The Nature and Import of the Relationship Between the Joseph Story in Genesis and the Book of Esther

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Hornung, Gabriel F. 2016. The Nature and Import of the Relationship Between the Joseph Story in Genesis and the Book of Esther. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts &amp; Sciences.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citable link</td>
<td><a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:33840665">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:33840665</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at http:// nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Nature and Import of the Relationship between the Joseph Story in
Genesis and the Book of Esther

Abstract

This study offers an extended, detailed examination of the nature and character of the
relationship between the story of Joseph in Genesis and the book of Esther. While also engaging
the court narratives found in the first half of the book of Daniel, this dissertation seeks to
underscore the sustained and constructive comparison between Joseph and Esther: the author of
the latter knew and meaningfully invoked the former throughout his telling of the Megillah.

Firmly situated in the growing field of biblical intertextuality, the present work strikes a
different chord on three important but also intertwined issues. While many learned and helpful
books in this growing subfield bring scores of intertextual examples from across the entirety of
biblical literature, this project has, in an effort to hone in more closely on the complexities of this
particular case, limited itself in the main just to the texts of Joseph and Esther; and in so doing,
the goal is to bring some of the more difficult theoretical underpinnings of such an endeavor into
sharper relief. Second, the argumentation presented here leans heavily upon and therefore
strongly encourages the importance of structural overlap, pushing past the oft-cited although
admittedly crucial similarities of language that fill the previous studies off of which the present
one builds. And third, the precisely defined focus of the evidence examined offers greater
diachronic and theological insight into the book of Esther; it therefore does not seek to explain
the development and hermeneutical techniques of all, or at least large swaths, of later biblical
literature.
Speaking then most directly to the interpretation of Esther and its placement in the canon, this dissertation offers a fresh take on the confusion and disputes that characterizes the scholarly conversation of these two issues. In proving that the author of Esther knew and continuously alluded to Joseph, it will be suggested that the Megillah most certainly presents itself as a key part of the developing literary and theological tradition of ancient Israel; and that any historically sensitive reading of this book must understand it as such. While such an approach in no way endorses reading God into the noticeable and suggestive absence, it does conclude that the patterns initiated by the divine in the past continue to influence and at times even control the present moment of the Megillah.
# Table of Contents

1. Acknowledgments........................................................................................................... vi

2. Introduction: Joseph, Esther, and The Limits of Biblical Intertextuality...................... 1

3. Chapter One: The History of the Relationship Between Joseph and Esther ................. 10

4. Chapter Two: Linguistic Similarity and Thematic Overlap........................................... 30

5. Chapter Three: The Paralleled Structures of Joseph and Esther................................. 49

6. Chapter Four: The Contrast of Daniel.......................................................................... 68

7. Chapter Five: Esther’s Audience.................................................................................. 85

8. Conclusion: Theological Implications......................................................................... 105

9. Bibliography................................................................................................................... 113
Acknowledgments

First and foremost I would like to thank my advisor, Professor Levenson, for his guidance over the past six years. His insightfulness led me to this fruitful topic, and while any lingering wrongheadedness most certainly reflects my own shortcomings, I must credit him for most every point of interest and breakthrough. I would also like to extend my gratitude to the other members of my dissertation committee, Professors D. Andrew Teeter and Bernd Schipper, for their helpfulness, encouragement, and energies.

Along the way I have benefitted from the counsel and wisdom of many graduate students, and three close colleagues stand out: to Jonathan Kline, Joanna Greenlee Kline, and Maria Metzler I express my appreciation for their continuing friendship. I would also like to acknowledge Joe Cook and Eva Misho in the NELC office for their good cheer and invaluable support throughout this process. And finally, to my family and friends I send my heartfelt thanks for sustaining me with love and laughs on this long, strange trip of graduate school.

G.F.H.
Cambridge, Mass.
July, 2016
Introduction: Joseph, Esther, and The Limits of Biblical Intertextuality

When considering the similarities between Joseph and Esther, two foundational difficulties emerge. The first is historical in nature, and probes into the diachronic conclusions that can be drawn from synchronic evidence: Even if a relative dating between two biblical texts can be firmly fixed, how can it be proven on historical grounds that the earlier text was available to the later author? The second is more theoretical, and pushes at a different but equally sensitive spot: How and when can the literary and thematic affinities across diachronically distinct texts speak to a particular author’s intention? That the biblical scholar must consistently deal with the frustrating and potentially troubling combination and intersection of such issues makes the endeavor all the more challenging.

While this dissertation makes no claim of theoretical breakthrough, three important pieces of its argumentation are designed to confront such difficulties directly to navigate through them effectively. The first emphasizes the significance of structural parallels between Joseph and Esther. Easing the burden on the striking but potentially quite misleading similarities of language and theme,\(^1\) this consideration offers a crucial support to the main argument of this dissertation: that the author of Esther knew and purposefully invoked the Joseph story throughout his telling of the Megillah. The second point addresses the author of Esther’s hermeneutical stance toward the story of Joseph: something more than just culturally current but not yet quite canonically

---

\(^1\) Many scholars have discussed and theorized about the dangers of drawing historical conclusions from textual similarities, and nearly every book or article devoted to biblical intertextuality includes some discussion of this point. See, for example, Benjamin Sommer’s discussion of this problem in his book, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 6–31; but as I will draw out in this introduction, his learned remarks about literary theory do not seem to inform his more specific argumentation and conclusions. For a more sustained interaction with these issues, see Richard Hays’ influential book, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 1–33, which wrestles more consistently with this foundational tension.
authoritative, Esther’s sustained dialogue with Joseph suggests that the Joseph story had a particularly poignant meaning for the author and original audience of the Megillah. And finally, only a limited number of examples of linguistic, thematic, and structural similarity will be brought forward, as each individual point will be required to stand on its own merit. For instead of trying to prove one borderline case by appealing to another, this dissertation seeks to bring together a collection of individually compelling points.

Approaches to author-oriented biblical intertextuality, however, have not always followed such organizing principles, as efforts to traverse these theoretical and historical tensions have made claims of specific and historical influence across wide arrays of biblical and even rabbinic literatures. William Kynes’ essay, “Job and Isaiah 40–55: Intertextualities in Dialogue,” presents one such example. Suggesting that he has found a functionally helpful and methodologically sound way to employ the synchronic for the diachronic, to make the later biblical shape speak to specific developments that occurred in previous time and space, Kynes astutely points out how the canonical can in fact shed light on the historical. “In this essay,” he begins with an admirable honesty and boldness, “I will put diachronic and synchronic approaches to intertextuality into dialogue in order to demonstrate how they can together contribute to pushing beyond a scholarly impasse and providing new exegetical insight” (94). He continues to lay out his conception of the problem.

