the Benjaminite governor appointed over Judah by Nebuchadnezzar after the fall of Jerusalem. The Judean assassins were led by “Ishmael, son of Nethaniah son of Elishama, who was of royal descent”; the Hebrew, מִזְרַע הַמְּלִיכָה, *mizzera ‘ hammēlūkâ*, means literally, “from the seed of the kingship” (2 Kgs 25:25). The book of Daniel similarly notes that young Daniel and his Judean friends were brought up in the Chaldean court because Nebuchadnezzar had his chief officer choose them from “Israelites of royal descent [here again, *mizzera ‘ hammēlūkâ*] and of the nobility” (Dan 1:3).

In the case of other, gentile royal houses—or for that matter, even in the descriptions of the lineage of other significant gentiles throughout the Hebrew Bible—*mizzera ‘* does not appear. The biblical authors and/or redactors use a different (and much more common) grammatical construction to show gentile lines of ancestry: the Hebrew word בֶּן, *bēn* (“son”) in the genitive construct form בְּן, *ben*, to indicate “son of *x*.” The “son of *x*” structure is used hundreds of times in the Hebrew Bible (including in MT 3:1).²⁰ It is used frequently to show ancestry lines among

¹⁹ That Saul intended to found a dynasty is a given (Blenkinsopp, *David Remembered*, 40). The Saulide royal family does not last long enough to clarify whether Saul would have practiced primogeniture. It does appear that Saul intended that his eldest son Jonathan would have succeeded him on the throne (1 Sam 14:49; 20:24–31), but Saul and his sons die together in a disastrous confrontation with the Philistines, Saul committing suicide after seeing his sons die in battle and receiving a likely mortal wound himself (1 Sam 31:1–13). His remaining son, Ishbaal, briefly assumes the throne until he is assassinated (2 Sam 4:1–7).

²⁰ Other examples (just to show the range of texts in which this is used) include Gen 11:31; Exod 31:2; Num 1 (in which the form appears twelve times); Josh 7:18; 1 Kgs 16 (in which the form appears eleven times); and 1 Chr 6:18–23, in which one of the Temple singers, Heman, has his ancestry traced back twenty-two generations. Examples of gentile ancestry indicated by the *ben* genitive-construct chain include Bethuel the son of Milcah (Gen 24:15), Laban son of Nahor (Gen 29:5), Shechem son of Hamor

Israelites as well, but (with two exceptions noted below) it is the only structure used to show ancestry among gentiles when the biblical authors include reference to gentile ancestry at all.²¹ This distinction suggests that the *ben* genitive-construct chain is the generic idiomatic expression to indicate ancestry, while the *mizzera*‘ genitive-construct chain appears only in more specialized contexts.

Holiness is a crucial element related to this contextual use of *mizzera*‘, and in looking back over our previous examples, we see that holiness or divine purpose has provided the context in which the writers of the biblical tradition have used the phrase “from the seed of *x*.” Two additional and perhaps unexpected uses of *mizzera*‘ clarify this. Near the end of the book of Leviticus, there is a chapter-long discussion of items consecrated to the LORD, covering such things as the monetary equivalent offered in place of a vowed human being or the consecration of a house or land to the LORD. At the very end of this discussion are reminders that first fruits and tithes may not be consecrated or vowed to the LORD under any circumstances because such items already belong to the LORD (Lev 27:1–33). It is here that *mizzera*‘ appears in a perhaps unexpected context: “All tithes from the land, from the seed of the ground [Hebrew מִצְרַע הָאָרֶץ, *mizzera*‘ *hā’āreṣ*] or from the fruit of the tree, are the LORD’s; they are holy to the LORD” (Lev 27:30).

the Hivite (Gen 34:2), Bela son of Beor (Gen 36:32), Balak son of Zippor (Num 22:2), Balaam son of Beor (Num 22:5), and Achish son of Maach of Gath (1 Sam 27:2). This list is far from exhaustive.

²¹ The two exceptions: 1) According to the books of Kings, “the LORD raised up an adversary against Solomon, the Edomite Hadad, who was of the royal family [Hebrew, מִצְרַע הַמֶּלֶךְ, *mizzera*‘ *hammelek*, lit. ‘from the seed of the king’] of Edom” (1 Kgs 11:14). 2) Similarly, in the book of Daniel, Darius the king is spoken of as “the son of Ahasuerus [who was] from the seed [*mizzera*‘] of Media” (Dan 9:1). This is the same Ahasuerus that we have encountered in MT Esther.

A second structure describes lines of *descendants* rather than lines of ancestors; it uses the Hebrew term יָלַד, *yālad* (often translated as “fathered” or “begot”), and appears most notably (and repeatedly) in the first nine chapters of the first book of Chronicles. This form does not appear in MT Esther and appears to have no special idiomatic significance.

An allegory offered by the prophet Ezekiel contains the second unexpected usage of *mizzera*‘ and reinforces the sense of holy purpose associated with it. The allegory begins with a description of a great eagle and its actions:

The great eagle, with wide wingspan and long pinions, with the full plumage and the brilliant colors, came to the Lebanon range and seized the top of the cedar. He plucked off the topmost bough and carried it off to the land of traders and set it in a city of merchants. (Ezek 17:3–4)

The interpretation of the allegory is straightforward: the “great eagle” is Nebuchadnezzar, who carried off King Jehoiachin of Judah and his officers (collectively here “the top of the cedar”). He then held them as prisoners in Babylon, a city (in)famous in the biblical narratives for its merchants and wealth.

This explication is no deep insight into the text; the author or redactor himself offers it in vv. 12–13 of the same chapter. Verse five of the oracle, however, contains the section of the allegory important to our discussion:

[The great eagle] then took from the seed of the ground [the Hebrew here is identical to Leviticus: מִזְרַע הָאָרֶץ, *mizzera*‘ *hā’āreṣ*] and planted it in a fertile field; he planted and set it like a willow beside abundant waters. It grew and became a spreading vine of low stature; it became a vine, produced branches, and sent out boughs. (Ezek 17:5–6)

It would be easy to mistake the *zera*‘ noted here as another reference to the messianic kingship, but this reading is too narrow for the Ezekiel passage, again as the later explication within the prophetic work itself attests. The verbs in vv. 6–10 (in which the oracle describes the vine in rebellion against the great eagle) are conjugated as third-person masculine singular. At first glance, this would suggest that the implied subject is the king (here, Zedekiah, the royal puppet placed on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar). Caution in our exegetical process is essential. We need to respect the integrity of the allegory in its own right before we can interpret it; the verbs in the allegory therefore must first refer to elements within the allegory itself, rather than to their

assumed referents in the world outside the allegory. Put another way, we must first determine what allegorical entity serves as the grammatical subject belonging to these verbs before we can decide what the allegorical image signifies.

Significantly, the Hebrew words for *seed* and *vine* are mentioned in succession to describe the same entity within the allegory and agree in person, gender, and number with the verbs in vv. 9–10. The rebellion and its aftermath within the allegory itself are functions of the *vine* that grew from the *seed/zera'* of v. 5. The parable's explication within the biblical text notes that the singular *seed* and its germinated *vine* are a reference by the prophet to a collective group; in explicating the opening image of the allegory, the author or redactor offers this:

Then the word of the LORD came to me: Say to the rebellious breed: Do you not know what these things mean? The king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and carried away [1] *its king and officers* and brought *them* back with him to Babylon. He took [2] *one of the royal seed* [here, a term we have seen earlier: מִזְרַע הַמְּלֹכָה, *mizzera' hammēlūkā*] and made a covenant with him and imposed an oath on him, and he carried away the nobles of the land—so that [3] *it* might be a humble kingdom and not exalt itself, but keep his covenant and so endure. (Ezek 17:11–14, emphasis added)

In this passage of explication, there is first [1] a collective group taken to Babylon (Jehoiachin and his officers, noted first in the italics above); then there is [2] a single member of the royal *zera'* (Zedekiah, noted in the Hebrew with masculine singular verb forms and adjectives); and finally, there is [3] the resulting “humble kingdom” that the LORD hopes will arise in the aftermath of the exile (its antecedent pronoun in the translation above is *it*; in the Hebrew, it is properly described in the text's explication with feminine singular verbal forms and adjectives to match the gender and number of the Hebrew word מַמְלָכָה, *mamlākā*, “kingdom or dominion”). This “humble kingdom” remains in the Promised Land; it is not carried away to the eagle's homeland.

Mizzera' hammēlūkā in the *explication* refers to Zedekiah, the Davidic king; this is true

(just as the same term has been used to designate the Davidic line in 2 Kings and in Daniel). But the *mizzera' hā'āreš* of the allegory itself refers, at the very least, more broadly to the leadership of Israel and likely to Israel as a whole. The “seed of the land” that is holy in Ezekiel’s oracle apparently is not simply that of the plants of Israel (as it was in Leviticus) or even the Davidic king; it is also the very people Israel. And they are holy like those first fruits mentioned in Leviticus because they have been dedicated to God, a point expressed overtly and with the same terminology by the prophet Jeremiah: “Israel was holy to the LORD,/The first fruits of his harvest” (2:3). Rebellion and disobedience do not change this reality because, as the regulations of Leviticus have reminded us, what has been dedicated to God or chosen by God cannot be taken away from God. This reading allows us to understand why the LORD can promise in vv. 22–24 of Ezekiel’s oracle:

Then I in turn will take and set [in the ground a slip] from the lofty top of the cedar; I will pluck a tender twig from the tip of its crown, and I will plant it on a tall, towering mountain. I will plant it in Israel’s lofty highlands, and it shall bring forth boughs and produce branches and grow into a noble cedar. [. . .] Then shall all the trees of the field know that it is I the LORD who have abased the lofty tree and exalted the lowly tree.

Zedekiah is not the “tender twig” that the LORD will preserve “in Israel’s lofty highlands”; he will die in exile. Rather, the twig is the remnant of the vine that grew from “the seed of the land” in vv. 5–6. It is the children of Israel who will persevere because they are the LORD’s chosen seed. The “seed of the land” *must* survive; the LORD will see to it.

Mizzera' has been used in the Hebrew Bible only in a limited range of contexts, and it remains surprisingly consistent across the final canonical forms of the biblical texts. The biblical writers and redactors appear conscientiously to have avoided using *mizzera'* in discussions concerned only with common ancestry. In those cases where they have used *mizzera'*—circumcision, the Israelite priesthood, royal families, dedicated produce of the Promised Land, or

even the holy remnant that will persevere in Israel’s covenanted existence—the narrative or teaching in the biblical text refers to a familial line from which specific works to preserve Israel may be expected in response to the divine choice of Israel. *Mizzera*‘ appears in canonical narratives that describe a sense of divine intervention in creation and in history: one who is *mizzera*‘ has been consecrated, literally set aside or set apart as a family, to accomplish some work relative to the preservation or restoration of Israel. One sees this difference exhibited even in MT Esther. Mordecai is *mizzera*‘ *hayyēhūdīm* (מִצְרַע הַיְהוּדִים), literally “from the seed of the Jews” (MT 6:13). Haman’s descent is described quite differently, however; he is simply “Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite” (MT 3:1). He is not from the *zera*‘ of Agag or even the *zera*‘ of Amalek.

This contrast seems intentional in the context of the MT Esther narrative. If our reading of this distinction is correct thus far, we then may infer that the author of MT Esther has consciously created an intertextual allusion to these other biblical uses of *zera*‘ and *mizzera*‘. He wishes the reader to see through these allusions that Mordecai’s lineage has prepared him to assume a role related to Israel’s deliverance. Haman’s lineage bears no such consecration; indeed, it suggests just the opposite. Looking back to our first foray into the meaning of Zeresh’s warning in chapter three, we now can see more clearly how well the “gentile warning” motif in MT Esther matches the usage of the same motif in the book of Judith. Achior’s warning brings into sharp relief the importance of the use of *mizzera*‘ in Zeresh’s warning. In terms of the motif, the phrase, “*if* Mordecai [. . .] is of Jewish seed,” we now see as parallel in meaning to Achior’s conditional, “if they are not a guilty nation.” If so, then *mizzera*‘ *hayyēhūdīm* in MT Esther can be seen in this context as an assertion that one is among a family called to live out a divine vocation as a Jew.

This intertextual allusion appears intentional here because, as we have seen other interpreters note repeatedly, Zeresh’s warning makes no sense in the narrative if it is only a reference to Mordecai’s ethnicity. That is already known to Haman’s associates; their question is whether Mordecai is the reason Haman has already begun to fall. Whether Mordecai has accepted this role is a question the gentiles in MT Esther are not yet able to answer, much as the answer was not known to the Assyrian army facing the Jews in the book of Judith. Yet the refusal of either Haman or Holofernes to heed this warning—even when given to each of them by another gentile—is testimony in each narrative that these figures are disordered. They are on the wrong side of history, a history already perhaps being decidedly reshaped by divine intervention.

Mizzera’ hayyēhūdîm therefore appears to draw into contact with MT Esther the canonical context associated with the term *zera’*. MT Esther reveals two different aspects of Mordecai’s character when it claims, on the one hand, that the *yēhūdîm* (יהודים) are *‘am mordōkay* (עַם מֶרְדֳּכַי), that the Jews are “Mordecai’s people” (MT 3:6); and on the other, that Mordecai is *mizzera’ hayyēhūdîm*, “from the seed of the Jews” (MT 6:13). The former is an ethnic designation that Haman uses to explain *whom* he intends to kill. The latter designates *why* Haman will not succeed: because (according to this canonical reading) Israel has been designated to serve a larger divine purpose, and the seed of the Jews has been chosen to serve in the work of preserving Israel. If the Jews are doing so, then according to even hostile gentiles like the wife and advisors of Haman, Haman will surely fall to his ruin in raising his hand against a *zera’* chosen by God.

The seed of the land of Israel, both plant and human, has been consecrated as the source of first fruits offered to the LORD and has been given a divinely mandated call to holiness. The

author or redactor of MT Esther appears to have drawn on this canonical memory by calling the representative Jews in his story “the seed of the Jews,” first in MT 6:13 in reference to Mordecai, but then also in MT 9:28, where the Jews bind themselves to observe Purim in perpetuity, promising that “the memory of [the days of Purim] shall never perish among their descendants,” the latter word in Hebrew literally מִצָּרְאָם, *mizzar’ām*, “from their seed.” To understand the duty to which the seed of the Jews is called, we need now to look at what exactly those characters do who are so named in MT Esther.²²



For much of the narrative’s progress, there are only two points at which to look to understand what Jews do in MT Esther. First and most obvious is Mordecai himself, “the Jew” so named by his gentilic and the one person who overtly and specifically defends his actions as motivated by his Jewishness. “Mordecai’s epithet,” Michael Fox reminds us, “is a pointer to his special role in the story’s development and message: He acts not as an individual but as *the Jew*—the representative and then the leader of the Jewish people.”²³ In addition, however, is the collective group known throughout the narrative as either “the Jews” on a large scale, or “the Jews who live in Susa” (MT 4:16) from a more limited scope. This group acts as one, entering and exiting the narrative as though a character unto itself.²⁴ These Jews also act collectively on behalf of *all* Jews of the ancient Near East. If one keeps in mind the time period and the Persian kings to which the Esther story appears to allude, one also must recall that this is the same

²² As Michael Fox notes, “The author of [MT] Esther, after all, is not merely telling an exciting story. He takes an ethical stance, which includes an implicit affirmation of the morality of the behavior of the two protagonists and the other Jews in this affair” (*Character and Ideology*, 220).

²³ *Ibid.*, 186.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

Persian Empire consolidated by Cyrus in 539 BCE. Not only are all the known Jews of the Diaspora contained within this empire, but even the Promised Land itself (known in the empire as the province of *Yehud*) lies under the rule of imperial Persia, under the throne of its emperor, and—most telling for us—under the genocidal decree promulgated by Haman in the emperor’s name. Haman’s plan represents an attempt within the narrative world to eradicate *all* Jews from the world. The Jews who act in MT Esther, we may legitimately infer, act on behalf of all Jewry.

Timothy Beal sees the diaspora element of the Esther story as its sole narrative driving force, a view that culminates in his statement that “[t]here is no indication in the book that Jews in Persian diaspora would or should have wanted to distinguish themselves over against Persian society (only Haman claims that they did so), or to ‘return’ to Palestine. This is a story about Jews in diaspora for the long haul.”²⁵ This claim is accurate to the degree one keeps in mind that the Esther story purports to take place in the same general time frame as that of Ezra and Nehemiah. Unlike the narratives of return in Ezra and Nehemiah, the Esther story focuses on Jews who have remained in diaspora, but (if I may take a bit of canonical literary license to make a point) Haman’s decree reaches past the book of Esther into the plans and work of Ezra and Nehemiah. If Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews of MT Esther do not succeed in stopping Haman’s plan, the Jews in Ezra and Nehemiah (and by extension, all who returned to the Promised Land) are lost as well. The Esther story is a story of diaspora Jews, but I think it is easy to overstate the dichotomy in this time between Jews in diaspora and those who returned.

We saw in our earlier discussion of identity associated with *zera* ‘ that the familial identity is a necessary but not a sufficient cause to determine a vocation as it emerges in the biblical narratives. In all of the examples we saw, the *zera* ‘ possesses the opportunity to enact a practice

²⁵ Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 137, n. 2.

or set of behaviors that were part of the divine choice. One should assume, then, that Jewishness in MT Esther is also a set of enacted behaviors corresponding to those acts performed by both Mordecai and the Jews throughout the narrative. Esther's Jewishness, in contrast, appears to be hidden throughout much of the narrative.²⁶ At least in terms of defining the work associated with the Hebrew *mizzera' hayyěhūdīm*, the narrator of MT Esther looks past Esther as a meaningful example. She is not defined as Jewish at her introduction in the narrative; rather, her Jewishness is implied through her familial relationship to Mordecai. She loses *Hadassah*, her Jewish name, as an indicator of her identity almost as soon as she is introduced: "[Mordecai] was foster father to Hadassah—that is, Esther—his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother" (2:7). She will be known as Esther from this point forward in the narrative (and in history); even after she publicly reveals to Ahasuerus her relationship to Mordecai, she is known as either "Esther the queen" or simply "Esther" throughout the rest of the story. *Hadassah*, at least as her name, never returns. While we have seen that her eventual decision to identify with her Jewishness is crucial to the Jews' deliverance, Esther herself appears to be Jewish only in the manner in which she acts in harmony with Mordecai and "the Jews" of the story.

If so, then Jewishness in MT Esther is defined by what at first appears to be a rather mundane set of collective actions: repentance, fasting, fighting, celebration, and remembrance. Mordecai and the Jews' first collective action in MT Esther involves the penitential rites enacted once Haman's genocidal decree has been promulgated (3:15). Mordecai tears his clothes, and donning sackcloth and ashes, "he went through the city, crying loudly and bitterly, until he came in front of the palace gate" (4:1–2), through which he cannot enter because Persian regulation does not allow entrance into the palace while one is dressed in sackcloth. Mordecai, of course, is

²⁶ Ibid., 2–3, 35–36.

not the only one in MT Esther to rend his clothes and don sackcloth and ashes in the hope of averting disaster; the other Jews “in every province that the king’s command and decree reached” likewise enact these practices (MT 4:3).

The rending of one’s clothes and the donning of sackcloth together are a common action in biblical accounts at least as early as the Deuteronomistic History.²⁷ David, for instance, commands “Joab and all the troops with him to rend their clothes, gird on sackcloth, and make lament before Abner” during the funeral procession for the fallen military leader (1 Sam 3:31). Tellingly, the act denotes not simply mourning but also repentance. Joab had killed Abner surreptitiously while pretending to confer with him in private, and David seeks through this penitential act to avert the LORD’s potential anger with all of Israel on account of the injustice of the murder. The corrupt Israelite king Ahab responds in a similar manner to a vehement divine condemnation delivered by the prophet Elijah:

When Ahab heard these words, he rent his clothes and put sackcloth on his body. He fasted and lay in sackcloth and walked about subdued. Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite: “Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before Me? Because he has humbled himself before Me, I will not bring the disaster in his lifetime; I will bring the disaster upon his house in his son’s time.” (1 Kgs 21:27–29)

Significant to our discussion, neither of these passages records a divine directive given to the penitents to act in the prescribed manner. From the penitent’s perspective, the religious efficacy of these acts is understood rather than expressed overtly by oneself or by God.

The addition of ashes (or their use in replacement of rent garments) appears to intensify

²⁷ Genesis 37:34, in which Jacob “rent his clothes, put sackcloth on his loins, and observed mourning for his son [Joseph]” is an outlier. Given the relative lateness of all other references to sackcloth in the Hebrew Bible, this reference likely is evidence of a textual interpolation in the Jacob cycle material; it is the only use in the Torah of the Hebrew *שַׂק*, *śaq*, to refer to “sackcloth”; other instances of the term in the Torah (Gen 42:25, 27, 35; and Lev 11:32) appear to indicate a carrying sack of some sort, rather than the material from which the sack is made.

the degree of mourning and sense of contrition communicated by the act, either individually or collectively. Thus Jeremiah's lament when he sees a vision of a great people coming from the north to assault Judah: "Daughter of my people,/Put on sackcloth/And strew dust²⁸ on yourselves!/Mourn, as for an only child;/For suddenly the destroyer/Is coming upon us" (Jer 6:26). This is an enacted call to mourn and to repent in hope of changing the LORD's mind and averting divine judgment. A similar process takes place in the book of Jonah. After hearing Jonah's message of divine judgment, the repentant king of Ninevah tears his robe, puts on sackcloth, sits in ashes, and then quaintly calls on all humans and even the animals in the kingdom likewise to don sackcloth. "Who knows," he asks in hope, "but that God may turn and relent? He may turn from His wrath, so that we do not perish" (Jonah 3:6–9). Again, the reader witnesses only the recorded intentions of the penitent; the narrative contains no record of an overt set of prayers or a theophanic divine response.

Gentile readers have far too often missed the point of these behaviors in MT Esther. Moore, for instance, believes that while it is easy to assess *what* Mordecai does in these penitential acts, "what he intended and why he did it are not."²⁹ Moore goes on to suggest that such acts may be merely "a conventional way of expressing grief and humiliation [. . .] and need no more be interpreted as proof of deep religious faith than the presence of an officiating clergyman at an American funeral means the deceased was a 'believer.'"³⁰ He even suggests that Mordecai's acts may be nothing more than "an expression of self-reproach for bringing all this

²⁸ The Hebrew word translated here as "dust" is אָפֶר, *'ēper*, which connotes the ideas of both dust and ashes and is translated regularly with either term throughout most English translations of the Hebrew Bible.

²⁹ *Esther*, 46–47.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 47.

misfortune on [his] people.” Such views would carry more weight if Moore were consistent in them. Less than a page later, he grants that the corresponding penitential acts undertaken collectively by the Jews “were essentially religious acts.”³¹ Moore’s criticism, in other words, appears directed more at the legitimacy of Mordecai’s personal intentions than in the meaning of the acts themselves when typically performed by Jews.

If so, such criticism is not only wrong in its assessment of Mordecai’s character but also speaks *only* to his character, rather than to the question of the meaning of such behavior. These actions have clear canonical resonance with other moments of collective mourning and repentance within the Hebrew Bible. But this canonical resonance is not (in and of itself) a sufficient interpretive explanation. Within the narrative world of MT Esther, the actions also must have meaning to Mordecai and the other Jews. They must believe at the very least that the actions possess potential efficacy as a means to demonstrate repentance *and* to change the direction of historical events within their world. In addition, they likewise must believe that there is some conscious entity or power that can respond to such human interventions.³² Narratively speaking, the Persian regulation that bans the performance of such public ritual performance within the royal quarters (MT 4:2) demonstrates nicely that these actions are not undertaken in order to sway the mind or heart of the human king. Ahasuerus (like Esther) is not able to see

³¹ Ibid.

³² Fox would appear to disagree, suggesting instead that these actions represent only attempts to communicate at the interpersonal level: “Genuine grief and agitation are natural reactions in a man whose people has been threatened with annihilation. It is, after all, the reaction of Jews throughout the empire. At the same time, Mordecai’s behavior may have an additional purpose, namely to shock Esther into action” (*Character and Ideology*, 57). Fox, like Moore, will later backtrack and admit that the fasting undertaking collectively by the Jews at the same time is “a religious act designed to influence God’s will; it is also perceived as a form of prayer” (ibid., 58). Unlike Moore, however, Fox does recognize the apparent contradiction between his view of Mordecai’s fast and that of the Jews’ fast. At the same time, he remains hesitant to accept the obvious religious importance of the actions, labeling the interpretive problem “curious.”

Mordecai, much less the other Jews outside the palace, who are so garbed. The intent of these rituals is aimed elsewhere.³³

We need to parse carefully the oddity of these rituals in MT Esther, which does not lie in the lack of recorded prayers or in the lack of an overt divine response to the penitent. It also does not lie in the lack of clear justification for the individuals' penitential behavior in the various narratives (the overt intentions motivating the actions of David and Ahab that we saw above, for instance, appear to involve at least as much self-interest and self-preservation as they are overtly religious or focused on the LORD). As Levenson notes, the penitential practices in MT Esther come "as close to traditional religious practices as the book of Esther ever gets, and some have thought that they here serve only as conventional expressions of grief or as a way to capture the queen's attention."³⁴ But Levenson suggests that there appears to be something more to these acts, something akin to "theurgic performances." Indeed,

[a]s the story develops, however, a marvelous set of coincidences does indeed reverse the apparently hopeless plight of the Jews, and it is best to think that the author wants us to suspect that this was indeed partially in response to the extraordinary penitential exercises of Mordecai, Esther, and the rest of the Jewish people.³⁵

The oddity of the rituals in MT Esther, in other words, lies in the *narrator's* lack of attention to their religious nature. The author appears to *want* the reader to see the penitential exercises as potentially efficacious, but he appears unwilling to make that assertion overtly. This is the "curious" interpretive problem, as Fox describes it, of the veiled religious impulses that at times

³³ Paton is quite emphatic: "These rites [. . .] were believed to be efficacious in turning away the divine wrath" (*Esther*, 214).

³⁴ Levenson, *Esther*, 78. This may be a reference to Fox's view.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

appear to be burbling about in MT Esther.³⁶

The focus on this set of behaviors as an act of contrition tightens as Mordecai and Esther share their communication via messages carried back and forth by Hacath, one of the royal eunuchs who wait upon Esther (4:4–15). This passage, perhaps the best known of the entire story, is riveting in its tight emotional portrayals using simple declarative prose, absent of any significant commentary from the narrator. Instead, the writer leaves it to the reader to recall not only that Esther and Mordecai’s brief remarks to one another are emotionally charged and offered under the shadow of impending doom for the Jewish community, but also that the two relatives are forced to communicate through messages carried between them by the eunuch. The two zones demarcating the limits of royal life—Esther’s harem life inside the palace and Mordecai’s place of mourning outside the palace gates—cannot be bridged by the protagonists themselves; only the eunuch is free to transcend the legal barriers.³⁷

As Mordecai communicates the content of Haman’s decree to Esther, she wavers, fearful of the pre-emptive decree within the palace that promises death to anyone who tries to enter the king’s presence unbidden (4:10–11). Mordecai counters her hesitance with a message that emphasizes the full reach of Haman’s decree: “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis?” (4:13–14). Esther, in other words, faces death whichever way she chooses to act in this moment. The only question she faces, according to Mordecai, is whether she will face

³⁶ *Character and Ideology*, 58.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

death alone or in solidarity with her people.

If the narrative's world were in fact a mechanistic or morally indifferent universe, then Esther's choices at this moment are exactly the opposite of what Mordecai has suggested. In such a world, Esther would be safe precisely as long her ethnic identity remains hidden; she would in fact be the *only* Jew likely to survive Haman's acts of genocide.³⁸ But Mordecai inverts this view, claiming instead that if Esther refuses to stand with the Jews, she and her father's house *alone* will die.³⁹ Mordecai is sure that some power sympathetic to the Jews guides the universe in which they live. He does not doubt that the Jews will be delivered; the question is simply whether Esther will be a participant in that deliverance.

When viewed from this perspective, Mordecai's reproach to Esther contains two affirmations that fit with the claim that a broadly religious stance underlies the narrative of MT Esther. First, he affirms a belief that someone (or at least *something*) of epic power oversees the fate of the Jews: "relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place [מִמְּקוֹם אֲחֵר],"³⁸ regardless of what Esther chooses to do. Second, he trusts that this power has been guiding history in some way even before this need arose: "And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis?" These are not the words of a person committed to the Greek

³⁸ It is tempting to compare this view with that of the rabbinic midrash we saw earlier from Targum *Rishon*. There, the Amalekite king Agag needed to survive only one additional night beyond his condemnation, and that was enough time for him to begin the repopulation of his people and Amalek's continued attempt to frustrate the LORD's work. In Esther's case, the Jewish queen might be seen by modern readers as a similar source for Israel's survival, especially given that the rabbinic tradition itself relied on a matrilineal understanding of Jewish descent. From this perspective, Esther's survival would make her the mother of all future Jews and so enable her to preserve Israel without violence.

Such a reading ignores a view held by the author of MT Esther (as well as by all the other writers of the Hebrew Bible): unlike the rabbinic understanding of matrilineal ancestral lines, ancient Israel contended that ancestry traveled via patrilineal lines alone. If one's father was not a Jew (or an Amalekite or a Philistine or what have you), then one was not counted among the people. If she chooses to hide in the palace and refuses to identify as Jewish, Esther then would be not just the *only*, but also the *last*, Jew alive if Haman's plan were to succeed. She can save herself, but she cannot save her people by hiding.

³⁹ Paton, *Esther*, 223; Moore, *Esther*, 50.

concept of luck, a Stoic view of fate, or Eastern ideas of karma. Rather, Mordecai affirms a belief in an intentional force behind history, one that appears uniquely committed to the perdurance of the Jews even if (as in this case) the Jews cannot always be sure where and when this force is active. Levenson points out that Mordecai's use of the phrase "who knows?" (*mî yôdēa'*) may be indicative of just this sensibility when seen in the larger canonical context: "In several other passages in the Hebrew Bible, these words preface a guarded hope that penitential practice may induce God to relent from his harsh decree, granting deliverance where destruction had been expected."⁴⁰ It has been tempting for some interpreters to see in Mordecai's words an indirect reference to the God of Israel.⁴¹ This may be the case, but we may only make this inference after we have established a religious sensibility within the text. This "deliverance from another place" is at best a secondary religious signifier; the reader first needs to see that Mordecai and the Jews believe there is some larger power shaping their destiny. Only after that may we look for evidence of what—or who—that power is.

Mordecai's point proves persuasive to the young queen and so sets up the next collective act among the story's Jews: fasting. Bowing to Mordecai's argument, Esther tells him, "Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Susa, and fast on my behalf, do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish" (4:16). Esther, although skeptical at first,

⁴⁰ *Esther*, 81. As evidence, Levenson cites 2 Sam 12:22; Joel 2:14; and Jonah 3:9 (the latter we have already seen). We will return shortly to 2 Sam 12.

⁴¹ Paton, *Esther*, 222–23; Moore, *Esther*, 52. Levenson sees this as a possibility but is not nearly as confident as Paton or Moore (*Esther*, 81). Fox argues strongly that the reference *cannot* be to God: "God is the Place par excellence, and it would make no sense to call him 'another place.' [. . .] 'Another place' must be simply another human as a source of deliverance" (*Character and Ideology*, 63). The conflict among interpreters affirms my earlier point that we must first determine the religious sensibility of the narrative before we can determine whether God is present. Most commentators have attempted to move in the opposite interpretive direction, trying instead to find God in order to determine the narrative is religious.

is enough convinced by her cousin's argument that she calls a city-wide fast among the Jews. This, by the way, is actually the *second* fast undertaken by the empire's Jews, who enacted a fast when they first heard Haman's decree (4:3). Esther's fast is not intended to change the mind of the king, who remains unaware of these actions as we saw above.⁴² Rather, Esther clearly (even if implicitly) hopes that the fast will sway the sympathies of this guiding power or person to which Mordecai has alluded. The city's Jews, already exhibiting penitential rituals, likewise embrace this fast once Mordecai communicates the plan to them; thus, the Jews of Susa collectively appear to adhere to the view of history and of the force behind it that Mordecai has communicated to Esther. The fact that the fast is not undertaken by Esther alone allows us safely to disregard readings that might suggest that it serves as a means of personal focus or clarification of the mind. Instead, Esther, her attendants (themselves not Jewish), Mordecai, and the rest of the Jews of Susa fast on Esther's behalf.

The larger biblical canon again testifies to the religious nature of such actions. As with the sackcloth seen earlier, here too we see an outward action that is undertaken by characters in the story with a belief in its efficacy to change the external world. Ezra the scribe makes the connection between fasting and divine intervention overt as he prepares his caravan to set off for Jerusalem. Setting out from a site near ancient Babylon with a decree from the Persian king Artaxerxes, Ezra led a group of Jewish exiles on a journey back to Jerusalem and the Promised Land. His view of fasting thus represents a view roughly contemporaneous with the events of the Esther story, offering a potential mooring point by which to understand the intentions of Mordecai and the Jews:

Then I proclaimed a fast, there by the river of Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from him a safe journey for ourselves, our

⁴² Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 58; Paton, *Esther*, 225.

children, and all our possessions. For I was ashamed to ask the king for troops and horsemen to protect us against enemies along the way, since we had said to the king, “The favoring hand of our God is over all who seek him, but his fierce anger is against those who forsake him.” So we fasted, seeking this from our God, and it was granted. (Ezra 8:21–23)

One of the Davidic kings seeks divine intervention in a similar fashion. Fearing an invasion from Edom, “Jehosaphat resolved to consult the LORD; he proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah. Then Judah gathered to seek the LORD’s help” (2 Chr 20:3–4). A prophet arises among the gathered people and proclaims in the name of the LORD,

Do not fear or be dismayed by this great multitude for the battle is God’s, not yours. March down against them tomorrow as they come up by the Ascent of Ziz; you will find them at the end of the wadi in the direction of the wilderness of Jeruel. It is not for you to fight this battle; stand by, wait, and witness your deliverance by the LORD, O Judah and Jerusalem; do not fear or be dismayed; go forth to meet them tomorrow and the LORD will be with you. (2 Chr 20:15–17)

The connection between this narrative and MT Esther is both tantalizing and frustrating. The connection is tantalizing because, as in MT Esther, the people arm themselves to go forth in battle after a penitential fast similar to the one called by Esther. The connection is also tantalizing because the deliverance is promised by the LORD to Jehosaphat and the Judeans specifically in response to the fast. The connection between the narratives is frustrating because, unlike MT Esther, the armed Judeans do go forth in battle only to find that the enemy forces have been caught in ambushes set by the LORD and have turned upon one another. It is not clear in this passage whether the Chronicler believes that the Judeans actually fought in armed combat during the divine rout or whether the LORD alone delivered Judah (2 Kgs 20:20–30).