2 The two most important and oft-cited books on this topic show the breadth of its reach: Michael Fishbane, Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel (New York: Clarendon Press, 1985), has found this process all throughout the Hebrew Bible; and Daniel Boyarin, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), has used it to explain nearly the whole of the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael.

At least in biblical studies, the concept of intertextuality, despite the objections of some, has developed into an umbrella term encompassing any connection between texts. Within this broader understanding, two approaches have developed, one primarily interested in the intentions of authors, and therefore attending to the relative dates of texts, and the other largely unconcerned with these questions since it considers texts part of an infinite web of meaning to be untangled by the reader. Whereas diachronic approaches read texts in a historical sequence, synchronic ones enable the reader to interpret texts simultaneously, irrespective of their places in history. The two approaches have been set in direct opposition to one another so that, in the words of one scholar, they are “separated by an unbridgeable chasm.” That may be true of their most extreme forms, but, in fact, synchronic and diachronic concerns have always been intertwined in critical reading of the Bible, and the same can be the case in intertextuality. (94)

But while this study of Joseph and Esther also sees synchronic and diachronic evidence as inherently intertwined, it will ultimately relate these distinct considerations in a different way: by relying on structural similarities, this dissertation seeks to avoid putting too much weight on specific exegetical positions. For the problem of such a practice becomes clear when Kynes uses Terrien’s criteria — that the external coherence of an allusion, “how it relates to the context from which it came” (97), can determine the direction of that allusion — to suggest that Job was alluding to Second Isaiah, even though Terrien had used his own criteria to reach the exact opposite conclusion. Such instability must be noted, and until Kynes can demonstrate the strength of a methodology that generates directly contradictory results, his suggestion — “this study has demonstrated how synchronic and diachronic concerns may be mutually beneficial in the discussion of intertextual connections in the HB” (104) — must be deferred.

This effort to develop a historically reliable and theoretically defensible way to relate two diachronically distinct biblical texts also responds to the recent and influential work of Benjamin Sommer, who, having limited his attention to linguistic and thematic considerations, finds
himself in the uncomfortable position of appealing to the slipperiness of cumulative reasoning. “More important than these case-by-case disquisitions,” he writes,

is an implicit cumulative argument that emerges from my work as a whole. If I find one or two cases in which an allusion occurs in a section regarded by others as a hodgepodge of fragments, one might view my findings as coincidental; that is, one might contend that the verses in question do not — indeed cannot — contain extended references to an earlier text. But if I find scores of such borrowings, and if they display consistent patterns in their reuse of older material, then the notion that all these cases result from happenstance becomes untenable; the repeated occurrence of a single type of borrowing validates my presumption that the passages in which they occur are unified compositions.⁴

But any mathematician knows that the basing of one probable claim on another often does not increase the probability of the original proposition, and this unsteady principle is then employed to prove another less than coherent point — that opposite textual characteristics actually indicate the same result. For when analyzing the connection between Jer 29:4–6 and Is 65:18–23, Sommer suggests that it is the identical order of the invoked words that proves the intentionality of this relationship; but just a few pages later, when arguing for a specific connection between Is 42:5–9 and Jer 31:31–36, he leans on the split-up of the repeated words to prove his point.⁵ This weakness, one that runs throughout Sommer’s reading of Second Isaiah, highlights how approaches to author-oriented biblical intertextuality are best served to consider each example on its own to help prevent running the risk of circular textual arguments and unstable diachronic conclusions.

For at the center of Sommer’s argument for Second Isaiah’s allusiveness stands an undocumented historical assumption concerning the compositional history of Isaiah 40–66. And

⁴ Sommer, A Prophet Reads Scripture, 5.
⁵ These two interpretations are found on pages 42 and 48, respectively, of Sommer’s book.
against the current of modern scholarship, Sommer argues that this complex textual unit actually ought to be understood as the work of one man’s pen.

My approach to prophetic texts differs from that of many contemporary scholars. Where some of my colleagues detect composite writings and evidence of scribal hands spread over diverse periods, I usually find unified poems; where others sense a need to read several short pericopes atomistically, I encounter longer, highly integrated units. This tendency is evident in my conclusion that Isaiah 40-66 forms a single corpus, probably by one author. (4)

But his preference to encounter unified poems throughout Isaiah 40–66 no more proves the single authorship of this text than tradition’s understanding of Mosaic authorship proves the unity of the Pentateuch; as even the precursors to historical criticism intimated long ago, the tendencies of later readers is a far cry from evidence for the particular compositional histories of the texts themselves. The historical rejoinder stings in response: multiple authors can create a text just as unified as one person can create it disjointed; and by the same token, the overwhelming majority of a tradition is just as likely as one dissenting individual to read a disjointed set of texts as unified.

If Sommer’s work wobbles on its penchant for cumulative reasoning and inability to disentangle synchronic considerations from diachronic conclusions, then Richard Hays’ learned book on Paul’s usage of Scripture stumbles on its inconsistently applied historical principles. This unevenness comes to the fore when Hays develops his criteria for determining diachronic dependence. Arguing that Paul may not have been specifically indebted to the rabbinic culture that his breathtaking experience on the road to Damascus so compelled him to leave, Hays appeals to a strikingly high bar to free the great apostle from the Judaism that surrounded him:
any claim for source or influence, Hays suggests, is often misleading without documentable lines of historical dependence.