All the same, the fast is a primary biblical means by which to win the LORD’s favor, to seek his pardon, and to bring his power to bear on an otherwise insurmountable crisis. It likewise can be combined with penitential rites that we have already seen. Well known among such passages is that from the prophet Joel, who places the call for a fast in a divine oracle meant to

avert the dreaded Day of the LORD:

Gird yourselves and lament, you priests!
Wail, ministers of the altar!
Come spend the night in sackcloth,
ministers of my God!
For the grain offering and the libation
are withheld from the house of your God.
Proclaim a holy fast!
Call an assembly!
Gather the elders,
all who dwell in the land,
to the house of the LORD, your God
and cry out to the LORD! (Joel 1:13–14)

The LORD's response is clear:

Yet even now—oracle of the LORD—
return to me with your whole heart, with fasting, weeping, and mourning.
Rend your hearts, not your garments,
and return to the LORD, your God,
For he is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting in punishment.
Perhaps he again will relent
and leave behind [instead] a blessing. (2:12–14)

The prophet not only calls for the priests and elders to don sackcloth and to fast, but he is also firm that such behavior, done intentionally (i.e., “Rend your hearts, not your garments/and return to the LORD your God”), will be efficacious. The LORD will hear and will respond. The response may not be all that the people seek, but the LORD will respond.

Similarly, when David faced divine punishment for his adultery with Bathsheba and his order to allow the death of her husband Uriah (effectively having him murdered), the prophet Nathan told him that the LORD would strike the child born of his infidelity: “You shall not die, but since you have utterly spurned the LORD by this deed, the child born to you will surely die” (2 Sam 12:13–14). Over the next week, “David pleaded with God on behalf of the child. He kept a total fast and spent the night lying on the ground clothed in sackcloth” (12:16). The baby dies,

as the LORD had commanded, but David does not see in this a failure of the efficacy of fasting: “While the child was living, I fasted and wept, thinking, ‘Who knows? The LORD may grant me the child’s life’” (12:22). This passage makes reference not only to the use of sackcloth and the fast, but it also includes the “who knows?” (*mî yôdēa*) idiom, all repeated in MT Esther by Mordecai, and here suggesting a firmly religious set of practices aimed at changing the divine will. These acts, in other words, remain for David real and powerful means to attempt to gain the LORD’s attention, even if they do not always change God’s resolve. And their connection to Mordecai’s behavior creates a constellation of intertextual associations in MT Esther: like David, Mordecai seeks to save lives; like David, Mordecai sees the overt impossibility of his situation; like David, Mordecai believes his actions can change the heart of God. But unlike David, Mordecai will succeed. In this, he has outdone both Saul and David.



The common denominator in these examples drawn from outside MT Esther, of course, is the overt nature of the proclamation of God’s choice of Israel. In addition, the narrator or first-person speaker in most of these cases reveals that the acts are religiously motivated. While such a contrast might seem to undermine the argument here concerning the collective actions of the Jews in the narrative, one must recall that it so far has been the seeming intention of MT Esther’s author precisely to obscure such references, rather than eliminate them; *why* he does so, remains to be seen. Of course, this set of inferred meanings does not in and of itself indicate to whom or to what Mordecai and the other Jews have directed these acts of contrition, nor does their collective belief in their efficacy demonstrate that any such being(s) or force(s) exist within the narrative universe. The actions do, however, demonstrate a religious sensibility that stands apart

from the story's otherwise seemingly blank religious background.⁴³ The point here is not yet to prove whether such actions actually are efficacious or whether a power exists in the narrative universe of the Esther story that responds to these actions. Instead, I seek only to show at this point that the Jews of Susa—even in MT Esther—believe that their personal actions of repentance and fasting can change the trajectory on which history appears to be moving. Someone or something, they believe, can intervene to change the heart and mind of the king, can create in him a sympathetic response to Esther's otherwise offensive breach of royal law and decorum. Something—or someone—is looking out for the Jews because they have a purpose in and beyond the historical moment. Levenson delightfully captures the ambiguity of this force within the narrative, calling it “the mysterious charisma that protects the Jews throughout the story.”⁴⁴

As we know, the king does receive his queen with sympathy, setting in motion the plan by which Esther undermines Haman's plot to destroy the Jews. We also know, however, that stopping Haman is not enough to stop his plot. Esther successfully pleads for the survival of “her people,” telling Ahasuerus that “[h]ad we only been sold as bondsmen and bondswomen, I would have kept silent; for the adversary is not worthy of the king's trouble” (MT 7:3–4). She names Haman as “the adversary and the enemy” in response to the king's inquiry, and within six verses, Haman is exposed and impaled, his personal threat to the Jews eliminated. But the larger threat that he has set in motion remains. As it was with Agag in the time of Saul, the Amalekite threat to the Jews survives Haman's death, this time in both the irrevocable genocidal decree and the continuing presence of “the enemies of the Jews [. . .] who sought their hurt” (9:1–2).

⁴³ Levenson, *Esther*, 81.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

The assault upon Haman, and then upon the remaining enemies of the Jews, is the third collective action of the Jews in MT Esther: “On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month—that is, the month of Adar—when the king’s command and decree were to be executed, the very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to get them into their power, the opposite happened, and the Jews got their enemies into their power” (9:1). As we saw earlier, these enemies are virulent anti-Semites whose hatred leads them to ignore the common sense of the moment.⁴⁵ Despite Haman’s execution, Mordecai’s replacement of him as prime minister, and the promulgation of the counter-decree that empowered the Jews to defend themselves—all events that have taken place literally months before the fateful day—these enemies of the Jews still insist on gathering to attack the Jews.⁴⁶ The Jews “struck at their enemies with the sword, slaying and destroying; they wreaked their will upon their enemies” (9:5), and they were decisively victorious in their self-defense. The victory is all the more astonishing given the sheer number of anti-Semites who flouted Mordecai’s decree and try to realize Haman’s plan: 75,000 outside Susa (9:16) with another 810 killed within Susa over a two-day period, including the execution of Haman’s ten sons. What to many gentile interpreters has seemed indulgent and vindictive in this narrative of killing now should appear to the reader in a different light. “It is true that Mordecai’s decree instructs the Jews to be ready ‘to take vengeance on their enemies’ (8:13), but vengeance, however it may be viewed from an ethical standpoint, is not gratuitous” in the

⁴⁵ Ibid., 121.

⁴⁶ Paton disagrees, claiming the Jews did not face any assembled enemy force. Instead, “[a]ll that were known to be hostile to the Jews were hunted out and killed” (*Esther*, 283). Moore likewise believes the Jews exceeded the bounds of self-defense (*Esther*, 86). Despite these objections, Fox’s careful argument in support of a Jewish self-defensive battle, which we saw in chapter one, remains persuasive (see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 222–25). It is interesting how strongly and how often even sympathetic gentile interpreters want to read Jewish behavior negatively in the Esther story.

biblical tradition, as Fox points out.⁴⁷ He goes on to note that biblical vengeance “means the legitimate exercise of punitive power outside a judicial context[. . .]. There can be no vengeance without an unpunished offense.”⁴⁸ The death of so many enemies attests to the depth of anti-Semitism lurking below the surface of the seemingly peaceful Persian Empire, even in MT Esther. It now makes sense why Mordecai encouraged Esther to hide her ethnic identity and family connections.⁴⁹

The execution of Haman’s sons also appears in a different light. Like Haman, they literally embody the Amalekite threat. Fox, however, misses this point. Fox acknowledges that Haman’s gentile establishes at least an allusion to the Amalekites.⁵⁰ He says, “Though tribal antagonisms lie somewhere in the background of the conflict between Mordecai and Haman, the Jews direct no special attention to the Amalekites among their foes.”⁵¹ This claim would be accurate *if* the text were not so specific in its focus on the execution of Haman’s ten sons, effectively ending his family line. As we have seen with the reference to Mordecai as a *Jew*, rather than as an *Israelite*, the allusive background element does not preclude a more direct relationship between *Agagite* and *Amalekite*. Haman’s gentile implies that his ethnicity is unusual in the empire; there is no reason in the text to assume that there are any other Amalekites other than Haman and his sons. If so, then this is very much “special attention” directed toward the Amalekite threat. If MT Esther draws meaning from its narrative connections to 1 Sam 15,

⁴⁷ *Character and Ideology*, 221.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 221–22.

⁴⁹ Levenson, *Esther*, 119.

⁵⁰ *Character and Ideology*, 224, n. 18.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 223–24.

then another lesson comes from Samuel's response to Saul's encounter with Agag: Amalek must be utterly destroyed.⁵² Any survivors allow the possibility of Amalek's rise to power once more.

The anti-Semites killed in battle are human enemies, but Amalek is something different when read alongside the narratives of 1 Sam 15, Exod 17, and Deut 25. Amalek is something more than human, some sort of persistent chaotic force opposed to Israel and to God, and so something that falls under the Josianic era's understanding of *ḥērem*. This also explains why the Jews do not "lay hands on the spoil," a point emphasized three times in chapter nine of MT Esther as the empire-wide battle is described in otherwise brief detail (9:10, 15, 16), and a point of marked contrast to Saul's failure in 1 Sam 15.⁵³ This is a defensive battle meant to stop those who seek to destroy the Jews; there is no place for the pre-Josianic understanding of *ḥērem* as the sacrifice of the best of the spoils to the LORD in thanksgiving for victory. This is no sacrifice; it is the destruction of a force fundamentally opposed to Israel and to Israel's God. The collected enemies of the Jews are stopped, and the Amalekite threat (for the moment at least) has been eradicated from the empire.

The battle and the Jewish victory in MT Esther are decided markers of Jewishness. The defenders strike back at the gathered "enemies of the Jews," a dichotomy in the narrative that all but requires that the defenders are themselves Jewish. Indeed, this dichotomy sheds light on the odd verbal form that appears in the last part of MT 8:17, which the JPS translates: "And many of the people of the land professed to be Jews [מִיְהוּדִים *mityahādîm*], for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them." *Mityahādîm* appears grammatically to be an unsurprising plural active participial form of the Hebrew *hitpa'el* stem of the verbal root *yhd*. This root also appears to be

⁵² Levenson, *Esther*, 121.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 122; Moore, *Esther*, 87–88.

the source for the Hebrew *yěhūdīm*, the “Jews” of our discussion in this chapter. The *hitpa‘el* stem typically carries with it connotations of reflexive action. An overly literal translation (and one with unfortunate connotations in modern English) might suggest that “many of the people of the land *Jewed themselves* or *Judaized themselves*.” The JPS translation uses the much less problematic phrase “professed themselves to be Jews,” but this is an unfortunate rendering as well.

When coupled with the last clause of the verse, “for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them,” the JPS translation suggests that these people claimed (perhaps falsely?) and under duress to be Jews because they feared the wrath or power of the Jews once Mordecai replaced Haman and sent forth his counter-decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves.⁵⁴ Paton, for instance, contends that “[s]o completely were the tables turned, that it was now dangerous *not* to be a Jew.”⁵⁵ A different picture emerges if we focus our interpretation on the battle at hand in chapters eight and nine of MT Esther, which reveals a very different context for the meaning of *mityahādīm*. In this battle between the Jews and the “enemies of the Jews,” it appears that the author of MT Esther wants to show that many of the empire’s gentiles chose to identify *with* the

⁵⁴ In rare instances, the *hitpa‘el* can carry the sense of disguising oneself or pretending to be something one is not (Joüon, *Grammar of Bib. Hebrew*, sec. 53.a–g). Joüon does not list MT 8:17 as an example of such a case. Waltke and O’Connor see the verb here differently, calling it in this instance an example of the “estimative-declarative reflexive,” which connotes a sense of esteeming or presenting oneself in a given state; they specifically note that they do not believe that the idea of deception is part of the intended meaning in MT 8:17 (*Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, sec. 26.2f). Gesenius and Kautzsch suggest that only context might clarify whether the *hitpa‘el* intends to show active deception or whether it simply indicates the act of showing oneself to be in a state that one has attained in truth. Indeed, they contend that in the case of the verb in MT 8:17, the meaning is demonstrative with a reflexive meaning, indicating the idea, “to embrace Judaism” (Gesenius and Kautzsch, *Gesenius*, sec. 54e, i). I am suggesting that the narrative context in MT 8:17 would require a sense of public deception (or false conversion) among these gentiles *only* if one has already assumed that the Jews are hunting down opponents. Otherwise, the idea of embracing or supporting the Jews makes perfect sense in the context.

⁵⁵ *Esther*, 280, emphasis added. Levenson notes that, under later rabbinic Judaism, such forced conversion motivated by “fear of the Jews” would have been judged invalid (*Esther*, 117).

Jews and not with the anti-Semites.⁵⁶ The fear or dread that has fallen upon the people of the Persian Empire is the same understanding that we saw in Zeresh's warning.⁵⁷ These people see that the wheels of history are already in motion: one will surely fall if one stands in opposition to the Jews. The choice between Haman and Mordecai, or between Amalek and Israel, is not simply that of gentiles versus Jews as far too many gentile commentators have suggested. *Mityahādîm* shows us that gentiles too can choose sides—literally “embracing Judaism,” as the participle can be translated—in the ongoing battle between Amalek and Israel. In the case of MT Esther, many in the empire choose to side with the Jews and stand against the forces of Haman and Amalek.⁵⁸

The author of MT Esther does not describe these *mityahādîm* as participants in the battle of chapter nine, however; the fighting itself remains a duty engaged by the Jews. This battle clearly is a defining characteristic of Jewishness in MT Esther, and its author likewise appears to credit the Jews' overwhelming success to the acts of repentance and fasting undertaken by Mordecai and the Jews earlier in the narrative. Together, these actions are a unified piece of the duty given to those *mizzera' hayyēhūdîm* in MT Esther: they have been given the duty to defend Israel in a time of profound crisis, again most likely by the force that, in response to the Jewish penitential acts, has been shaping history throughout the narrative to help the Jews. We saw no evidence of strategic battle plans or the amassing of superior arms prior to the battle in MT Esther. We saw no evidence that the Jews turned out to defend themselves in superior numbers to those of the anti-Semites. But we did see that this victory is the direct result of Esther's work to foil Haman, work that only came to fruition after the acts of Mordecai and the Jews:

⁵⁶ Levenson, *Esther*, 117; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 105–6.

⁵⁷ It is at least similar, as noted by Fox (*Character and Ideology*, 105–6).

⁵⁸ Levenson and Fox firmly emphasize this. See Levenson, *Esther*, 77; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 218.

For Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the foe of all the Jews, had plotted to destroy the Jews, and had cast *pur*—that is, the lot—with intent to crush and exterminate them. But when [Esther] came before the king, he commanded: “With the promulgation of this decree, let the evil plot, which [Haman] devised against the Jews, recoil on his own head!” So they impaled him and his sons on the stake. For that reason these days were named Purim, after *pur*. (MT 9:24–26)

The author seems confident that Esther saved the Jews through her battle with Haman within the palace walls. The Jews, however, not only fought the battle outside the palace walls (in Susa and throughout the empire), but they also performed the acts that changed Esther herself. Esther is able to act only because the Jews acted collectively and acted first.⁵⁹

The last two enacted behaviors associated in MT Esther with those *mizzera ‘ hayyēhūdīm* reflect a liturgical response to the success of the previous actions undertaken by Mordecai and the Jews:

Mordecai recorded these events. And he dispatched to all the Jews throughout the provinces of the King Ahasuerus, near and far, charging them to observe the fourteenth and the fifteen days of Adar, every year—the same days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month which had been transformed for them from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy. They were to observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor. The Jews accordingly assumed as an obligation that which they had begun to practice and which Mordecai had prescribed for them. (MT 9:20–23)

A pair of feast days emerges as the immediate outcome of the Jewish victory, a celebration notably “prescribed” by a Jew (Mordecai) but, even more importantly, “assumed as an obligation” by not just those Jews present, but all Jews in perpetuity. As the narrator tells us,

[T]he Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them, to observe the two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year. Consequently these days are recalled and

⁵⁹ Although Fox focuses on the ways in which the community initiates the celebration of Purim before Mordecai or Esther endorses it, he makes the point that the Jewish community guides the decisions of its leaders: “[t]he basic authority resides in the Jewish people” (*Character and Ideology*, 228). I am merely reading Fox’s basic idea back into an earlier scene in the story; I believe his point here holds there as well.

observed in every generation: by every family, every province, and every city. And these days of Purim shall never cease among the Jews, and the memory of them shall never perish among their descendants. (9:27–28)

The celebration of these events, known henceforth as the feast of Purim, serves as a defining feature of the Jews in MT Esther and of their descendants. From this point on, a Jew is known in part by his or her observance of Purim.⁶⁰

An intentional echo of another set of national celebrations appears at this point in MT Esther. Noting that “[d]ispatches were sent to all the Jews in the hundred and twenty-seven provinces of Ahasuerus,” the narrator tells us that Esther wrote a second letter of Purim confirming the authority of Mordecai’s prescription of the new Jewish feast; in the JPS translation, it is “an ordinance of equity [Hebrew has *שְׁלוֹמ*, *šalôm*] and honesty [Hebrew has *אֱמֶת*, *’emet*]” (MT 9:30), but this translation masks an otherwise strong connection with the latter part of the book of Zechariah.⁶¹ There, the writer has offered an oracular response from the LORD to the question of whether post-exilic Jews should continue to observe the fasting and lamentations established after the destruction of the First Temple and the conquest of Jerusalem (Zech 7:1–5).⁶² The LORD’s reply is interrupted by a lengthy statement of his assurance that he has returned to Zion and will continue to dwell in Jerusalem. With this assurance, however, also comes a response: “Thus said the LORD of Hosts: The fast of the fourth month, the fast of the fifth month, the fast of the seventh month, and the fast of the tenth month shall become occasions for joy and gladness, happy festivals for the House of Judah; but you must love honesty [Hebrew has *אֱמֶת*,

⁶⁰ Levenson, *Esther*, 128–29; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 122.