Rabbinic Judaism, no less than early Christianity, represents (along with the Qumran community and Philo’s scholastic Alexandrian Judaism, inter alia), [sic] one of several different adaptations of the religious and cultural heritage represented by Israel’s Scriptures. These different adaptations should be studied, at least initially, as parallel phenomena, related but distinct dispositions of that heritage. To argue that one of these phenomena represents a source or influence for another is likely to be misleading unless some documentable lines of historical dependence can be demonstrated.⁶

But in short order Hays comes awfully close to sidestepping the same high historical bar he has here just invoked. For when he turns to discuss the development of Old Testament literature, Hays embraces a form of inner-biblical exegesis that makes specific claims of source and influence, even though the desired lines of historical dependence are not usually able to be demonstrated. “The phenomenon of intertextuality — the imbedding of fragments of an earlier text within a later one,” Hays writes, just starting to inch away from the stricter standard he developed above,

has always played a major role in the cultural traditions that are heir to Israel’s Scriptures: the voice of Scripture, regarded as authoritative in one way or another, continues to speak in and through later texts that both depend on and transform the earlier. Such intertextual processes do not begin only with the formal closure of the canon. Renee Bloch’s seminal studies of midrash articulated an insight that has now been elegantly documented by Michael Fishbane in *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*: the revisionary hermeneutical operations that later came to be called midrash were already manifest in the work of the writers of the biblical texts, who collected, interpreted, and transmuted still earlier texts and traditions.

To read Paul against this background of “inner-biblical exegesis” is to understand his place in the stream of tradition in a new way. He saw himself as a prophetic figure, carrying forward the proclamation of God’s word as Israel’s prophets and sages had always done, in a way that reactivated past revelation under new conditions. (14)

---

But Bloch and Fishbane’s work do not demand of the Bible what Hays demanded of midrash; it is Hays’ own demand for documentable lines of historical dependence that opens up theories of inner-biblical exegesis to such deep lines of doubt and interrogation. For even when a relative dating for two Old Testament texts can be fixed, what sort of specifically historical evidence, Hays’ strong diachronic standard would ask, suggests that an earlier Hebrew Bible text was available to a later Old Testament author? If it is known that Paul more often than not used some version of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, Hays’ high historical bar would suggestively query, then what version of the earlier Hebrew Bible text was the later Old Testament author reading and referencing? And such a line of thinking could even continue: if Paul was quite clear about his usage of Scripture, then why did the later Old Testament authors chose not to cite explicitly the sources they wove into their texts? The point is not to imply such considerations to undermine the entire field of inner-biblical exegesis, but rather to show how any methodology that uses history to doubt the rabbis’ influence over Paul must doubt any specific relationship between P and D all the more.

An awareness of these foundational insecurities, and a concerted attempt to avoid them, in no way positions this study above the uncomfortable fray of relying on synchronic evidence to prove a specific historical conclusion. It does, however, inform and shape the particular arguments that follow. In the first chapter, a review of the literature concerning this relationship will be offered. For even though there has not yet been a comprehensive discussion of this issue, a number of important and diverse positions have been proposed concerning the relationship between the story of Joseph and book of Esther. The second chapter will present three extended examples of literary and thematic overlap between the texts; and at this point, the major
argument will begin to clarify: these sorts of similarity begin to suggest that the author of Esther knowingly and purposefully alluded to and engaged with the story of Joseph. The third chapter, by highlighting the paralleled structures of the two stories, will work to confirm this position.

The fourth chapter will bring the unique expression of this relationship into sharper relief, as portions of the book of Daniel will be examined as a point of comparison. For even though the court stories of the Daniel 1–6 also use similar language to express similar themes, the obvious structural disjunctions found in this book prevent the linguistic similarities and thematic overlaps from ringing as loudly or extending as deeply. And in the fifth and final chapter, Esther’s original audience will be discussed, and the different layers of meaning inside of the Megillah unpacked.

By the end, this study will offer a firm conclusion. The deep lines of contact between these two stories, and their multi-faceted expressions, suggest that Joseph was part of Esther’s historical context; and that important points of literary and theological nuance come out most clearly when the Megillah is read against Joseph’s relief. The recurring patterns, and their continuous ricochets, bring this point into sharpest focus. Joseph, a handsome Israelite in a foreign land, uses his peculiar favor to rise to power in Egypt; Esther, a beautiful Jewish young woman, uses her particularly good looks to come to the seat of royalty in the Persian court. As Joseph uses his authority to navigate a dangerous moment of famine and reunite himself with his estranged family, so does Esther skillfully wield her influence to curb Haman’s rising stature and defeat her people’s powerful enemies. The major implication of such a reading is as crucial as it is subtle. For even though Esther seems to stand outside the general lines of that uniquely biblical movement of *Heilsgeschichte*, the Megillah is, like the Joseph story, a distinct voice in the literary and theological tradition of ancient Israel. And appreciating these links in a
historically sensitive way, and then interpreting them with theoretical and theological sophistication, will be the focus of the rest of this dissertation.
Chapter One: The History of the Relationship Between Joseph and Esther

Even though scholars generally speaking agree on the existence and direction of a relationship between Joseph and Esther, fundamental questions concerning the intentionality, purpose, and implications of this textual association remain. The history of the scholarly interest into these connections begins in 1895, when Ludwig Rosenthal, in a clever and concise article, detailed a number of linguistic similarities found in Joseph, Esther, and also the book of Daniel.⁷ Focusing mainly on Joseph and Esther, he notes how the opening banquet in Esther, משתהעשהועבדיוולכל(Esth 1:3), reminds of the language used for the Pharaoh’s birthday party, והꝣםأشياءועבדיוולכל(Gen 40:20); how Joseph’s repeated refusals to Mrs. Potiphar’s advances, ויהיאליהשמעולאיוםיוסףאלכדברה(Gen 39:10), seems to be invoked by the language used for Mordecai’s repeated refusals to bow down to Haman, (Esth 3:4) (278–79). He points out that just as the king and his ministers are pleased in Esth 1:21, ייטבוהשריםהמלךבעיניהדבר, so are the Pharaoh and his advisors pleased in Gen 41:37, ייטבוהשריםבעיניהןכהמן; that just as Joseph recommends that the Pharaoh appoint overseers over the land of Egypt so that the grain can be gathered to stave off the famine...andscapeקדיםעלהארץויפקד, so is Ahasuerus advised to appoint officers over the land of Persia so that beautiful maidens can be gathered to begin the search for a new queen, מבוגרהתמהשלמלכותכלؤمنהבעיניהםמראת(Gen 41:34–35), so is Ahasuerus advised to appoint.