⁶¹ Levenson, *Esther*, 130–31.

⁶² Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 126–27.

'*emet*] and integrity [Hebrew has *שלום*, *šalôm*]” (8:19).⁶³

MT Esther notes that “[t]hese days of Purim shall be observed at their proper time, as Mordecai the Jew—and now Esther the queen—has obligated [the Jews] to do, and just as they have assumed for themselves and their descendants the obligation of the fasts with their lamentations” (9:31). The narrator clearly connects the process by which Purim is made a perpetual feast with that of the fasts and lamentations that are under discussion in Zechariah. The narrator also connects the observance of these celebrations with a way of life. The proper practice of these festivals requires *šalôm* and '*emet*, richly complex terms in Hebrew that convey the ideas of peace, balance, and right-orderedness, as well as honesty, a truthful life, and transparency or steadiness. Significantly, the revised celebrations instituted in Zechariah, like the new celebration of Purim, reflect a time in which mourning was turned to gladness, when (as MT Esther puts it) “the opposite happened,” and what seemed lost was recovered.

As commentators have long noted, this set of events (crisis, deliverance, and celebration) also bears a strong resemblance to the events leading up to the institution of Passover as it is described in the Torah.⁶⁴ In Exod 13, the Passover holiday is instituted as a perpetual practice

⁶³ Fox warns not to tie this part of MT Esther too closely to the passage in Zechariah. His point is well taken (and Levenson’s view is similarly circumspect), but the comparison here concerns the nature of the process of the festival’s institution and the expectations of behavior associated with it; it is not an attempt to trace an exact duplication of the specific elements of the fasts and lamentations noted in Zechariah.

⁶⁴ Levenson, *Esther*, 70; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 151–52. Michael G. Wechsler offers an unusual but rewarding notice of a seeming scribal error in Peshitta Esther that reflects the strong exegetical connections between Passover and Purim in his “The Purim-Passover Connection: A Reflection of Jewish Exegetical Tradition in the Peshitta Book of Esther,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117, no. 2 (1998): 321–27. In Peshitta Esth 9:26a, the scribe has transliterated the Hebrew word for Purim into Syriac, rather than translate it with the Syriac word for “lots.” Conversely, however, the Syriac translator has then replaced the Hebrew word *pur* not with a transliteration but instead has used a Syriac word that means “Passover” (ibid., 321–22). In a thorough article that discusses the details of the language and exegetical history involved in the tradition, Wechsler concludes that “it may be noted that the nature of the proposed exegetical linkage between Passover and Purim in Peshitta Esth 9:26a is not simply methodological but also thematic and theological, insofar as it centers on the pivotal element used

among the Israelites.

And Moses said to the people, “Remember this day, on which you went free from Egypt, the house of bondage, how the LORD freed you from it with a mighty hand: no unleavened bread shall be eaten. You go free on this day, in the month of Abib. [. . . Y]ou shall observe in this month the following practice: Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival of the LORD. [. . .] And you shall explain to your son on that day, ‘It is because of what the LORD did for me when I went free from Egypt.’ And this shall serve as a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead—in order that the Torah of the LORD may be in your mouth—that with a mighty hand the LORD freed you from Egypt. You shall keep this institution at its set time from year to year.” (Exod 13:3–10)

The wording of the ordinance in Exodus and in MT Esther is quite similar. Both ordinances lay an injunction on the recipients to observe the celebration yearly, specifically on the same days as those of the originary celebration of deliverance recalled by the festivities. Both ordinances demand a set of behaviors among the participants that sets the day apart from other days, including a feast and sharing of one’s abundance with one’s neighbors. Similarly, both ordinances place central emphasis on memory as a crucial aspect of the celebration.

As was the case with the institution of Passover, Purim is instituted to celebrate the deliverance of the children of Israel but also to remember and to re-enact that deliverance. Fox makes this point specifically about Purim,⁶⁵ but the book of Exodus makes a similar trans-historical claim about the sacrificial lamb offered at later Passover celebrations: “You shall observe this as an institution for all time, for you and for your descendants. And when you enter the land that the LORD will give you, as he promised, you shall observe this rite. And when your

by God in the process of national redemption in both accounts. Thus linked, the two feasts may be seen as ‘mirrored bookends’ of redemption, occurring as they do on the same day in the first and last month of the Jewish festal calendar, at opposite ends of Israelite biblical history, and so calling attention to the year-round, enduring faithfulness of God toward the people he has sworn eternally to preserve” (ibid., 327).

⁶⁵ *Character and Ideology*, 228.

children ask you, ‘What do you mean by this rite?’ you shall say, ‘It is the passover sacrifice to the LORD [. . .]’” (Exod 12:24–27). The Hebrew of the last clause lacks a verb (relying instead on an implied verb of being) and so does not place the sacrifice clearly in the past, unlike the described memory of the events themselves, which is noted in vv. 28–29 and described in the perfect tense. The lack of verbal tense in this context suggests a present moment equivalence between the original Passover sacrifice and that of the one offered generations later.

Moses in the book of Deuteronomy offers a similar view as he speaks one final time with the Israelites at the edge of the Promised Land, reminding them, “[D]o not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. [. . .] The LORD spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of the words but perceived no shape—nothing but a voice” (Deut 4:9, 12). Yet according to the setting of the book of Deuteronomy, Moses here addresses the *children* of the Israelites who saw and heard these things; the original recipients of the Sinai Covenant have died in the years of the wilderness wandering. These liturgical moments place all Israelites at the first Passover and at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Every Passover, in a very real sense, is the same (first) Passover.⁶⁶ Purim at the end of MT Esther offers a similar possibility to the Jews of all generations. Both ordinances carry with them the specific requirement that the celebrants must help the descendants of the Jews (specifically their *zera* ‘ in MT 9:28) to keep alive the memory of the great deliverance.⁶⁷

These memories are key to define those who are *mizzera’ hayyēhūdīm* in MT Esther. With these allusions to other liturgical memories of biblical history—Passover, the restoration of fallen Jerusalem, and the rebuilding of the Temple—the memories preserved in the observance

⁶⁶ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary*, Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2004), 200.

⁶⁷ Levenson, *Esther*, 129.

of Purim are linked into a chain of the great works of Israel's preservation and restoration. These textual and canonical echoes place the events of MT Esther within the greater narrative of Jewish deliverance. Memory in these cases, however, is not simply a process of recalling factual data about the past. Instead, memory in these celebrations is recollection, literally a re-collection of, and renewed participation in, the events that have shaped Jewish destiny. It is an intentional practice of handing on these memories to one's descendants by means of the celebrations themselves. Memory is not individual in this process; it is familial, it is communal, it is part of what it means to be "of the seed of the Jews."

Memory drives the work of celebration, as we have seen above, but it also drives the work of repentance, fasting, and fighting that we have explored in this chapter. In a very real sense, all of these actions rely on memory, particularly a liturgical memory. Levenson points out that "Esther 9:28 is noteworthy not only for its legal, formulaic style, but also for its twofold invocation of memory, once at the beginning of the verse and once at its end. It should not be overlooked that the Hebrew root *zkr*, from which the words 'remembered' and 'memory' here are derived, can have a connotation of ritual observance."⁶⁸ The acts are themselves memory embodied and enlivened. Memory for the Jews of MT Esther may in fact *be* action, action done in conformity with the great redemptive acts of ancient Israel's history.⁶⁹ This may explain one of the most important and confusing aspects of MT Esther: Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman. We have seen in earlier chapters how gentile commentators have far too frequently ascribed Mordecai's refusal to self-interest, rampant nationalism, or bald hubris.⁷⁰ In contrast, AT and

⁶⁸ Ibid. In support of this claim, Levenson cites examples from Exod 13:3 and 20:8.

⁶⁹ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 152.

⁷⁰ Torrey, "Older Esther," 23; Anderson, "Place of Esther," 34, 38–39; Paton, *Esther*, 196; Clines, *Story of the Story*, 139, 141.

LXX Esther ascribe his motivations to a zealous religious devotion that, while intriguing as a solution, is nowhere apparent in such overt fashion in MT Esther.

Perhaps, however, Mordecai's refusal to bow is a form of liturgical memory. Liturgical memory is written into the body's gestures and motions in such a way that its reasons and purposes become almost an afterthought, literally a thought *after* the memory already has been expressed in action. Recall the LORD's words concerning Amalek: "Inscribe this in a document as a reminder[. . .]: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. [. . .] The LORD will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages" (Exod 17:14, 16). And in Deuteronomy, Moses reiterated this call to memory in even stronger terms: "[Y]ou shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!" (Deut 25:17–19). *Do not forget*. This was the continuing mistake of Israel as a whole and King Saul in particular, at least in terms of the danger of Amalek. Even the memory of Amalek should have been destroyed, yet despite the biblical injunctions, Amalek persists into the days of Ahasuerus.

If what we have seen in MT Esther is a set of actions shared by the Jews that are enacted memories of Israel's covenanted existence with the LORD, then it is not a stretch by any means to suggest that Mordecai's refusal *as a Jew* to bow to Haman is just such an enacted memory.⁷¹ It is liturgically impossible for one who is *mizzera' hayyêhûdîm* to bow down before a son of Agag. Whether Mordecai consciously understands his action in this way (even within the narrative world of MT Esther) is irrelevant. It is an act of liturgical memory, theology expressed in muscle memory. Liturgy enacts the memory of the Jews more truly than does even a conscious iteration of the remembered reality.

⁷¹ Levenson sees this as a possible interpretation but one lacking in textual corroboration (*Esther*, 67). If my argument thus far is persuasive, the reader should now see a stronger possibility, if not likelihood, of textual corroboration.



The question that the interpreter faces at this point is this: what exactly is remembered in the narrative of MT Esther? Isolated canonical references or fleeting intertextual connections would not be a sufficient base on which to draw a conclusion, but the sheer volume and richness of the canonical allusions that we have seen in MT Esther are telling. It seems evident that the author of MT Esther is well aware of the canon of the Hebrew Bible as it existed in his time, and he has brought his canonical awareness into contact with the events of the Esther story. The Jews in MT Esther are part of a people connected to the great biblical narratives of covenant and deliverance; they are the children of Israel, they are *mizzera' hayyēhûdîm*, they are a people placed in a different relationship to history than that of the gentiles around them. The web of intertextual connections within MT Esther *requires* this reality as part of the narrative world in which Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews of the Persian Empire find themselves. The narrative itself brings forth this reality to bear on the story's events; it is part of what the author has placed there and appears to have placed there quite intentionally.

Michael Fox approaches this question with caution. He is confident that the trajectory of history in MT Esther is (at least in part) contingent because individuals in this narrative world bear responsibility for their actions. “The narrative dynamic,” as he notes, “assumes the significance of human choice” on the shape of history, not just the state of one's own soul or personal destiny.⁷² At the same time, however, he acknowledges that history in MT Esther also is guided: “events are channeled in certain directions and certain possibilities are foreclosed. It never really was possible [in the story] that the Jews would be destroyed,” and as evidence of this, Fox points to two elements in the Esther story. First, he notes Mordecai's confidence that

⁷² *Character and Ideology*, 250.

“relief and deliverance will come from another place” even if Esther refuses to act (MT 4:14). And next, Fox points to nothing less than the very narrative point with which we have been wrestling over the last two chapters, the warning that Haman receives from his wife and advisors: “If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish seed, then you will not overcome him; you will fall before him to your ruin” (MT 6:13).⁷³

Fox notes, as I have argued, that the logic of the narrative presumes this comment to be a statement of fact, even if the gentiles offer it as an opinion. “Patterns exist in events independently of their causal interrelations,” Fox tells us of the reality in MT Esther. “If history were only the sequence of act and consequence, Haman’s associates could not have predicted his fall, for nothing has happened as yet in 6:13 to undermine his scheme.”⁷⁴ But the warning, coupled with Mordecai’s faith in the deliverance of the Jews, points to an axiom of history at work in MT Esther, according to Fox:

It is Mordecai’s identity, his Jewishness, that guarantees the Jew’s victory. Somehow, Jewishness is a decisive factor in the course of history [in MT Esther]; but neither Mordecai nor Haman’s people say how, or through whom this factor works. It seems to be an absolute principle, independent not only of individual decisions but even of the moral condition of Jewry. Jewish existence was truly in danger, yet Jewish victory somehow was, and always will be, written into the script.⁷⁵

Fox’s view presumes that we can go no further than this in our deductions. Unlike the Joseph story in the book of Genesis, no one in MT Esther tells us concerning these events that “God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of [his chosen] people” (Gen 50:20). Lacking such clear assurance, MT Esther leaves the reader with the contradiction

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

that human choices shape history and yet that something else shapes history toward foreordained ends. The narrator of MT Esther, Fox believes, “simply lets the contradiction stand.”⁷⁶

This is not to say that Fox rejects the possibility that God could be present in the narrative world of MT Esther; instead, he holds that “the author conveys his belief that there can be no definitive knowledge of the workings of God’s hand in history. Not even a wonderful deliverance can prove that God was directing events; nor could threat and disaster prove his absence.”⁷⁷ Fox believes the author remains sure, however, that “Israel will survive—this is the author’s faith—but how this will happen he does not know.” This knowledge enables the Jew willingly “to bear the responsibility that a fickle history lays on his or her shoulders.”⁷⁸

While an intriguing reading, I remain less than confident that Fox’s view has taken into account all that the narrative world had offered the reader. True, MT Esther does not present an overt statement of the divine plan for history, and most definitely, the narrative contains no indication that God appears in word or act. But without recourse to the God of Israel, Fox’s discussion does not and cannot account for the sense of Jewish destiny and Jewish responsibility that he finds in the narrative. Without reference to the history of salvation offered in the Torah and Prophets (the parts of the Hebrew Bible most likely canonical by the author’s time), any reference to Jewish destiny in MT Esther is quite literally incoherent. The Jews in MT Esther cannot simultaneously be both the children of the covenant and the recipients of a mysterious history of victories “written into the script” by “a fickle history,” as Fox describes the view contained in MT Esther.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 251.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 247.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

Unless one is prepared to return the *yěhûdîm* in MT Esther to the status of only a people or an ethnicity, then Jewish identity in the narrative world is something larger: those who are *mizzera' hayyěhûdîm*, “from the seed of the Jews.” Jewish identity that sustains a sense of historic or cosmic purpose must rely in MT Esther on the tissue of intertextual connections that are the narrative’s own mode of liturgical memory. Yes, it is most definitely true, as Fox points out, that the author of MT Esther believes in a world in which the hand of God cannot be definitively seen or intuited with ease in the midst of events. But this does not mean, as Fox appears to think, that the author then believes that God’s existence is likewise mysterious or veiled. There is a still deeper sign of the underlying reality in MT Esther that Fox has missed: the Jews themselves.

In MT Esther, it is the Jews who enact liturgical memory and who fight the enemies of God. It is the Jews who make real the covenantal promises that God will deliver the children of the covenant and that the covenant will endure for the ages. It is the Jews themselves in MT Esther who are the primary evidence of God’s presence in the narrative’s world, and this is why their presence is something that the enemies of God want to see eradicated from their world. The narrator of MT Esther has stripped his covenantal theology to its most basic form and reminded his readers (at least his Jewish readers of his time) why they are *mizzera' hayyěhûdîm*. The interpretive problem in this instance lies *outside* the text. If one believes the Jews are chosen and so have a special place or role in history, then the presence of God in MT Esther is obvious: God is present in the Jews of MT Esther.

This reading of MT Esther opens further aspects of the story for interpretation. The religious silence of the Jews in MT Esther may be indicative of Jewish life in the story. In other words, it might not be the story itself that is silent on its religious content; it may be the Jews in

the narrative who are so silent. Unlike their portrayals in AT and LXX Esther in which the Jews in general (and Mordecai and Esther in particular) are scrupulous in their observance of Torah, it may be the simple case in MT Esther that Mordecai and Esther are not “good” Jews in the typical sense of the term. They exist in a world where standard observance of Torah may have become impossible, perhaps even forgotten to much of conscious memory. The hostile gentile interpreters whom we encountered early in this discussion may inadvertently have stumbled onto a useful point here. It may be correct that these Jews are not figures meant to represent the vibrancy and richness of the tradition as it is normally (or even *should* be normally) expressed.

We are circling back to the same sort of questions posed by Graham Greene in *The Power and the Glory*. What does it mean to be a “good” Catholic priest or a “good” Jew in a world filled with overt hatred and aggression against the Church or against Israel? Greene’s answer is offered by the whisky priest shortly after he is captured by the lieutenant, who is not at this point in the story yet moved to sympathy for the priest. Instead, he notes with bitter delight the priest’s evident fear of his coming execution, something that the lieutenant rightly suggests should mean little in the face of eternity. The priest, as we saw earlier, admits he is neither a saint nor brave. He then offers an insight crucial to the interpretation of Greene’s novel:

That’s another difference between us. It’s no good your working for your end unless you’re a good man yourself. And there won’t always be good men in your party. Then you’ll have all the old starvation, beating, get-rich-anyhow. But it doesn’t matter so much my being a coward—and all the rest. I can put God [in the Eucharist] into a man’s mouth just the same—and I can give him God’s pardon. *It won’t make any difference to that if every priest in the Church was like me.*⁷⁹

The ability to communicate God’s presence and God’s power in the world has been given to the priest by his vocation. Catholic theology of the sacraments contends that this is a literal and an ontological power. The priest literally makes God present in the world; he literally is a conduit

⁷⁹ Greene, *The Power and the Glory*, 256–57 (emphasis added).

by which God's restorative power rushes into a broken world. The priest's work and his person bring God in the world, regardless of the priest's morality or respectability as a person, regardless even of his own belief (or lack thereof).