Such connections also extend to the book of Daniel. Much like the language used to explain the appearances of the cows in Pharaoh’s dream, יظهورמהריהובשר (Gen 41:2), so are

the handsome appearances of Daniel and his companions expressed in very similar terms, מראיהם (Dan 1:15) (279–80). And such correspondences are also to be found between Esther and Daniel:

Wollen wir noch an einander anklingende Einzelheiten erwähnen, so fällt die ähnliche Art auf, mit der Daniel und Mardechai in die Erzählung eingeführt werden. Letzterer mit den Worten (Esth 2:5ff): אשר יהודה מלך יכניה עם המלחמה אשר הגלה עם מירושלים הגלה אשר יהודי איש נבוכדנצר; so wird (Dan 1:1ff) Daniels Gefangennahme zusammen mit dem Falle Jojakims vor Nebuchadnezzar erwähnt, und Belsazar sagt ganz ähnlich: אתה הוא יהודה וי יוהו יהוה מלכים אボ פון יהודה (Dan 5:13). (282)

That he first turns to the book of Daniel midway through his already brief article suggests that for Rosenthal the relationship between Joseph and Esther maintains pride of position. “Da mir Daniel nur als drittes Glied in der Kette des Vergleichs dienen kann, so komme ich erst hier dazu, die oben noch nicht erwähnten Wahrnehmungen— sie hätten sich ohne Verwirrung dort nicht anbringen lassen — nun anzuführen” (281). And while I will follow Rosenthal’s lead and continuously stress the unique character of the relationship between Joseph and Esther, I will also, however, seek to refine his position concerning Daniel. Since important structural differences found in this late book prevent the admittedly present similarities of language and theme from sounding as loudly in or exerting such influence over the plot developments of the court narratives, Daniel’s relationship to both Joseph and Esther is best understood not as the third link in this chain but rather as indicative of a different strand of comparison altogether.

That Rosenthal then seeks to explain these linguistic features with the now outdated ideas of 19th century philology hampers him from adequately exploring many of the connections he so incisively brings to light. Working under the assumption that biblical Hebrew was no longer a living language by the time these later books were written, a position modern research has by
now roundly discredited, Rosenthal suggests that all of the many affinities he raises reflect a
linguistic necessity. “Hier hätten wir also einen Beleg dafür vor uns, dass man für die
Darstellung späterer Verhältnisse, weil die Sprache nicht mehr lebendig war, die Erzählungen der
alten Bücher der Bibel zum Vorbild genommen hat” (284).

If Rosenthal is at least correct to see a clear purpose behind the complex connections in
the texts, then Moshe Gan, writing some 60 years later, strangely stumbles on this very issue. “It
is clear,” he concludes, “that the author of the Megillah was influenced, consciously or
unconsciously, by the story of Joseph in Genesis, and that he built his story with the inspiration
of the story there.” This hesitation, however, is all the more surprising given Gan’s suggestive
argumentation: pushing Rosenthal’s work beyond the philological to include also the thematic,
Gan elegantly draws out deep-seated parallels in the plot developments of both Joseph and
Esther.

Perhaps his most incisive analysis points out how the rise of the protagonists in each
story is the culmination of a series of upward and downward movements, ירדות, יעלה (145). More specifically, this larger framework of “rising, falling, rising” manifests itself
in both stories through banquets attended by invited guests who do not know their hosts’ true
motivations (147). The obvious examples are the brothers’ attendance at Joseph’s banquet in
Genesis 43 and the first banquet Esther requests in Esther 5: the brothers enter the vizier’s house
without even knowing that Joseph is hosting them, let alone what his motivations might be;

---

8 For a more up-to-date treatment of the history and development of classical Hebrew, see, for example,
History of Judaism, Vol 1, ed. W.S. Davies and Louis Finkelstein (Cambridge,: Cambridge University

completely unaware of Esther’s intention to trap him at her banquet and finger him as the guilty author of that terrible edict, Haman comes to Esther’s party puffed up by the illusion of his own high status.

Gan’s analysis not only recognizes the similarities found in these two banquets, but also brings out points of contact in their aftermaths. In the Joseph story the brothers leave the vizier’s banquet surprisingly happy and relieved, only to be surprised yet again. Overtaken by Joseph’s accusing servant, they are forced back to Egypt despite their innocence (Gen 44:6–13). And in a story of ups and downs this point is certainly one of the lowest, but it is exactly this deepest fall that then engenders their next and steepest rise. For upon their return to Egypt, Joseph loses that steely self-control (Gen 45:1), finally identifies himself to his brothers, and thus begins the most improbable process of familial reunification in Egypt.

In the Megillah, as Gan points out, the movement is equally topsy-turvy. When Haman is on his way home, happy and drunk after the first banquet that Esther had requested, he sees Mordecai refusing to bow down to him, sending the Persian prime minister into a fury fit for a man of his infamously weak character. After somehow managing to control himself when immediately faced with such disrespect (Esth 5:10), Haman waits until he has made it home before divulging his rage against Mordecai to his wife and friends. And how ironic it is that they, while seeking to raise him up even further, actually seal his own death. Recommending he erect a stake on which to impale Mordecai, they tell the enraged prime minister to approach the king immediately to seek royal favor for his wrongheaded plan (Esth 5:11-14). That Mordecai is honored (Esth 6:10-11) and Haman eventually impaled on that same stake (Esth 7:9-10) highlights the long reach of Gan’s insightful point: the banquets in both stories, thrown for
motivations that remain unknown to their attendees, facilitate the rising and falling action that is so characteristic of and crucial to both stories. And against the backdrop of his own forceful argumentation, his cautious hesitancy concerning the intentionality of this multi-layered relationship seems to fall short of effectively dealing with the complex evidence he himself presents.

* *

Shemaryahu Talmon, writing just two years after Gan, takes a completely different approach. Arguing strenuously for connections between Esther and the wisdom tradition, he cites Gerhard von Rad to conclude that this genre consideration best explains the relationship between Joseph and Esther.

But what is more important, they can be shown to belong basically to one literary type. In a most instructive paper G. von Rad recently has brought to light the exceedingly strong wisdom elements in the Joseph-story. He has proved for this composition, what we set out to do for the Esther-narrative, namely that in essence the Joseph-story illustrates the realization of wisdom precepts in practical life. Thus both the Joseph-story and the Esther-narrative represent the type of the ‘historicized wisdom-tale’. Their similarities therefore are to be accounted for not only by their probable interdependence but also by their dependence upon one common literary tradition.10

The problem with this sort of argumentation, however, is that neither Esther nor Joseph belong as cleanly to the wisdom genre as Talmon and von Rad would want to have it. This is in no way, however, to dismiss the insights of Talmon’s position; he is certainly correct to note that elements of wisdom are to be found in the Megillah. And his strongest point identifies links between Mordecai and Haman and the archetype of the court-scribe in the wisdom tradition.