With due respect to the profound differences in theology between Jews and Catholics, I nonetheless believe that we may say that, in MT Esther, this also is what it means to be *mizzera' hayyēhūdīm*. Throughout the narrative, the "seed of the Jews" performs actions that are consonant with the biblical traditions: repentance, fasting, the battle against the enemies of both the LORD and the Jews, and the liturgical celebrations that keep alive the remembrance of God's saving acts on behalf of Israel. In all of those traditions, these actions have been efficacious: they have brought about God's forgiveness, have changed God's plans, have enabled the divine deliverance of God's people, and ultimately have change the trajectory of history—even if the Jews in the narrative do not themselves understand the nature of their actions, even if they perhaps are no longer sure just what they do believe.

It is no coincidence that, in response to these actions, Haman and his sons are eradicated and the enemies of the Jews are destroyed. The author of MT Esther clearly affirms that the actions preceding Esther's encounter with Haman and the great battle were efficacious. The story literally makes no sense without this implicit affirmation. By drawing on echoes of other canonical narratives of Jewish deliverance, the author has placed the story of deliverance in MT Esther in that line of transformative moments. The liturgical actions described throughout the narrative are aimed to bring some power or force that stands above history into transformative contact with the fate of the Jews in Susa. That this power would be the LORD, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is an almost inescapable deduction, both for the story's author and for the Jews within the narrative if (as I believe) we have read rightly the canonical associations

located within MT Esther. Like the life and work of Greene's whisky priest, the actions of the Jews in MT Esther have made present their God in a world bereft of any clear signs of that God or his people. God does not appear in MT Esther, but his power is manifest in the success of the battle against the forces of Amalek and against the enemies of the Jews.

I want to be careful and clear in what I am asserting here. This is not a homiletical insight or a pious desire to harmonize MT Esther with the canon. Rather, I am arguing this: the narrative logic of MT Esther, if it is an internally consistent narrative, requires that the liturgical actions undertaken by the Jews within the narrative world must be interpreted as the logically sufficient cause of the Jewish victory near the story's end. If this is not the case, the liturgical actions have no inherent narrative meaning in the story. The range of canonical allusions throughout the narrative then further requires that the power that brings about such a victory in response to those liturgical actions, and on behalf of the Jews, can only be the LORD. This is not to make any claim of theological *necessity*; i.e., that the Jews' actions have forced the God of Israel to act on their behalf or that the liturgical acts are somehow a means of controlling the deity. Rather, we may say within the internal logic of the narrative itself that, because the Jews have enacted these theurgic performances, the LORD has chosen to respond to them. The Jews in the story do not know with certainty that their God is active in these moments, but their actions remain efficacious all the same.

The silence concerning the divine nature of this intervention is the same one that appears in *The Power and the Glory*. God never appears in Greene's narrative, nor does anyone stop to tell the reader that this is divine work. We have only the gestures and actions of the whisky priest and the qualitative changes in the world around him in response to those gestures and actions. Yet no modern reader would doubt that Greene, as a Catholic, is showing in his narrative

anything other than that God is the power that travels through this broken and battered religious man. As the whisky priest says to the lieutenant near the story's end, "It's not likely I'd find a saint here, is it?"⁸⁰ The world of the whisky priest does not allow the exercise of the stereotypical Catholic saint. God's power instead moves in more mysterious ways and among more unlikely actors. By the story's end, we can see clearly the hand of God at work. This appears to be Graham Greene's intention in his narrative: we see the divine interventions in the world not in the present moment of those interventions but in the cumulative form and trajectory of history shaped by the life of the whisky priest.

A similar lesson lies at the heart of MT Esther. Mordecai and Esther are not ideal Jews. Their world lacks clear signs of Jewish observance and is one in which such observance may be impossible. Yet in such a world, they remain "the seed of Jews," and they are—likely unknowingly—acting on behalf of Israel's God. The narrator of MT Esther invites the reader, as does Graham Greene, to walk amidst the theological shadows and blank religious spaces of the narrative's world in the same manner as do their protagonists. The meaning of one's actions and the divine presence in them only rises to the surface at the story's end (this point, by the way, may explain why the apocalyptic dream and its interpretation have been added to LXX and AT Esther). Ironically, it is the enemies of God's people who appear most clear sighted in both *The Power and the Glory* and in MT Esther; these enemies seem to understand what must be stopped and destroyed, as well as whom they are fighting and why. The reader and the stories' protagonists, in contrast, wander in the dark with little in the way of assurance except the vestiges of the liturgical traditions that they enact more as muscle memory than out of theological certainty.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 265.

But this is sufficient in such narrative worlds. God's presence and power are manifest, even if only in obscure ways. Where is God in *The Power and the Glory*? He is present and active in the person of the whisky priest. Where is God in MT Esther? He is present and active in the seed of the Jews.

Chapter Five.
“Reveal Yourself in this Time of Our Afflictions”

¹*By the rivers of Babylon,
there we sat,
sat and wept,
as we remembered Zion.*
²*There on the poplars
we hung up our lyres,
³for our captors asked us there for songs,
our tormentors, for amusement:
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”*
⁴*How can we sing a song of the LORD
on alien soil?*
⁵*If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither;
⁶let my tongue stick to my palate
if I cease to think of you,
if I do not keep Jerusalem in memory
even at my happiest hour.*
⁷*Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem’s fall;
how they cried out, “Strip her, strip her
to her very foundations!”*
⁸*Fair Babylon, you predator,
a blessing on him who repays you in kind
what you have inflicted on us;
⁹a blessing on him who seizes your babies
and dashes them against the rocks.*

(Ps 137)¹

As Jon Levenson notes in a recent essay, there is “a general tendency in contemporary

¹ This is the JPS translation with one crucial emendation as offered by Jon Levenson: he has changed “thought of” in v. 1 to “remembered” in order to emphasize the repeated usage of the Hebrew verb *zākar* in the psalm [“The Horrifying Closing of Psalm 137, or the Limitations of Ethical Reading,” in *Biblical Essays in Honor of Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, and Richard J. Clifford, SJ: Opportunity for No Little Instruction*, ed. Christopher Frechette, Christopher R. Matthews, and Thomas D. Stegman (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2014), 12–19].

religion to stress joyful occasions and to downplay or even omit mournful ones, apparently on the assumption that religious life is best focused on moments of happiness and fulfillment alone, whereas moments of decline, debilitation, and death are best isolated from the liturgical year and dealt with only as they occur in individual cases.”² There also exists a strong resistance to those biblical texts (like Ps 137) that cause “acute offense” to modern ethical sensibilities (in this case the advocacy of the murder of children, as expressed in vv. 7–9 above). Levenson notes that Ps 137 has all but disappeared from Conservative and Reform Jewish liturgical practice even though historically, the text has been designated by prayer books to be read virtually every day of one’s life “as the psalm recited just before the blessings that follow meals on weekdays.”³ He also notes that many Protestant liturgists have judged at least the latter verses of Ps 137 as “unworthy of public reading.”⁴ The latter appears true of the Roman Catholic liturgical sensibility as well; Ps 137 appears with some regularity in the weekday and Sunday liturgical cycles of the Catholic mass, but the public proclamation of the psalm in these cases consistently only includes vv. 1–6.

The problem with Ps 137 is also the problem that much of the Christian tradition has imposed on the Esther stories: “There is a general feeling that such thoughts should not occur in the Bible.”⁵ Levenson’s response is frank and cuts to the heart of the matter: “But occur in the Bible they do.”⁶ Because the religious tradition grounded in Scripture (be it Judaism or

² Ibid., 21.

³ Ibid., 19.

⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁵ Elizabeth Rice Achtemeier, *Preaching Hard Texts in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 105; cited in Levenson, “Horrible Closing,” 22.

⁶ “Horrible Closing,” 22.

Christianity) does not have the luxury of excising scriptural texts from the canon, it is the work of the tradition first to understand the nature and meaning of those texts and only then to decide what the tradition should “do” with them. Ignoring them, however, is not an option for the community that considers these texts Scripture, as Levenson demonstrates in his discussion of Ps 137.

Rather than jump to the ethical implications of the final verses, Levenson first places the entire psalm in its broader historical and theological context, exploring why the psalmist awaited and wished to bless the person who would destroy not just his enemy but even his enemy’s children. Turning to the broader canon of the Hebrew Bible, Levenson notes that other biblical writers have described events like those noted in the closing verses of Ps 137, but they describe them as historical events that were done *to* the Israelites *by* Babylonian and Edomite forces during the catastrophe of 587 BCE, when the Neo-Babylonian Empire invaded the kingdom of Judah, conquered Jerusalem, and destroyed the Solomonic Temple, resulting in the Babylonian exile.⁷ This horrific reality, Levenson points out, is what the psalmist pledges to “keep [. . .] in memory/even in my happiest hour” (Ps 137:6) because, as long as it is unavenged, it is an unrepaired breach in the created order.⁸

Levenson is circumspect about the use of *vengeance* as a term to describe the redress that the psalmist seeks, especially if the interpreter tries with its use to drive a wedge between the human and divine aspects of justice and vengeance, as though vengeance were a mere human emotion and justice the divinely practiced reality. The truth is more complex than such views

⁷ Ibid., 24–30.

⁸ Ibid., 26, 30–33.

allow.⁹ We are reminded, for instance, of Michael Fox’s emphasis that the biblical traditions understand vengeance differently than does the modern mind. Vengeance in the Bible, Fox notes, “is not gratuitous,” however much our modern ethical stance might draw back from such a claim. The typical Hebrew term for vengeance, נִקְמָה (*něqāmâ*), indicates the “legitimate exercise of punitive power outside a judicial context[. . .]. There can be no vengeance without an unpunished offense.”¹⁰ Or as Levenson notes in regard to the offenses in Ps 137, there is a sense in the biblical mind that “the consequences of [one’s] crimes are already implicit in the crimes themselves [. . .] the actions and the consequences are part of a single entity that develops over time until it reaches completion.”¹¹ The process may be completed through an act of God or through the actions of human agents. For the psalmist in Ps 137, this is a needless distinction: divine action and human action can (and often do) act reciprocally and toward the same goal of righting that which remains dangerously disordered in the cosmos.¹² “This does not make the closing of Ps 137 any less horrifying as human behavior,” Levenson clarifies. “It does suggest, however, that if we interpret that last verse *only within the parameters of human behavior*, we condemn ourselves to missing its larger import.”¹³

Expanding the context in which we read Ps 137 does not, however, require that we then must accept the psalm’s conclusion as moral guidance for daily life. Levenson notes that the Torah rejects killing children as a means of punishing their parents, and the rabbinic tradition

⁹ Ibid., 30.

¹⁰ *Character and Ideology*, 222–23.

¹¹ “Horrifying Closing,” 33.

¹² Ibid., 32–33.

¹³ Ibid., 38–39, emphasis added.

accepts the Torah's stance as normative law for Jewish life. Christianity has held a similar refusal to allow the execution of minors, in vengeance or otherwise.¹⁴ Indeed, the mistake the modern reader makes far too frequently lies in the interpretive approach taken to reading Ps 137:

Those who grant *hermeneutical primacy to the ethical dimension* will inevitably wish to remove the poem from their liturgies, and [. . .] many Jews and Christians have done just that. Judging the whole psalm and the entirety of the theology underlying it by its horrifying closing is a conversation stopper: it puts an immediate end to the interpretive process. Such a move is not a communally neutral option; it invalidates the use of the text in communities of interpretation for which the text is part of Sacred Scripture.¹⁵

In other words, we can reject the ethical stance derived from the psalm as a mode of guiding our ethical behavior in the modern world; we cannot and should not, however, avoid the continuing “process of confronting the Scriptures”—and being confronted by them—that careful reading of all the canonical texts of the tradition requires of the religious community.¹⁶ Levenson's argument is powerful and elegant, and it is persuasive in its call to avoid the trap of reading Scripture only through the lens of a modern ethical sensibility, perhaps the most common ahistorical reading mode in use today. The contemporary reader must be aware of his or her own historical situation as one reads Scripture, particularly when one reads it as part of a tradition of composition, redaction, interpretation, and transmission that encompasses millennia.

At the same time, it might be easy for some contemporary readers to miss the nuance of Levenson's concern over the stress on the ethical as the primary hermeneutic of interpretation, particularly as we turn from Ps 137 to the Esther narratives. A simplistic application of Levenson's stance would suggest that, just as we cannot follow the dictates of the concluding

¹⁴ Ibid., 39.

¹⁵ Ibid., emphasis added.

¹⁶ Ibid.

verses of Ps 137 in our daily encounters with our enemies, so too we should not follow the potential moral lessons derived from the closing scenes of violence in the Esther story or, for that matter, the moral lessons of any other biblical text the modern mind finds distasteful. It would be far too easy for the ethically cautious modern reader to smuggle back into the interpretive discussion all the traditional gentile misreadings of the Esther as ethnocentric and nationalistic. One then could effectively excise the story from the community's shared reflection, only now do so under the guise of "confronting the Scriptures." But as Michael Fox reminded us earlier, "The author of [MT] Esther, after all, is not merely telling an exciting story. He takes an ethical stance, which includes an implicit affirmation of the morality of the behavior of the two protagonists and the other Jews in this affair, and he expects the reader to grant the validity of that stance."¹⁷

Whether and how that ethical stance may be normative for daily life remains to be seen. The violence in MT Esther, as we have seen in the previous chapters, may well be one of the clearest indications of the divine presence at work in the narrative's world. Like the vengeance awaited in Ps 137, the violence in MT Esther is eschatological; it is aimed toward and part of the work of cosmic restoration that is shared by the LORD and Israel. When interpreted in isolation from its canonical context and outside the perduring reality that the Jews are the LORD's covenantal partners, the violence in both texts makes no ethical sense. But when seen as part of the work of cosmic restoration, the violence in both narratives not only may be ethically defensible but may also be a defining sign of the LORD's continuing covenant with Israel.



Set amidst pages roiling at times with blood divinely wrought and often divinely spilled, the great Jewish victory described at the end of the Esther story seems almost an afterthought.

¹⁷ *Character and Ideology*, 220.

After all, there is much violence in the Bible. The violence in the Esther story is comparatively discreet, at least in the narrator's description of it: it is little more than a total count of casualties and a list of Haman's dead sons. Even a cursory survey of the broader collection of biblical texts reveals an overwhelming commitment to religiously motivated violence by God and by the people of God; it matters little whether one focuses on the texts shared by Judaism and Christianity or whether one looks to the Christian additions to its canon. On one side of the canonical spectrum is the book of Genesis, in which God releases the primordial waters to destroy all humankind and every living creature on the earth (except for Noah and his ark of refugees), all this in response to the evil in the hearts of humanity and the corresponding abnormal relations between the "sons of Elohim" and the "daughters of Adam" (Gen 6:1–9).

There are likewise vicious and gratuitous accounts of Moses' and Joshua's exploits against the enemies of the LORD. In the book of Numbers, for instance, Moses enacts divine punishment on the Israelites who "attached themselves" to Baal-peor, the god of the local Moabites. Moses publicly executes the "heads of the people," most likely through some form of impalement meted out to the leaders of Israel who participated in the foreign cult (Num 25:1–6). He then commands the surviving officials to execute every Israelite male who had participated in the Baal cult. Phineas the priest stabs through the midriff a couple apparently engaged in (cultic?) sexual intercourse, while a divine plague simultaneously strikes down 24,000 Israelites in addition to those killed by the leaders of Israel (Num 25:6–9). Or look instead to the book of Joshua. There, Joshua sets out on a divinely mandated *hērem*, the wholesale execution of the citizens of numerous Canaanite cities as the Israelites take control of the Promised Land, leaving no survivors among them. In Josh 10:28–43, to name just one passage, he follows this practice on the citizens of Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron, and Debir, the casualties likely

numbering in the thousands. Earlier, when he executed the recently defeated Amorite kings, he personally stabbed each king to death, hung their bodies in public display until nightfall, and then had them unceremoniously disposed in the cave where they had dishonorably hidden after their armies' defeat (Josh 10:20–27).

In the era of the judges (a particularly violent era, as the book by that name portrays), the narrative of a gang rape that takes place in Gibeah stands out for the brutality of the assault as well as the community's response, which results in eleven of the Israelite tribes waging war against the tribe of Benjamin because the Benjaminites refuse to turn over the rapists to face vengeance. The ensuing intertribal war nearly annihilates Benjamin, setting in motion yet another series of abductions and rapes, this time numbering in the hundreds, so the six hundred surviving Benjaminite males might repopulate their tribe (Judg 19–21). Later still, King David, once he consolidates his hold on the Israelite throne, lays out Moabite prisoners of war on the ground in lines, randomly executing them on the basis of which line he chooses to kill or spare (2 Sam 8:1–2). And in the Northern kingdom after the great Israelite civil war, Elijah (second only to Moses in stature as a prophet) stages a contest on Mt. Carmel between the 450 priests of Baal and himself; and when the LORD answers him, proving Baal a fraud, Elijah personally slaughters the entire Baal contingent (1 Kgs 18:20–40). Jehu, in an act similar to Elijah's in its aim to purge the Northern kingdom of syncretism, deceptively gathers all the capital's Baal worshipers in their temple and then stages a mock worship service to Baal; unbeknownst to the worshipers, the exits are barred once they have arrived, and at the end of the service, Jehu's men turn on the crowd packed to capacity in the temple and execute them *en masse* (2 Kgs 10:18–27).