The typical product of wisdom education is the court-scribe, the adviser of kings, whose metier may take him to foreign countries and may bring him into contact with foreign

cultures. His loyalty is to his master whosoever he may be. The counselor is a professional expert unfettered by national allegiances. His main concern is with the proper execution of his functions at court which may be as manifold as is multicolored court-life. In preparation for his tasks he must have acquired a thorough knowledge of court etiquette. He must possess administrative abilities to cope with sundry problems which do not differ essentially from realm to realm. Now both Mordecai and Haman admirably fit this pattern. (434)

If he convinces here, then he starts to lose his stride when trying to assert that the characters in Esther display a sort of one-dimensional nature that expresses certain values usually associated with the wisdom tradition.

Esther and Mordecai contrast Haman not only in their roles of true sages, but also in their capacities as representatives of 'goodness'. Theirs is not the goodliness of absolute morality. Such a concept would not square with the type of wisdom exemplified in the story. Their virtues become apparent in the subjection of their private interests to the requirements of the communal weal, whereas Haman was prepared to sacrifice a nation in order to satisfy his personal hatred of one man. The “evil Haman” (Esth 7:6) whose intentions are vile (ib. 8:4; 9:24) is opposed by Mordecai whom all his brothers welcome and who "seeks good for his people" (ib. 10:3). The victory of Mordecai and Esther over Haman is a double score: the sage vanquished the apparent wise, and the goodly-just the evildoer. (448)

Ironically, his own argumentation undercuts his position and suggests the problematic overstatement. For as long as Talmon holds that the wisdom of the two protagonists comes out most strongly through their dedication to a greater good sometimes even at the expense of their selfish desires, then he must, in fact, implicitly recognize the crucial role that Esther and Mordecai’s developments play throughout the story — developments that push against any stereotypical or one-dimensional understanding of these subtly complex characters. The most salient example of this all-important dynamic comes in Esther 4. When Mordecai first asks Esther to approach the king, the good of her people is the last thing from her mind (Esth 4:8–11), and it is exactly this very selfish impulse that Mordecai must work to cut through in their famous
dialogue. “Do not imagine,” Mordecai begins with a palpable urgency, “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” (Esth 4:13–14). That Mordecai must appeal to her own safety in his effort to convince her to act on behalf of her people underscores the point: not inclined to use her position of influence for a greater good, Esther must develop into the wise and courageous queen she becomes.

This most important scene does not then express the sort of moral lesson that comes with more staid characters and storylines, or the instructions associated with the more traditional wisdom of aphoristic sayings — always approach a king if your people need you to — but rather an idea more sensitive to and dependent upon the particularities of Esther’s strange circumstance. Once a pretty and obedient young maiden relatively unaware of the ways and dangers of the outside and foreign world, she transforms herself — and the story — into an active character worthy of her royal epithet and people’s trust. That Talmon’s interpretation misses this point, choosing rather to highlight the static traits of the characters’ natures at the expense of their dynamism, does not take away from the presence and importance of the wisdom features that he does correctly identify in the book of Esther; but it does suggest that the Megillah cannot be fully encapsulated with any one genre or typological designation that does not allow for the subtle but crucial transformations of character and story to come out strongly and clearly.

Opening Talmon up to a second theater of critique, Arndt Meinhold brings attention to Talmon’s complete dependence on von Rad.

Given his reservation concerning Talmon’s suggestion, it is curious to notice that so much of Meinhold’s interpretation is dedicated to the same kind of program. Also for Meinhold, Joseph and Esther belong to the same literary genre, but instead of wisdom literature he chooses a more structural designation — the \textit{Diasporanovelle}. And if Talmon goes about trying to prove his point through a thematic-based analysis, Meinhold offers a formal one: both plots are made up of a series of nearly identical stages. And after finding twelve in common, albeit in different orders, Meinhold suggests that in this case the sums do in fact equal their parts.

Both stories begin with a \textit{Vorgeschichte}, a sort of introduction that prepares the terrain for the whole story (I, 311; II, 76). This \textit{Vorgeschichte} then leads, more or less directly, to the small \textit{Aufstiegsbericht}, in which the origins for Esther and Joseph’s favor and overall successes come to the fore (I, 315-16; II, 78–79). In both stories, Meinhold notes, the difficulties for the protagonists start to add up: Mrs. Potiphar approaches and then slanders Joseph, and an intensifying famine is soon to bring the threat of starvation; Haman devises his murderous plan, and then slyly convinces the king to authorize it as the unchangeable law of the empire. The main characters must then act to fight off these real and terrible possibilities: the cupbearer remembers Joseph at exactly the right moment, and Joseph comes before the Pharaoh to interpret...
the foreign ruler’s dreams; after her initial hesitation, Mordecai convinces Esther to approach the king at exactly the right moment, and Ahasueros receives her favorably to swing the plot and its momentum back in the Jews’ favor (I, 316; II, 82). And with a few more bumps along the way, the main characters — Esther, Mordecai, and Joseph — are then all raised in foreign governments, finally delivering their people from the potentially devastating danger they have been facing (I, 318–20; II, 82–83, 86–87).

It is then in these denouements that Meinhold sees the major difference between the Joseph story and Esther book. The universalistic tendency of Joseph, as the story ends with both the Israelites and Egyptians being delivered from the danger of the famine, is to be distinguished from the overwhelming emphasis on the particular found in the book of Esther.


And according to Meinhold, it is this very concern for כל הארץ that pushes against von Rad’s reading of Joseph.