On the other end of the Christian canon is the book of Revelation, in which Jesus appears first as the Lamb who has been sacrificed (Rev 5:6) and then as the rider of righteousness astride

a white battle steed, his tongue a sword (19:15) and his cloak bathed in the blood of his enemies (19:13), the avenger of the suffering of every martyr in history (19:3) as he “tread[s] out in the wine press the wine of the fury and wrath of God the almighty” (19:15). The imagery used to describe Jesus at this point in the book of Revelation draws heavily on a portrayal of the LORD as the Divine Warrior in the later chapters of the book of Isaiah. There, the author questions the LORD, who comes forth from Edom, dressed “in crimsoned garments.” When the prophet asks, “Why is Your clothing so red,/Your garments like his who treads grapes?”, the LORD replies:

I trod out a vintage alone;
Of the peoples no man was with Me.
I trod them down in My anger,
Trampled them in My rage;
Their life-blood bespattered My garments,
And all My clothing was stained.
.....
I trampled peoples in my anger,
I made them drunk with my rage,
And I hurled their glory to the ground. (Is 63:1, 2–4, 6)¹⁸

The book of Revelation does not attempt to mitigate the violence seen in the Isaian portrayal of the Divine Warrior. Quite to the contrary, the enemies of God and of the Lamb in in the book of Revelation do not just suffer violent deaths; their suffering continues eternally in pits of unyielding and everlasting punishment (19:20). It is, like the destruction in the Flood narrative of Genesis, *hērem* played out on a universal or even cosmic level. And it is worth remembering that, for the writer of Revelation, this is not some far distant fantasy of the end times: “The one who sat on the throne [i.e, God] said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’ Then he said, ‘Write these

¹⁸ This, by the way, is the same imagery used in “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” the lyrics of which were composed by Julia Ward Howe in 1861. Howe was consciously aware that the song’s version of the Divine Warrior is Jesus, as her lyrics seek to tie the events of the American Civil War to the eschatological judgment of the LORD’s enemies. After the song’s opening verses describe “the coming of the Lord” and “the grapes of wrath” he has trampled, the “Battle Hymn” then makes express reference to a “fiery gospel” and “the Hero, born of woman [who will] crush the serpent with his heel.” Christians have not always been focused exclusively on Jesus as a Man of Peace.

words down, for they are trustworthy and true.’ He said to me, ‘*They are accomplished*’” (Rev 21:5–6a, emphasis added).¹⁹

Given this rather violent panorama running throughout the Jewish and Christian Scriptures, the question is not one of whether concepts of good or authentic religious violence exist in the narratives and thought of biblical traditions; instead, it is the question of how Christian thought has drawn distinctions between so-called “acceptable” and “unacceptable” violence portrayed in the biblical narratives. Millard Lind, in his influential work *YHWH Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel*, presents perhaps the strongest recent Christian argument that tries to draw a distinction between the type of violence described in the Esther stories and that of other biblical narratives—a view that has been adopted by both John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas, two of the most influential, respected, and prolific Christian pacifist theologians of the last forty years. Lind defines Exod 15:1b–18 (an ancient Israelite poem known as the Song of the Sea) as the narrative that best describes the formative Israelite experience of war and military force. Drawing upon the seminal work of Frank Moore Cross, Lind stresses that the Song of the Sea is likely one of the earliest of the canonical biblical texts and among the most ancient recountings of the Israelite memory of the events at the Sea of Reeds.²⁰ Lind points out that in the Song, YHWH is not simply *a* warrior (Exod 15:3) but is in fact the *only* warrior acting on behalf of Israel. The Israelites need not defend themselves or fight for their freedom; their covenanted relationship with the LORD places them in the position of passive observers of their deliverance. As Moses puts it in one of the later prose accounts found

¹⁹ These examples are offered neither for their historical accuracy nor as an exhaustive set. Rather, they simply point to the much more detailed and graphic nature of Israelite military and religious violence described in canonical texts outside the Esther stories.

²⁰ Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 121–24.

in Exod 14, “Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance that the LORD will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. The LORD will battle for you; you hold your peace” (Exod 14:13–14).

The narrative in the Song of the Sea is not quite the one most Christians remember from the movies. Early in the Song, the LORD casts Pharaoh’s army and chariots *into* the sea (15:4), and they “went down into the depths like a stone” (v. 5). Later, the Song relates that “the sea covered them,” true, but again, “they sank like lead in the majestic waters” (v. 10), suggesting with vv. 4–5 that the Egyptian armies were thrown into the waters of the Sea of Reeds or knocked from boats moving across the surface of a wind-tossed sea.²¹ Only in vv. 8–9 is there some indication of Cecil B. DeMille’s theatrical vision of the waters blasting apart, standing up like walls on either side of a chasm of dry land that emerges in the midst of the sea as though “the deeps froze in the heart of the sea” (v. 8). Yet the language here is not so clearly meant to be read literally, given that only a few verses later the songster will tell us that “[the LORD] put out [his] right hand/The earth swallowed them” (v. 12), a line that offers a very different picture of the divine deliverance (an earthquake, perhaps?) and, together with the conflicting images preceding it, suggests that the entire poem leans toward metaphor or hyperbole in its descriptions of the events.

Something did indeed happen at the Sea of Reeds that the Israelites attributed to the LORD. Yet his hand appears present in inference only, just as we have surmised is the situation in MT Esther. This does not mean the narratives possess the same theology of God’s presence. The differences between the Song and MT Esther are twofold. First, a natural event, rather than a military encounter, has served as the means of Israelite deliverance in the Song; and second, the

²¹ Ibid., 131–34.

event has been clearly credited by the Song's narrator as an act of divine deliverance (the absence of such credit in MT Esther having created much of the critical flurry—and fury—surrounding the text). Despite this, the overt presence of God within the events of the Song is seen no more clearly “on the ground,” as it were, than that presence is seen in MT Esther.

In contrast, the prose account in Exod 14 is a composite redacted text (drawn from J, E, and P source materials) that overtly emphasizes both the presence of God and the theological point of the story found in Exod 15, much as we saw in our earlier exploration of the Additions found in AT and LXX Esther.²² Exod 15 is both the older and the more circumspect description of what happened at the sea. Yet in contrast to the conflicts we encountered between the Hebrew and Greek versions of the Esther story, there is overt agreement among the narratives of the event at the Sea of Reeds, at least in terms of *who* is acting in the event. All the narrators in Exod 14 and 15 confirm that Israel was delivered by the LORD. The difference found among the Exodus accounts lies instead in how they present the divine intervention. In the Song of the Sea, the LORD's work is not nearly so clear in its miraculous nature; indeed, what exactly the LORD did to the Egyptians is less than fully coherent. “There is no suggestion in the poem,” as Cross demonstrates, “of a splitting of the sea or of an east wind blowing the waters back so that the Israelites can cross on a dry sea bottom or of the waters ‘returning’ to overwhelm the Egyptians in mud.”²³ The Israelites in the Song appear to have been delivered by the LORD, yes, but by

²² William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, Anchor Bible Commentary (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1999), 461–70, 476–82; Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 218–24. The following discussion of the source material in Exod 14 follows the source demarcations outlined by Childs and Propp. Propp offers a more splintered discussion, attempting to determine J, E, and JE source material, as well as a distinction between the P source and the final redactor (R) of the text. For the sake of simplicity here, I have refrained from these finer distinctions that even Propp admits are far from settled.

²³ Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 131. This view is shared by Childs (*Book of Exodus*, 244–45) and Propp (*Exodus 1–18*, 537–38, 553–54), both of whom note that without the aid of the prose account in Exod 14, one cannot clearly surmise from the Song whether the Israelites even entered (much less crossed) the seabed.

means of a divinely orchestrated set of natural occurrences.

The writers of the sources found in Exod 14 revel in the overtly miraculous aspect of Israel's deliverance at the sea, in much the same manner that the writers and redactors of LXX and AT Esther celebrate the divine presence at work in their narrative worlds. In the J (or JE) account as preserved in Exod 14, the entire event is prominently overseen by the pillar of cloud that is the divine presence, manifest for all to see as it moves among the Israelites and Egyptians, while the LORD dries the seabed with a mighty wind (Exod 14:19–20, 21 α). This dry seabed is a trap for the Egyptians, however, rather than an escape route for Israel; as the Egyptian army travels along the seabed, their chariot wheels lock up, and their forces move forward only with difficulty. The Egyptians themselves suddenly recognize their fate: “Let us flee the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt” (v. 22–25). This recognition comes too late for them as the waters flow back toward the fleeing Egyptians. There is no plummet into the depths for them, as there was in the Song; rather, their corpses move upward, washed up on the beach as a vivid sign of “the wondrous power that the LORD had wielded against the Egyptians” (v. 31).

The P account relates yet another version of these events, the one known best by most readers (and most likely the version in the back of Lind's mind throughout his argument). The P narrator tells us that the LORD commanded Moses to raise the divinely-empowered rod he received at Mt. Sinai, and the waters of the Sea of Reeds are split, drawn back as walls “on their right and on their left,” dry ground appearing wherever the Israelites will step (Exod 14:15–18, 21b–22). It is only in the P account that the Israelites clearly enter the seabed and cross from one shore to the other. They here are most definitely pursued by the headstrong Egyptians who follow them into the midst of the dry seabed and between the walls of restrained waters. The Israelite head start is sufficient, for as the last Israelites leave the seabed and emerge on the other

side, the Egyptians have not yet caught up with them. Moses again uses the rod, this time to close the sea and bring the watery walls crashing down upon the trapped Egyptians, returning the sea to its natural state. In this version of the story, the Egyptians do not sink into the depths or float to the surface. They simply are swallowed by the sea, never to be seen again.

Setting aside the conflicts among the narrative perspectives in Exod 14–15, Lind focuses on the unity within the views and, citing Josh 24:12, contends that the experience at the Sea of Reeds was paradigmatic for the biblical writers in that the LORD was Israel’s sole warrior and “fought by means of miracle, not through the armies of his people: ‘it is not by your sword or by your bow’” that Israel’s enemies were defeated.²⁴ Lind explains,

By miracle we mean an act of deliverance that was outside Israel’s control, beyond the manipulation of human agency. This conviction was so emphatic [among the biblical writers] that Israel’s fighting, while at times a sequel to the act of YHWH, was regarded as ineffective; faith meant that Israel should rely upon YHWH’s miracle for her defense, rather than upon soldiers or weapons. The human agent in the work of YHWH was no so much the warrior as the prophet.²⁵

Lind believes the biblical writers arrived at this stance because “the exodus rather than the conquest or judges provide[d] the fundamental paradigm of holy war in the Old Testament.”²⁶ Specifically, Lind contends that because “YHWH is first called warrior [. . .] in a situation where he exercises his judgment by a nature miracle,” the Song in Exod 15 therefore “forms the paradigm for Israel’s future salvation.”²⁷

Lind then shows through a series of attentive readings how narratives of the Conquest and the era of the Judges return to the Song as the touchstone for understanding how the LORD

²⁴ Lind, *YHWH Is a Warrior*, 23.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 47.

²⁷ Ibid., 49.

delivers his chosen people.²⁸ The crossing of the Jordan and the fall of Jericho (Josh 2–6), both acts of war led by Joshua, are nonetheless miraculous interventions in history attributed solely to the power of the LORD, according to the Deuteronomistic narrator.²⁹ Lind sees in Joshua an unwavering trust in the LORD alone. Joshua later obeys the LORD’s command to hamstring the captured horses and destroy the remaining chariots after the defeat of King Jabin and his confederates (Josh 11:1–15). Such destructive rejection “was probably extended by early Israel to other weapons as well,” according to Lind. “Superior weaponry was rejected, in order to demonstrate trust in YHWH as warrior.”³⁰ He sees a similar trust appear in Gideon’s reliance on a tiny squad of armed men chosen by the LORD to fight a much larger Midianite army (Judg 6–7), rather than in Gideon’s clever ruse of spreading the men out with torches and horns in each small group, suggesting a much larger Israelite contingent (Judg 7:15–22). The ruse may be helpful, but the effective power in the encounter belongs solely to the LORD. As the narrator puts it, “[T]he LORD turned every man’s sword against his fellow throughout the [Midianite] camp.” In each of these cases, according to Lind, the primary understanding is the same as that of the Song of the Sea: “Stand by, and witness the deliverance that the LORD will work for you today.”

Lind writes as a member of the Mennonite Church, one of the historic Anabaptist traditions that became known primarily for their stress on the nonviolence required of Christian followers of the nonviolent Jesus. Lind rejects the dispensationalist perspective typical of

²⁸ See, for instance, *ibid.*, 71–74, 81–85, 92–95.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 77–82.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 84. The attentive reader will note the freighted word *probably* that qualifies Lind’s point here.

American Mennonites,³¹ offering in his argument a more coherent and nuanced view of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. As his book's title reveals, Lind affirms that YHWH is a warrior—in reality and in perception—throughout the biblical revelation; there is no change in the self-revelation of God or in humanity as “dispensations” change. Lind neither attempts to mitigate the claim that YHWH is a warrior nor argues that the claim cannot likewise be made of Jesus of Nazareth; rather, Lind offers a limiting definition for the nature of the divine weaponry: “The *miracle* of YHWH alone is acclaimed as decisive; the human fighting is not described and the human war leader is not made a hero.”³² As he summarizes this,

The ancient tradition of Israel thus proclaimed its distinctive theology of warfare—that obedience to YHWH's word and trust in his miracle are alone decisive. Israel's faith in YHWH as warrior led her to reject the military expediency of developing sophisticated weapons such as horses and chariots even to the time of David,³³ weapons that would have made Israel competitive with her Philistine and Canaanite enemies, not merely on the hills and mountains, but on the lowlands and plains where competition finally counted.³⁴

Jesus' life and teaching, according to Lind, are in perfect continuity with this authentic vision of YHWH in the Old Testament. The later wars of the kings of Israel were political and (at best) atheological, if not outright rejections of this fundamental religious vision of Israelite deliverance. To be blunt, Lind rejects the view that these latter instances of warfare are examples of divinely led warfare; they instead reflect the emerging (and then established) nationalistic or imperialistic

³¹ Richard Kyle, “The Mennonite Brethren and American Evangelicalism: An Ambivalent Relationship,” *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* 20, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 29–32.

³² *YHWH Is a Warrior*, 171, emphasis added. It is difficult to reconcile Lind's claim here with the obvious valorization that the biblical narratives offer to the prowess of human warriors like Joshua, Samson, David, or Judah of the Maccabees.

³³ Lind is firm that this theology of divinely led warfare collapsed in Israel with the corresponding rise of the hierarchical and centralized authority of the monarchy, which placed greater reliance on political and military power and suppressed far too frequently this trust in the Divine Warrior and the Kingship of the LORD over Israel.

³⁴ Lind, *YHWH Is a Warrior*, 171.

yearnings among the Israelite elite.

The era of the Maccabees, as well as the beliefs of the Zealots anachronistically projected into Jesus' time, share this faulty theology and politics of the royal households of Israel after the time of David.³⁵ Although he does not cite or mention the book of Esther in his argument, Lind presumably would describe Mordecai's plan for Jewish self-defense as similar to the refusal he sees among the Israelite kings after David to acknowledge that "Israel's difference from the nations was not due to innate superiority, but lay in YHWH's miraculous [rather than militaristic] deliverance" and in the overt practice of Torah.³⁶ Jesus, in contrast, was the "Son of Man" in continuity with the visions in the book of Daniel and the "Suffering Servant" of the latter parts of the book of Isaiah, both of whom are not warriors but who are rewarded by the LORD precisely in their nonviolent trust in him and in their belief that "YHWH held a monopoly on military power, that he fought not through his people, but for them."³⁷ With the embrace of these visions to describe the work and person of this messiah, Lind asserts, "Jesus was declared by himself and by the ecclesia as fulfilling the promise of the Old Testament, a promise that points from the way of the nations to the way of YHWH" and so teaches that there was no authentic warrior on Israel's behalf except for YHWH himself.³⁸

The perceptive reader will notice a slippage that has emerged as Lind links his interpretation of the role of the Divine Warrior almost exclusively to the Song of the Sea. Lind frequently asserts that human force is, at best, secondary to the outcome of any war in which the

³⁵ Ibid., 174.

³⁶ Ibid., 173.

³⁷ Ibid., 155.

³⁸ Ibid., 174.

God of Israel is involved. “The unique emphasis in Israel’s historiography,” according to Lind, “is that YHWH, rather than any human leader, is the primary subject. This contrasts with the common focus on the king as prime mover of history in [other] Near Eastern annals.”³⁹ This slippage appears most starkly as Lind turns from the Song of the Sea to the Song of Deborah in Judg 5, an equally ancient Israelite poem that describes a military confrontation during the era of the judges. As in the Song of the Sea, the Israelites in the Song of Deborah lie under the power of foreign oppressors, and as we saw earlier, the LORD here too brings forth a prophet to lead his people. In Judg 5, it is Deborah who (along with Barak the warrior) will deliver Israel.

The Song of Deborah differs from the Song of the Sea in one vital aspect, however: it describes the direct participation of human agents in the battle with Israel’s enemies. “That difference is not fundamental,” however, according to Lind, “since in both cases Israel must rely on YHWH’s action for victory. The tribes [in the Song of Deborah] were involved in what amounts to mop-up exercises after the victory had essentially been won.”⁴⁰ In short, Lind contends that in all the *legitimate* battles waged in the era of the Conquest and the era of the Judges, “YHWH alone was obligated [to fight] as king and warrior [. . .] the efficacy of human fighting was denied.”⁴¹ The corollary of this point is equally true, according to Lind: if the LORD is not portrayed as the sole warrior or if a battle in Israelite history appears to rely primarily on the efficacy of human warriors, it then cannot be true sacred warfare—and so represents a violation of Israel’s covenanted existence. One can return, then, to any of the biblical examples

³⁹ Ibid., 58. I am not arguing whether Lind is correct in the contrast he draws here, although it is important to note that he is not. My goal is solely to explain how he formulates his views on human participation with the warlike interventions in history made by Israel’s God.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 72.

⁴¹ Ibid., 86.

of religiously motivated violence noted above (or to any other portrayal of violence in Scripture) and test its validity as an expression of the divine will. If God is not overtly present in the narrative's understanding of the events, or if the human deliverance portrayed in the narrative is a *sufficient* explanation for the victory, then the violence is *not* that of the Divine Warrior. It instead is the violence of fallen and sinful human agents (whether Israelite, Jewish, or gentile) acting in overt rejection of the divine will.

It is worth noting that, contrary to Lind's view, his understanding of sacred warfare does not contradict the stance attributed to the Jews of the Maccabean revolt in either 1 or 2 Maccabees. In beginning the campaign that resulted in the return of the Jerusalem Temple into Jewish hands, Judah (the first of the Maccabean military leaders) believes firmly that their military acts of liberation and deliverance are the very power of God himself acting through them; in language that even Lind could embrace, Judah prays, "Give this army into the hands of your people Israel; make them ashamed of their troops and cavalry. [. . .] *Strike them down by the sword of those who love you*, that all who know your name may sing your praise" (1 Macc 4:31, 33, emphasis added). True, Judah asks God in this prayer to act *through* his people Israel rather than *for* them, unlike Lind's view of authentic sacred warfare. But Judah sees no conflict between these stances: his prayer affirms that (at least in the Maccabean period) it was understood that God can act for his people precisely by acting through them. In fact, Judah prays that God might use the Maccabean forces as his own weapon in battle.

This view is even more apparent in 2 Maccabees. There, as the Seleucid general Nicanor advances on a badly outnumbered Jewish contingent, the narrator shows Judah rallying his troops, again using language that strongly echoes the views of Deuteronomic Historian and the prophet Isaiah:

[Judah] said, “They trust in weapons and acts of daring, but we trust in almighty God, who can by a mere nod destroy not only those who attack us but even the whole world.” He went on to tell them of the times when help had been given to their ancestors: both the time of Sennacherib, when a hundred and eight-five thousand of his men perished, and the time of the battle in Babylonia against the Galatians, when only eight thousand Jews fought along with four thousand Macedonians; yet when the Macedonians were hard pressed, the eight thousand, by the help they received from Heaven, destroyed a hundred and twenty thousand and took a great quantity of spoil. (2 Macc 8:18–20)

Judah and the Jews fighting with him see no conflict between their stance as warriors and the belief that God acts to save them. His narrative conflates stories of two disparate divine interventions. In the first, a plague destroyed the forces of the Assyrian king Sennacherib as he mobilized against Jerusalem and denied the power of the LORD of Israel; in this instance, the forces of King Hezekiah of Judah do nothing but trust in the LORD, as the prophet Isaiah warned them to do (2 Kings 18:13–19:37). The second is a battle unknown to us, mentioned neither elsewhere in the Bible nor in other records, but according to Judah’s account, the God of Israel empowered a small force of Jews to overcome an overwhelming force of gentiles. Both deliverances are miraculous, according to Judah, and they represent miracles that can be repeated with the Jewish forces present before him on the day of battle. Only one of them involves what Lind has called a “nature miracle,” however; the other is an act of heroic human military prowess, no doubt attributed to God’s intervention, but lacking in clear reference to anything miraculous or even a sense that the Divine Warrior preceded the Jews in battle. The Maccabees again do not appear to have recognized the distinction that Lind has drawn.

In 2 Maccabees, Judah knows that the God of Israel will strike down his enemies with “the sword of those who love you” (as the Judah of 1 Maccabees prays) because he also knows that this sword has come from God himself. The battle soon to be engaged between Judah’s forces and those of Nicanor is the direct result of Nicanor’s ridicule and defiling of the Jewish

priests and his overt attempt to defile the Temple of the God of Israel. As Nicanor prepares for battle, the priests stand before the altar and the sanctuary, praying that the God of Israel will “[t]ake revenge on this man and his army, and let them fall by the sword. Remember their blasphemies, and do not let them continue” (1 Macc 7:33–38). In a scene near the end of 2 Maccabees, Judah describes to his soldiers “a dream, a kind of waking vision, worthy of belief” that he received:

What he saw was this: Onias, the former high priest [who had been murdered earlier and so comes to Judas from the afterlife], a noble and good man, modest in bearing, gentle in manner, distinguished in speech, and trained from childhood in all that belongs to excellence, was praying with outstretched arms for the whole Jewish community. Then in the same way another man appeared, distinguished by his white hair and dignity, and with an air of wondrous and majestic authority. Onias then said of him, “This is a man who loves his fellow Jews and fervently prays for he people and the holy city—the prophet of God, Jeremiah.” Stretching out his right hand, Jeremiah presented a gold sword to Judas. As he gave it to him, he said, “Accept this holy sword as a gift from God; with it you shall shatter your adversaries.” (2 Macc 15:12–16)

Whether the sword appears in material form or remains only in the vision is inconsequential to the point. In 2 Maccabees, Judah and the Jews with him are assured that the force used by Judah to defeat his enemies is a gift from God. The Jewish victory, in other words, is itself most certainly understood as divine deliverance.

To connect this point back to our discussion of the book of Esther, it is furthermore interesting that this particular battle is engaged on the thirteenth of Adar, the same day in which the Jews rise to defend themselves in the Esther stories. As was the case with the enemies of Esther, so too here: Nicanor’s forces are crushed. The Jewish victory is total, as it was in the Esther stories, and it is sealed with a similar public affirmation and ritual: “By public vote it was unanimously decreed never to let this day pass unobserved, but to celebrate the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, called Adar in Aramaic, the eve of the Day of Mordecai” (2 Macc 15:36). It

appears that the writer of 2 Maccabees saw in the Maccabean victory not only divine deliverance, but a divine deliverance in the manner celebrated on the Day of Mordecai. The Maccabees apparently had no qualm with reading the Esther story as one in which human and divine deliverance functioned as one.



Given this, it is vital to see the limits of what exactly Lind has demonstrated with his argument because the conclusions drawn from his work will change as the ideas move out of biblical scholarship and into other areas of theology. Lind has affirmed that the LORD, the God of Israel, is indeed a warrior. Lind has also affirmed that Israel was called upon by God at times to assist in minor ways with the completion of divine assaults upon the enemies of Israel. His disagreement with the “Maccabean option” lies not in the Maccabees’ use of military force, but rather in their mistaken belief that God acts through them, rather than intervening miraculously for them. Lind does strongly deny the “efficacy” of supportive human involvement in sacred warfare, but all the same, he does not deny that it happened: “This is *not* to argue that the tribes did no fighting,” Lind emphasizes.⁴² His admission is not accompanied by an explanation. Thus, while he acknowledges the fact that Israel fought at God’s command, Lind is unable to explain why the Divine Warrior made such commands (he did not do so at the Sea of Reeds, a point central to Lind’s argument) or why such a command could not be made today. Lind seems hesitant to embrace the logical conclusion of his own argument: if one were to draw a guide for Jewish or Christian behavior from the theological views Lind has explored, it appears that this theology in fact permits a Jew or a Christian to engage in warfare or use violence (at least when such acts are understood to originate in divine command), as long as such work is ancillary to a

⁴² Ibid., 72, emphasis added.

divine intervention and not itself the prime violent intervention in the world. Religious nonviolence (or the nonviolence of the God of the Bible, for that matter) is a concept that cannot be derived coherently from Lind's understanding of the Bible.

These limits to Lind's argument make it surprising that Yoder and Hauerwas rely on his views to justify a much more expansive view of nonviolence in Scripture. Years before the publication of Lind's study, Yoder had begun a similar exploration of what he would come to call in the title of his central work "the politics of Jesus."⁴³ Yoder began his study, in contrast to the direction of Lind's approach, with the life and teaching of Jesus and worked backward into a reading of Old Testament salvation history. He incorporated insights from Lind's work into the second edition of *The Politics of Jesus*⁴⁴ and even wrote an approving introduction to Lind's book. Yoder affirms Lind's stance; in a chapter entitled "God Will Fight for Us," Yoder's summary of his argument could have written by Lind: "Thus even when Israel use[d] the sword, in a most fearful and destructive way, the victory is credited not to the prowess of the swordsmen or the wisdom of the generals, but to the help of YHWH. This remains the main point of the accounts throughout the books of Joshua and Judges."⁴⁵ Yoder here, by the way, is specifically referring to the Israelite battle with Amalek described in Exod 17, the same battle that we have seen to be a canonical intertextual reference in MT Esther that is essential to a fuller understanding of the latter narrative. Yoder specifically rejects the battle with the Amalekites as an instance of genuine sacred warfare. "It is rather the culmination of a period of Moses' being frustrated by the people's bitterness and their asking for a test of the Lord's presence," Yoder

⁴³ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, second edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 77–78.

tells us. “This time Moses and Joshua respond in their own way to the Amalekites’ attack; they fight their own battle.”⁴⁶

Like Lind, Yoder appears unaware that his references to the sword as the power of God alone do fit comfortably with the Maccabean perspective that both authors seek to reject.⁴⁷ Yoder too came from and worked within the Mennonite tradition, but in contrast to Lind’s focus on biblical interpretation, Yoder in his work has the overt intention to demonstrate that the authentic Church must be nonviolent because Jesus himself was (and is) nonviolent. While it may seem counterintuitive at first glance to say so, it remains true that Yoder’s argument follows Lind’s perspective in its main gestures. Like Lind, he argues that the LORD is the only legitimate warrior in ancient Israel and that the LORD fought through miracle and without need of human agency. Yet Yoder moves beyond this view as he returns to his discussion of Jesus. He believes that Jesus, because he is the LORD incarnate, must embody the same consistent ethic of divine warfare as the one that the careful reader discovers in the Hebrew Bible.

Yoder states unequivocally, “If Jesus Christ was not who historic Christianity confesses he was, the revelation in the life of a real man of the very character of God, then [my] argument for pacifism collapses.”⁴⁸ Yoder remains so convinced of the continuity among the scriptural witnesses that he daringly even turns to the book of Revelation in support of his view:

“The lamb that was slain is worthy to receive power!” John [the author of Revelation] is here saying, not as an inscrutable paradox but as a meaningful affirmation, that the cross and not the sword, suffering and not brute power,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 77.

⁴⁷ Yoder refers to the use of violence in the Jewish religious context as “the Zealot option” in *The Politics of Jesus*, but he accepts Lind’s categorical connection of the Maccabean revolt with the Zealot rebellion against foreign occupiers; both are similarly distorted understandings of the divine work active in history (ibid., 46–49, 56–58).

⁴⁸ Ibid., 237.

determines the meaning of history. The key to the obedience of God's people is not their effectiveness but their patience ([Rev] 13:10). The triumph of the right is assured not by the might that comes to aid of the right, which is of course the justification of the use of violence and other kinds of power in every human conflict. The triumph of the right, although it is assured, is sure because of the power of the resurrection and not because of any calculation of causes and effects, not because of the inherently greater strength of the good guys. The relationship between obedience and the triumph of God's cause is not a relationship of cause and effect but one of cross and resurrection.⁴⁹

This, according to Yoder, is but a restatement of the LORD's promise offered by the prophet Zechariah: "Not by might, nor by power, but by My spirit—said the LORD of Hosts" (4:6).⁵⁰

This promise was in fact given to Zerubbabel, the descendant of David appointed by Darius to serve as governor over the Persian province of Yehud in the first generation after the Babylonian exile. What this promise means in practice, according to Yoder, is a restatement of the proper form of God's kingdom:

When, therefore, Jesus used the language of liberation and revolution, announcing a restoration of "kingdom" community and a new pattern of life, without predicting or authorizing particular violent techniques for achieving his good ends, he need not have seemed to his listeners to be a dreamer; he could very easily have been understood as updating [. . .] a faith whereby a believing people would be saved despite their weakness, on condition that they "be still and wait to see the salvation of the LORD."⁵¹

From the perspective of this reading, it appears that Yoder has interpreted the Zecharian prophecy as one that reminds the LORD's people to be patient, to wait upon the power of the LORD to deliver Zerubbabel in his work rebuilding the Temple—and to wait upon that same power to deliver the LORD's people in the midst of suffering even generations after Zerubbabel. It also is apparent that, with the final biblical quote in the passage above, Yoder is drawing the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 232.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 84.

⁵¹ Ibid.

stances of Zechariah and Jesus into the orbit of the Song of the Sea. As with Lind, Yoder too is claiming that the Song is paradigmatic.

Yoder contends that Jesus enacts this same understanding of the LORD in his own life. The cross accordingly becomes the symbol of divine power because through it “Christ renounced the claim to govern history.”⁵² The apocalyptic vision of both the Old and the New Testaments, culminating in the visions of the book of Revelation, according to Yoder, reveals that “the crucified Jesus is a more adequate key to understanding what God is about in the real world of empires and armies and markets than is the ruler in Rome, with all his supporting military, commercial, and sacerdotal networks.”⁵³ Jesus reveals God’s power by renouncing all other powers: those of force, government, or even religion.

The LORD fights by renouncing his claim to violent and coercive power over his creation. It is the Maccabean fault, as Lind and Yoder have emphasized, to believe that Jewish violence can be a part of divine deliverance. Yoder’s later interpretation of the Esther story reveals just how deeply ingrained this viewpoint remains. Yoder places the Esther story in a category of biblical narrative he calls the “Joseph paradigm,” including here the Joseph story from Genesis 37–50 and the early chapters of the book of Daniel. Looking at the three stories together, Yoder concludes:

In three different ages and places, the same experiences recur in the Hebrew story. Joseph, Daniel and his three friends, and Esther all found themselves involuntarily at the heart of the idolatrous empire. Each ran the risk of faithfulness to their people and to the revealed will of the one true God, when their civil disobedience could have cost them their lives. Each was saved by divine intervention, with the result that the pagan tyrant was converted to the recognition of the one true God, vindicating them against their enemies, and giving Jews a role in running the

⁵² Ibid., 234.

⁵³ Ibid., 246.

empire.⁵⁴

This summary might pass in a pinch as a somewhat narrow reading of the early parts of the book of Daniel, but it is a severe misreading of either the Joseph story or MT Esther. In neither of the latter narratives does God appear or clearly reveal his will to the protagonists. Joseph may credit God with his ability to interpret dreams, but the narrator does not show us a divine intervention that verifies this claim. I noted earlier that Daniel's deliverance in the lion's den likewise lacks a definitive narrative description of divine intervention. Daniel and Joseph clearly are witnesses to the work of God, but the narratives themselves require that we trust their witness, their interpretation, of the hidden hand of God that they have seen at work in their world. Perhaps most ironically, Yoder's summary actually labels as "divine intervention" the execution of Haman and his sons in MT Esther, as well as the Jewish military victory over the anti-Semites of the Persian Empire. Yoder can only absorb the Esther story into his understanding of Scripture by rewriting it, but his attempted rewrite ends up sounding very much like the Maccabean view that Yoder rejects.

Regardless, this assertion moves Yoder's thought far beyond Lind's more limited perspective. For Yoder, the only player remaining on the stage of history is the LORD, the Divine Warrior. There is no room in Yoder's vision for even the "mop-up exercises" described by Lind as Israel's appointed work. As we saw above, Yoder believes that a correct reading of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures requires a pacifistic stance toward the world, an intentional and conscious action on behalf of the Church to imitate the renunciation that was first performed (according to this reading) by Jesus, the Divine Warrior incarnate. But what exactly in Yoder's thought the Divine Warrior does beyond this act of renunciation remains unclear.

⁵⁴ John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 186.

Stanley Hauerwas attempts to answer this question by using the work of Yoder and Lind to stake out a vision of a nonviolent Church that extends far beyond the Mennonite tradition. In *The Peaceable Kingdom*, Hauerwas offers what he considers a “primer” or “introduction,” a more systematic and orderly presentation of his ethical stances as they have been developed in other areas of his work. The goal of *The Peaceable Kingdom* is to show what is entailed in the Christian life by a commitment to nonviolence.⁵⁵ Central to our discussion is Hauerwas’ understanding of where the Christian commitment to nonviolence arises. It arises in the imitation of God:

We are not called upon to be the initiators of the kingdom [of God], we are not called upon to be God’s anointed. We are called upon to be *like* Jesus, not to *be* Jesus. [. . . T]hat likeness is of a very specific nature. It involves seeing in his cross the summary of his whole life. Thus to be like Jesus is to join him in the journey through which we are trained to be a people capable of claiming citizenship in God’s kingdom of nonviolent love—a love that would overcome the powers of the world, not through coercion and force, but through the power of this one man’s death.⁵⁶

Hauerwas, however, then argues that to understand “the theme of imitation” in Christian practice, one must begin “not with Jesus but with Israel.”⁵⁷ Israel, according to this view, has been called to imitate God by walking in the way of the LORD, particularly as understood in the observance of Torah.⁵⁸

The early Church “understood Jesus’ life as recapitulating the life of the Lord with

⁵⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), xvi–xvii.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 77–78.