Fragt man nach dem weiteren alttestamentlichen Kontext, in dem eine solche theologische Grundhaltung einen Platz haben könnte, dann wird man eher in die Nähe der Propheten als in die Weisheit gelangen…Mir schient, daß die Theologie der Josephsgeschichte Beziehungen zu Dtjes hat, freilich mehr als Spannung denn als parallele Entsprechung oder direkte Abhängigkeit. (I, 322)

¹² For Meinhold’s argument concerning the secularly particularistic nature of Esther, see “Die Gattung,” II, 89-93.
If Meinhold is correct, and von Rad’s stricter wisdom designation does not, in fact, adequately reckon with other possible influences on and contexts for the complex messages of the Joseph story, then his suggestion that this theme of universalism can be abstracted out of the Joseph story to be then compared against Esther is equally indicative of a flawed approach — his overly rigid exegetical approach. For by examining each stage on its own, he overlooks an important irony embedded in the interaction of these different constituent parts of the Joseph story: it is true that the Egyptians are only able to stay alive because of Joseph’s prescient food-saving plan, but they also must enslave themselves to Pharaoh as a result of this policy — a reversal of fates that was certainly not lost on the earliest audiences. If von Rad overstates the links in Joseph to the wisdom tradition, then it seems to be Meinhold’s attention only to the structural that causes him also to overlook how Joseph’s interaction with the Fremdvolk still expresses this particular Israelite slant. It is then not that there is no universalizing impulse in Joseph, but rather that this admittedly present tendency cuts in multiple and at times even conflicting directions, once again limiting the reach and accuracy of any genre designation that is directly dependent on it.

*  

Apparently unconvinced by the instructive advances in Talmon and Meinhold’s work, Sandra Beth Berg, writing in the late 1970’s, echoes Gan’s earlier equivocation on the intentionality of this relationship. But strangely enough, she suggests that this potentially unintentional relationship may also have been interpretive. “Whether intended by Esther’s author or not,” she writes, “the story’s ancient audience undoubtedly was reminded of the earlier story.
The Book of Esther thus presents, in some sense, a reinterpretation of the Joseph story. Such a peculiar stance, however, quickly runs into problems. Viewing the points of contact between the two stories as evidence of Esther interpreting Joseph, but perhaps not in a specifically intentional way, she falls to a more simplistic explanation of lining up paralleled scenes in a direct, one-to-one fashion.

The two eunuchs in the Joseph story play a significant role, while they are of minor importance in Esther. In Genesis, Joseph’s ability to interpret the eunuchs’ dreams anticipates Joseph’s subsequent explanation of Pharaoh’s dreams. Joseph’s success at dream interpretations demonstrates that he ironically lives up to the contemptuous nickname given by his brothers, “lord of dreams.” The account of the two eunuchs in the Joseph story functions as an integral part of a dream motif which pervades the story. (126)

While this strategy does correctly find an echo in Esther 2, it brings with it the misguided expectation that the roles of both scenes in their respective narrative developments should also somehow correspond exactly.

By contrast, Esth 2:21–23 plays a less significant role in the tale. The primary function of this notice is to allow Haman to honor Mordecai in Esther 6. This reward in turn presages the change in fortune of the Jewish people. Following the brief notice of their conspiracy, the eunuchs inconspicuously drop out of the story; they are executed two verses after their introduction into the account. Joseph’s successful interpretation of dreams leads directly to his promotion at court. Mordecai, however, remains “at the king’s gate” following his discovery of the eunuchs’ plot against Ahasueros. He is elevated to a position of power at court only after Esther informs Ahasueros of Mordecai’s relationship to her. (126–27)

But simply that the eunuchs’ dropping out of the story in Esther can be contrasted with their continued presence in Joseph in no way suggests a lesser importance for the scene in the Megillah. That Berg also appears to notice this, as it seems unlikely that she really wants to diminish the importance of the “change in fortune of the Jewish people,” betrays the deeper

---

methodological flaw in her too straightforward positioning of the issue. Constrained then by her own off-balance approach — one that sees the connections as interpretive but perhaps not intentionally so — she fails to deal with the complex way the author of Esther interacted with the Joseph story: interweaving and invoking the larger developments of the entire Joseph story that then come to bounce their way across the whole of the Megillah.

*

In much the same way that there is general agreement about the existence of this relationship but lingering confusion concerning its markers, content, and character, so also is there basic consensus concerning the relative dating of these two texts but some points of discord concerning the specifics of each. The parameters of this debate, especially for the Megillah, are as uninteresting as they are clear: Ahasueros is generally understood as Xerxes, who sat on the Persian throne from 486–465 BCE, forcing the date of Esther to be no earlier than 450 BCE or so; the story of Joseph, on the other hand, is usually assumed to have been completed before 500 BCE, in large part to accommodate its inclusion in the Priestly organization of the Pentateuch. Since then the dating of the Joseph story is often tied into larger models for the composition of the entire Torah, the dating of Esther is a much more straightforward affair.

Adele Berlin finds many parallels, in particular the humorously sardonic depiction of the Persian court, in Greek comedies, and accordingly dates Esther to the late Achamenid or early Hellenistic period — sometime between 400–300 BCE.\(^\text{14}\) She then looks to the cultural context of the book, and how it would have been received by its original audience, to conclude that later in the Persian period is the most likely date for the composition of Esther.

Several phrases hint that the story was written some time after the events that it purports to recount, that is, after the time of Xerxes I (485–465 B.C.E.), but that could still be during the Persian period. To the extent that Esther is a burlesque of the Persian court, it makes sense to date the story to the Persian period, for a burlesque would be less effective after the Persian empire ceased to exist. The worldview portrayed, in which the Jews are ultimately safe and successful in the Diaspora, suggests a time before the Maccabean revolt (in 167 B.C.E.). The book does not evince any antagonism toward Hellenistic culture, as one would expect if it had been written in Hellenistic times.

The proposed date for Esther coincides with the flowering of the Greek works on Persia, composed in the fifth-fourth centuries B.C.E (a few later authors, like Plutarch, Diodorus, and Quintus Curtius, drew extensively on the earlier Greek authors). Indeed, the author of Esther seems to have been very familiar with the kinds of stories and motifs that occur in the Greek writings about Persia during the Persian period, and that may have been conventional literary fare at the time. (xlii)

In fact in 1971, Carey Moore had already proposed a very similar dating, even though he comes at the issue from a slightly different angle. Looking to points of disjunction between the books of Esther and Daniel with respect to the attitudes toward foreign kings, Moore concludes that Esther must have been earlier than the latter half of Daniel and therefore before the Hasmonean period.

While 400 to 114 B.C. seem to be the extreme limits for the first and final editions of Esther, it is most likely that Esther reached its final form in either the late Persian or early Hellenistic Period; but in any case, long before Daniel reached its final form. The principal reason for this is the more sympathetic attitude in Esther toward a “Gentile” king. To be sure, the stories in Dan i-vi reflect a somewhat sympathetic attitude toward Gentile kings, but the visions of Daniel (vii–xii) clearly reflect the negative attitudes and situation of the early Maccabean Period when Judas Maccabeus (167–161 B.C.) had to contend against the Seleucian king Antiochus IV, Epiphanies (175–163) for religious freedom. Not could one characterize the relations of his brothers Jonathan (161-143) and Simon (143–135) with Gentile kings as cordial or sympathetic. Yet in the final form of Esther the Gentile king is not unsympathetically treated: Xerxes had been misled by Haman, a trusted adviser (iii 8–11); Xerxes ultimately supported the Jewish people (viii 7–8), and rightfully prospered with the advice and help of his prime minister Mordecai (x 1–2). Such a view is quite possible for a Jewish writer in the Persian Period (539–332),
but less appropriate in the Hellenistic Period (331–168), and highly unlikely in the Maccabean Period (167–135).\(^{15}\)

This very direct reasoning, however, can unfortunately not be applied to the Joseph story. Arguing against any sort of classical source critical analysis of Joseph, Claus Westermann suggests that the story actually breaks down along a different axis: the Joseph narrative proper is to be limited to Genesis 37, 39–45, while chapters 46-50 actually belong to the conclusion of the Jacob cycle. And since this more refined Joseph section is for Westermann so preoccupied with the question of the monarchy — ought one brother to rule over the others? — he dates the story to the very early time of David and Solomon.

The construction shows that the Joseph story itself [Gen 37, 39–45] is a unity. The two large expansions, chs. 39–41, and 42–45, together with the buildup of the tension by means of the two journeys, chs. 42 and 43–45, reveals the plan of an artist. The plan would be destroyed by division into two sources. The duple construction is the result of reflection which brings the family life-style into relationship with that of the monarchical state. It corresponds to two paths which the history of Israel has followed, that of the patriarchal period and that of the beginning of the monarchy. The transition to the monarchy was accompanied by the question, May and ought a brother rule over his brothers (37:8)? One line of thought in Israel, critical of the monarchy, passionately denied this. It is this question, hotly disputed at the time, that lies behind the binary aspect of the Joseph story. Something must be said about it here in the context of the patriarchal story. It is to be noted that the Joseph story presents the question of the relationship of the monarchy to the old order in narrative form. This presupposes a time when narrative was still of predominant importance as a form of tradition; the Joseph story also presupposes an obvious proximity to the patriarchal stories into which it was inserted. Hence it is more likely that the story had its origin in the period of David and Solomon than in the 6th or 5th centuries.\(^{16}\)

David Carr also thinks that the dating of Joseph hinges on its attitude toward the ancient Israelite monarchy. Suggesting that the Joseph story pushes back against the opposition that


arose in the north to the united kingdom, Carr proposes a dating for Joseph — save some
editorial remarks that were added in later by accretion — to the period of the early Northern
Kingdom. That he also, like Westermann, argues for a relatively early dating does not,
however, bring their larger compositional models any closer together. For if Westermann
maintains a divide after the end of Genesis 45, then Carr is much more likely to see the whole
story as more of a unity, with chapters 39 and 40-41 as the only preexisting blocks that were later
incorporated into the larger framework.

Rejecting Carr’s suggestion, Reinhard Kratz returns to Westermann’s proposed break
after Genesis 45 but also argues for a completely different textual development and history. With
much emphasis on the Jeremiah narratives that speak of Israelites heading south for Egypt in the
time leading up to the Babylonian exile, Kratz argues that this group of diaspora Israelites were
responsible for most of the Joseph story.

The basic stratum of Gen. 37–45 derives from a situation in which Israel and Judah are
living in the land, but the better part of Israel, the oldest son of beloved Rachel, who is
Israel’s favourite, has been sold by his own brothers into Egypt. That suggests rivalry.
The Israelites in the Diaspora feel written off by the “sons of Israel”, the Israelites in the
mother country, and Benjamin is caught between the two. Only Judah (later Reuben)
attempts to prevent the worst. Just as later parts of the book of Jeremiah (for example, Jer
24 and 29) and in Ezra-Nehemiah the Babylonians make themselves heard, so in the
Joseph story the Egyptian Diaspora makes itself heard and clearly indicates that there are
also Israelites outside Judah and the other territories in the land inhabited by Israelites:
Joseph in Egypt is not dead, as is said in the Jeremiah narratives, but alive.18

Kratz then goes on to suggest that the general shape of the story, given the crucial role it
plays in the final form of the Pentateuch, must have been completed before the Priestly Writings.

17 David M. Carr, Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches (Louisville:

Bowden (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 279.
In a way which differs from the exodus story, the original Joseph story makes it clear that Israel survived even in Egypt and gained great respect. A connection is obvious. Legends about the origin of Israel which were formerly contradictory were assimilated to one another in a way which made one the prehistory of the other. The move of Jacob-Israel, including Judah and all the other brothers, to Egypt in Gen. 46–50 serves this end. However, the material and the literary elaboration of the Yahwistic primal and patriarchal history, including the Joseph narrative, did not originally intend this combination. The *terminus ad quem* for the Joseph narrative is the Priestly Writing, which in 46.6–7 relates the later journey of Jacob to Egypt and thus seems to presuppose a connection — however loose — between the patriarchs and the exodus. (279)

And since Kratz puts the Priestly stratum at about 500 BCE, even this third and most creative compositional model upholds the consensus concerning the relative dating of Joseph and Esther.19

And while Joel Baden has rejected any attempt to relate the compositional makeup of the Pentateuch to its compositional history,20 his neo-documentarian approach to source criticism must also be here considered. Arguing firmly for nearly the entire Torah to be split up cleanly into the four classical documents, Baden finds strict source divisions inside the Joseph story as well. The well-rehearsed and more flagrant example in Genesis 37 serves as the opening example in his recent book on the subject,21 but his sharp eye for any sort of literary disjunction does not

19 Kratz, in an earlier section of the book, makes this point clear: “I therefore think it very probable that P could be put in the time around 500 BC (in Jerusalem)” (245–46).