Israel.”⁵⁹ The gospel accounts are intentional in this, according to Hauerwas, deliberately representing Jesus as the messianic king of Israel, but also showing him to relive the major events of Israel’s history of deliverance throughout his life: in his baptism, the temptation in the desert, the wilderness wandering, the cleansing of the temple, the calling of the twelve and the feeding in the desert, as well as his care and concern for the poor and marginalized. These events collectively show the way of Jesus, one that recapitulates the way of Israel, which in turn is the practice of the way of God himself.⁶⁰ Hauerwas centers this claim in Lind’s work, even quoting particular aspects that we saw earlier: Lind’s use of Josh 24 and his definition of the LORD’s weapon as the miracle, not the sword.⁶¹

“Through Jesus’ life and teachings,” Hauerwas summarizes, “we see how the church came to understand that God’s kingship and power consist not in coercion but in God’s willingness to forgive and have mercy on us.”⁶² This view undermines both “militaristic and ritualistic notions of what God’s kingdom required,” a point that stands in some tension with Hauerwas’ earlier assertions that Jesus could be understood only through Israel’s own observance of Torah.⁶³ Indeed, Hauerwas brings this view to a near total inversion of Lind’s initial argument:

Jesus calls his disciples to follow him, to leave all that they have, leaving the dead to bury the dead, in a manner not dissimilar to what is required of those called to fight a holy war. They are to make a radical break with security and possessions, with the customs and habits of everyday life, for no other purpose than to share in

⁵⁹ Ibid., 79.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 79–80.

⁶¹ Ibid., 80, n. 11.

⁶² Ibid., 85.

⁶³ Ibid.

his ministry of preaching the repentance needed to become part of the kingdom (Mark 3:13; Matt. 10:5ff). Discipleship is quite simply extended training in being dispossessed. [. . .] For our possessions are the source of our violence.⁶⁴

This stance brings Lind's understanding of holy war into contact with Yoder's emphasis on renunciation, resulting in a theology of discipleship and ecclesiology that requires the Church to turn away from possessions and the ability to govern history. Forgiveness and mercy are the primary powers of God because God refuses to coerce humanity or to coerce creation—through violence or through ritual—to come into conformity with the divine plan. Our mistaken belief in our sole ownership of our lives, our land, our future, or ourselves is the source of our violence.

This is a moving understanding of the work of Jesus, but it is not a coherent understanding of the way of God given to Israel in Torah. It is likewise far from Millard Lind's stance, upon which it appears originally to have been based. We have seen a series of steps in the theological progression through the views of Lind, Yoder, and Hauerwas in which each theologian has pushed an aspect of the biblical narrative aside in the pursuit of a nonviolent understanding of the work and ministry of the Church in the world. Millard Lind contended that the LORD is a warrior who does not depend upon or need Israel's violent assistance in his battles; likewise the LORD's choice of weapon is the miracle, not the bow or the sword. This, as we saw, appears to ignore giant swaths of Israelite history and biblical narrative by marginalizing, even trivializing, the warfare Israel undertook with and on behalf of the LORD. John Howard Yoder picked up Lind's argument, but he has projected onto the divine person of Jesus the renunciation of self-determination and power over history that Lind showed was meant only for Israel's self-understanding. Jesus is both God and Jew in Christian thought, however, and Yoder neglected to note that Lind had shown that there are two different sets of duties, one for God and one for

⁶⁴ Ibid., 86.

Israel, at least as they are portrayed in the Hebrew Bible. Israel was to “be still and wait to see the LORD’s salvation,” yes, but the LORD in contrast was covenantally bound to act on Israel’s behalf. Jesus, as God, cannot renounce the governance of history. Yoder, as we likewise saw, has selectively ignored the presentation of Jesus as the Divine Warrior in the book of Revelation. The lamb who was slain and so worthy “to rule the world” and “to receive power, riches, strength, honor, glory and blessing” in Rev 5 (vv. 10, 12) is one and the same with the “Word of God” in Rev 19 whose cloak is soaked in the blood of his enemies and who leads the armies of heaven into battle against the Beast and “all the kings of the earth” (vv. 13–14, 19). The latter is hardly representative of a renunciation of the governance of history or the cosmos.

Stanley Hauerwas creates a further offset by projecting renunciation of force as the primary defining characteristic of the Church. For Hauerwas, this renunciation is the primary defining characteristic of Jesus; and because Jesus is the perfect incarnation of God, his renunciation of force and coercion is therefore also the primary defining characteristic of God. Holy war here becomes the rejection of war. For Hauerwas, the divine warrior has become divine mercy. The evolution of this argument appears to be an inversion of the doublespeak in George Orwell’s *1984*. Where in Orwell’s novel, “war is peace,” we see that Hauerwas has quite literally ended with the claim that “peace is war,” at least when we are discussing the divine order: Jesus’ disciples prepare as participants in holy war by renouncing all means of violence. We likely could not have reached a point much further in conflict with the stance offered in the Esther story.



The incoherence seen in the progression of these views—offered by a group of thoughtful and respected Christian scholars overtly committed to the ongoing reality of God’s covenant with Israel and to dialogue with modern Judaism—suggests that there exists a deeper problem

with Christian views of the Esther story than simply the violence it contains. The definition of sacred warfare offered by Lind appears to rest on a degree of question begging. Lind (and by extension, Yoder and Hauerwas) appears to have assumed a predetermined set of “acceptable” biblical narratives that he believes to portray authentic instances of divinely sanctioned violence, and he has built a definition of sacred warfare that narrowly circumscribes only those instances. How Lind, Yoder, or Hauerwas determined that set of “acceptable” texts in the first place remains unstated. The seemingly arbitrary distinction between “good” (or authentic) religious violence and “bad” (or false) religious violence does, however, seem to rest on at least one profoundly problematic assumption. As Michael Fox has noted, “It is strange that Christian theologians, starting with Luther, have been more disturbed by the defensive action of the Jews in Esther’s time than by the aggressive and more destructive conquest by the Israelites” described in other parts of the biblical canon.⁶⁵ Fox goes a step further in this direction, adding a challenge to the frequent Christian claim that the Esther story is far too nationalistic or ethnocentric. “Perhaps the theologians would have been less exercised by the book’s nationalism,” Fox drily observes, “if the people were called ‘Israelites’ rather than ‘Jews.’”⁶⁶

There is more than some small merit in this view. The textual distinction between *Jews* (*yěhūdīm*) and *Israelites* (*běně yiśrā’ēl*, literally “children of Israel”) appears to be one that does a great deal of theological work on behalf of Christian supersessionism and a soteriology that depends on a radical distinction between “grace” and “works,” i.e., a vast dichotomy between the divine and human sides of personal and cosmic restoration of the divine order. The Esther stories, like 1 and 2 Maccabees and Ps 137, not only offer representations of human actors

⁶⁵ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 225, n. 20.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 236, n. 4.

trusting in violence to resolve crises, but the narratives likewise arose in a post-exilic setting in which the primary name for the people of God was (and remains) *Jews*. The violence in these biblical texts then is specifically Jewish violence (or at the very least, violence sought on behalf of the Jews). The narratives all presume that the divine order is somehow damaged until the Jews have been delivered. Each of the narratives also presumes that it is the responsibility of Jews to participate in that deliverance, whether that participation be the prayers and memory noted in Ps 137 or the active military action and enacted liturgical memory of the Esther stories and 1 and 2 Maccabees. Israel is not yet Israel and creation is not yet fully creation, these narratives tell us, until the divine order is restored; such restoration depends, at least in part, on the perdurance of the Jews.

This is a most difficult claim to reconcile with either Christian supersessionism or with a presumed dichotomy between “grace” and “works,” as is assumed by much of Christian thought since the Reformation. Recall why Martin Luther wished that the Esther story “did not exist at all”: his condemnation of the text (along with 2 Maccabees) lay precisely in the Jewish nature of the story’s violence and the “Judaizing” intent of the narrative; further, he “makes an explicit link between ‘Judaizing’ or ‘making Jewish,’ on the one hand, and ‘heathen impropriety’ or ‘perverseness,’ on the other. That is, Jewish identity is tied to religious immorality.”⁶⁷ Why did he make such a case? Timothy Beal notes Luther’s use of “‘Judaizing’ as a negative term which he opposes to living under grace by faith”; “Judaizing” is a refusal to live “according to spirit rather than flesh.”⁶⁸

David Nirenberg, in his recent monumental work, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*,

⁶⁷ Cited in Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 6.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 137.

offers a compelling assessment of Luther's influence in the West.⁶⁹ Luther was neither the first nor the most famous of Western gentile thinkers to be shaped by the Western tendency to use "Judaism" and "Jews" as intellectual categories by which to judge and critique ways of thinking and existing in the world, as Nirenberg notes, but "there was something revolutionary in Luther's message and in the way he delivered it."⁷⁰ Luther was an outstanding propagandist, a prolific publisher, and a beneficiary of his place and time: the German people of his time longed for their own sense of culture and imperial aspirations separate from those of French or Italian influences, and the Roman Catholic Church was a prime target for their aggrieved sense of domination, as well as for the clear theological and ecclesial abuses it was perceived to have practiced.⁷¹

Luther, however, offered at least two innovations to the Western tradition's use of "Judaism" as an intellectual category. Luther first returned to what he perceived as a restored reading of the apostle Paul's theology in the New Testament. Paul, according to Luther, had drawn a profound distinction between God's justice and God's mercy; the Church had forgotten this and had so confused the two that, according to Luther, "he who would be a good Christian might almost have to become a Jew."⁷² Perhaps needless to say, Luther found such a possibility appalling. Indeed, Luther coupled this emerging understanding of Scripture with an almost natural anti-Judaism permeating his culture. Both he and Erasmus noted nearly simultaneously in

⁶⁹ David Nirenberg, *Anti-Semitism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013). It (sadly) may seem unexpected to turn to an historian in a theological argument, but I have done so for a specific reason here. Nirenberg's work is wide-ranging and persuasive, and unlike a typical theological history or "history of Christian thought," Nirenberg specifically seeks to show how ideas endure in the culture and in the broader Western intellectual tradition. In one sense, what Luther actually wrote is irrelevant to this discussion: we are more interested here in how Luther's views and the "Luther" remembered by the West have shaped the reception of the Esther story.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 246–47.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 246–48.

⁷² Cited in *ibid.*, 251.

separate works that their reforms of the Christian faith went far beyond the current culture, especially in this anti-Judaism: “If hatred of Jews makes the Christian,” they both warned, “then we are all plenty Christian” already.⁷³

The radical distinction between grace and works, coupled with the anti-Jewish sentiment of the culture, were not the most distinctive and enduring elements of Luther’s reform of Christian thought, however. Luther, as both a Renaissance thinker and one of the bridges to the Reformation, wanted to return to the literal meaning of the biblical text, a concept he recovered through his study of St. Augustine, who warned the Church against the flights of fancy contained in the highly allegorized or “anagogical” readings of the Church fathers.⁷⁴ The Church fathers tended to downplay the literal meaning of the text (particular of the Hebrew Bible), at times referring to the literal sense as the “Jewish” reading because of its limits and lack of awareness of the role of Jesus in salvation history. Luther returned to what he called the literal meaning of Scripture, but he did so in a fashion new to his time and to the Church. As Nirenberg notes, “His claim would be that the story of Christ, not the history of ancient Judaism, was the literal meaning of even the most Hebrew of scriptures.”⁷⁵ The persecuted psalmist, the prophet speaking to Israel, the mourning Davidic king, or the suffering of the holy remnant of Israel: all this in the Hebrew Bible *literally* was spoken in the voice and person of Jesus (according to Luther), and his persecutors throughout history were the Jews and their desire to distort the meaning of the word of God.

Before Luther’s innovation in reading Scripture, the Jews were seen simply as poor

⁷³ Cited in *ibid.*, 254.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 251–52.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 251.

readers of their own Scripture—stupid and dense, but not malicious in their handling of their Scriptures. In the wake of Luther’s thought, however, the Jews became something more. They were pernicious, which meant that they were “bloodthirsty enemies,” only “worthy of hatred.”⁷⁶ One can see why, then, Luther would find repulsive any biblical text that showed the Jews—specifically as *Jews*—to be perduring under divine grace and working hand in hand with the God of Christianity to restore the world. If Nirenberg is correct, this approach has been woven into the very fabric of how the Western tradition reads the Bible. A “Jewish” reading or a “Jewish” text is the hallmark of error, theologically, politically, or ethically. There can be no room in the Church for Esther and Mordecai, the Maccabees, or even the psalmist who refuses to forget Jerusalem.

One can also see why a view of God as non-coercive might emerge from such a vision. As the role of the Jews in the restoration of the world was increasingly seen in the West as a theology of “works,” the God of Israel so too must begin to look more like a God of “grace,” who forgives and reconciles without cause or justification. For Lind, Yoder, and Hauerwas, their vision of the purpose of Israel and the Church rests in this prior vision of a non-coercive God. God remains the Divine Warrior who confronts the forces arrayed against the divine order shaping and permeating the cosmos, but his weapon of choice is the “miracle,” instead of the bow or sword. It is mercy, rather than violence, that is his prime source for renewal. In addition, if one believes that Jesus of Nazareth is the Second Person of the Trinity, then (according to this view) the renunciation that Jesus demonstrates in his life is also the central means of the “War of the Lamb.” We see in this the ultimate expression of the problematic stance that Lind first took in relation to his paradigmatic use of the Song of the Sea.

⁷⁶ Cited in *ibid.*, 265.

By emphasizing the role of God’s “miracle” as his weapon, Lind reflects a general Christian tendency to spiritualize the divine violence described by the ancient Israelites. Such “spiritualization” of violence effectively distances it from the reader and renders its effects less “real.” When the God of Israel acts miraculously—killing by flood, plague, hailstorm, or drowning in the sea—the deaths are somehow less real to modern readers than if a Jewish soldier thrusts a sword in the side of an opponent. This process of spiritualizing warfare is also easier for Christians to do when God is the primary (or only) actor in the narrative, or when the actors are safely stored away in history, as they are for Lind and Yoder: the Israelites of old fought only in support of the LORD, and the LORD in grace fought for them. All the same, the fact remains that (at least in the world of the narrative), an opponent of God or an opponent of Israel is dead as a result of “spiritualized” violence. A “miracle” is not less violent or less deadly than bow or sword. Indeed, it often appears in the biblical narratives to be much more so. This may, in part, be the profound challenge that the Esther story brings to the modern Church: like 1 and 2 Maccabees and Ps 137, the Esther story refutes the claim that the way of God is only the way of peace or is only the way of peace as it is understood by the world today.

Another problem emerges here. As Hauerwas has noted, the Church has been called to witness to the present reality of the kingdom of God and the person of Jesus active in the world today. Hauerwas rightly points out that the Church has been given an unexpected qualifier to that mission:

The task of the Church is not to survive, but to be faithful to its eschatological mission. The “success” of that mission is not measured in whether the Church survives or not, but whether her survival or nonsurvival serves the ends of that kingdom. Any time Christians presume that the “success” of God’s kingdom depends on the “success” of the Church[,] they have already betrayed their belief

in God's lordship of history.⁷⁷

This mission, however, is not the mission of Israel. Modern Christian thought has consistently tried to read its Scriptures backward: as we have seen in the work of Yoder and Hauerwas, a vision of Jesus is determined in isolation from the Hebrew Bible, and this vision of God becomes the test by which the Old Testament narratives are evaluated for their use in Christian thought. But as Hauerwas himself points out, this is backwards from the process that the early Church undertook. In his discussion of the imitation of God that the Church requires of Jesus' disciples, he emphasizes:

A proper appreciation of the centrality of the theme of imitation must begin, however, *not with Jesus but with Israel*. For Jesus brought no new insights into the law or God's nature that Israel had not already known and revealed. The command to be perfect as God is perfect is not some new command, nor is the content of that command to love our enemies new. [. . .] Jesus' activity as presented in the Gospels makes no sense without assuming what Israel had long known.⁷⁸

Israel, however, has not been called simply to obey, but also to *survive*. Esther herself makes this clear in her petition before Ahasuerus:

If your Majesty will do me the favor, and if it pleases your Majesty, *let my life be granted me as my wish, and my people as my request*. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated. Had we only been sold as bondsmen and bondswomen, I would have kept silent[. . .]. (MT 7:3–4, emphasis added)

Esther seeks in her story to survive—not to conquer, not to dominate, not even to flourish, but to survive. And she wishes to survive not for her own sake, but to survive with and as part of her people.

⁷⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, "Remembering as a Moral Task: The Challenge of the Holocaust," in *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 346, n. 28.

⁷⁸ Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics*, 76, emphasis added.

The Church's mission is qualitatively different from that of Israel and the children of Israel today. The Church makes a categorical mistake when Christians attempt to read the mission and work of the Church backward onto the mission and work of Israel. Biblical Israel—be it the ancient Israelites, the post-exilic Jews, or modern Judaism—has been called by the LORD to obey and to survive because, unlike the Church, Israel is central to the divine work of restoration. The Church, as St. Paul already attested in the book of Romans, is the wild olive branch grafted by God onto the olive tree that is Israel (Rom 10:16–24). The Church, in other words, is ancillary to Israel, which is why the mission of the former rests in obedience alone. Once one accepts that Israel is called to obey *and* to survive, the violence in the book of Esther, in 1 and 2 Maccabees, and even in Ps 137 may in fact be moral and necessary. Jewish survival must happen, these biblical narratives tell us, in a world that remains fundamentally dangerous to the Jews. Jewish survival must happen at times in a world in which God appears absent. Yet it is in the very survival of Israel that God's presence is made known. Until the Church grapples sufficiently with this truth, it will struggle to keep its story straight. Reading the book of Esther—and reading it well—may be a first step in that process.

“Reveal yourself in this time of our afflictions,” Esther begs of God in the Greek Additions. This is not simply a cry for help, we now can see, but a theological assertion about the nature of the violence and the survival of Israel. Israel's survival is made possible through the divine presence. That presence is at times manifest in the violence by which Israel acts to preserve its work as God's partner in the restoration of the cosmos.

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