20 He makes this point most clearly in the opening chapter of his strong defense of the documentary hypothesis. “We must be careful not to confuse the literary question with the historical one. Like thematic and stylistic considerations, the dating of the documents can be accomplished only after the sources have been isolated on other grounds. And at that point, the various datings of the documents have no effect on the literary analysis: if it could be demonstrated somehow that J is from the tenth century BCE and that P is from the third century BCE, while E is from the second millennium BCE and D was written during the Hoover administration, the literary evaluation of the text and its isolation of the sources on the grounds of narrative flow would be precisely the same. In this book, then, I will not discuss the dating of the documents. The separation of the literary analysis, on the grounds of narrative flow alone, from all other secondary considerations of the individual sources, be it theme, style, or potential historical setting, must be maintained if the analysis is to retain any degree of objectivity.” The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 31.

21 Ibid., 34-44.
stop there. Inserting a break at the end of Genesis 39, Baden’s program demands that Genesis 40–41 be attributed to the pen of the oft-questioned Elohist, but Genesis 42-45 to the Jahwist. 22

The issue at hand does not support nor critique Baden’s controversial work, but rather in pointing out how Esther’s interaction with Joseph spans across Baden’s proposed lines of division. For as the next chapter will demonstrate in greater detail, the interactions with the supposed J material in Genesis 43 and 44 are strong and literal: in Gen 43:14 Jacob, afraid of losing his son Benjamin but all the while knowing he must send him on that precarious journey south, exclaims with palpable fear, ובאשך天堂,天堂; and Esther, afraid for her own safety but still knowing she must risk her life by approaching Ahasueros unlawfully, exclaims with an equal amount of apprehension, והנערה אבדתי (Esth 4:16).

The similarities with Baden’s continuous, complete, and coherent literary document continue. In Esther 8 the queen herself conspicuously echoes Judah’s masterful speech to Joseph in Genesis 44. There the brothers, faced with that most awful reality of losing Benjamin, must appeal to the unrelenting vizier for clemency. The lot falls to Judah, and he makes his memorable move with stunning rhetoric: Asi, אני אחתי, אני אביך, אני אחתי, אני אביך (Gen 42:28).

---

22 In an effort to prove not only the existence but also the coherence of his E source, Baden writes, “This sentence from E [‘I was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews’ (Gen 40:15)] does not stand alone, of course, but is part of the larger unified narrative of Joseph interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh’s wine steward and baker, which occupies the entirety of Genesis 40. This story continues uninterrupted into Genesis 41” (Baden, Composition, 123). And his position on J’s authorship of Genesis 42-45 is also based on these narrative considerations. “The theme of recognition,” which Baden has just tied to his J strand running throughout Genesis, “noted already in 37:32 and 38:25, comes back in Joseph’s deception of his brothers in Genesis 42-45 (see especially and explicitly 42:7-8). Jacob’s attempts to spare Benjamin from traveling to Egypt in 42:3-4, 36-38 are dependent on his ostensible loss of Joseph in Genesis 37. Joseph’s dreams from 37:5-9 are recalled in 42:9. Judah’s role in bringing Benjamin to Joseph (43:8-10; 44:18-34) marks the reversal of his leading role in the sale of Joseph in 37:26-27. Joseph refers directly to his brothers’ selling of him in his self-revelation in 45:4. The brothers’ announcement in 45:26 of having found Joseph alive and Jacob’s reaction in 45:28 are a clear reversal of the end of Genesis 37. The remainder of J’s story of Joseph and Jacob follows in nearly perfect continuity and coherence” (73).
And in nearly identical fashion, so does Esther beg her husband also to do the impossible, to reverse the irreversible Persian law, with the exact same syntax: עשר באברהם אשר יאכלה אוכל וראיתי את עמי ואת כאברהםocabית (Esth 8:6).

And even though the similarities to the sections Baden ascribes to E do not stand out with such obviousness, the overlaps are still present, specific, and productive. After Joseph has interpreted the Pharaoh’s dream, a key feature, by the way, of his E source, the Egyptian ruler appoints the once-enslaved Israelite over all the land of Egypt; and in so doing, he gives Joseph his signet ring, יוסף יד על אתה ויתן ידו מעל טבעתו ואת פרעה ויסר (Gen 41:42). In much the same way, Ahasueros gives his royal jewel to Haman, after he too has been promoted to the very position Joseph inhabited — second-in-command over an entire foreign land. And the language here is once again nearly identical to the description found the Joseph: וס_projects את סכמתה מעל ידי ויתן את 이상 עלידי וסך (Esth 3:10).

The themes and structures undergirding these particular scenes are also equally intertwined. In much the same way that the Joseph story requires its protagonist’s rise, for it is only a result of his high position that he is able to reunite himself with the rest of his family while also keeping them all safe from the increasing danger of the famine, so does the Megillah also require its antagonist’s rise for the real movement to swing into action, as it is only after the evil Haman becomes prime minister that Mordecai and Esther are able to identify their prime enemy to vanquish him. And in much the same way that Joseph’s first real move of familial power is to test his brothers so harshly, making their and also his paths to reunification all the more complicated and painful, so is Haman’s opening play to engender the very people who will eventually defeat him so publicly.
That the very next few words of the Joseph story, which cement Joseph’s most unexpected rise to prominence, (Gen 41:42–43), are yet again echoed in the Megillah, this time invoked by Mordecai’s most unexpected and ironic rise at the hand of his arch-enemy, (Esth 6:11), completes the link between the Megillah and Baden’s proposed E text. And while this no more can be used to prove the source divisions mentioned than it can prioritize the original integrity of the final form, it does suggest that even if such source divisions are assumed, it still must be concluded that the author of Esther knew a version of the Joseph story that was very similar to if not identical with the one that later became canonical.

That there is an undeniable relationship between these two texts, and that Esther seems most certainly to have been written after the Joseph story was composed, suggests the direction this study will follow. To signal its argumentation and anticipate its conclusions once again, but this time more specifically: as three examples of linguistic and thematic similarity to be explored in the next chapter will show, the intricate and sustained connections to Joseph strongly push toward a meaningful interaction between the two texts. And as chapters three and four will bring out, that these reused words and overlapped themes also come together in deeply related structures pushes toward a specific purpose: the overwhelming connections do not ring of interpretation, but rather reveal how repetition can yield novelty, that the same words and ideas can be put together in different ways to explain a similar but ultimately distinct and new moment.
Since the Megillah is most specifically dedicated to articulating and explaining this particular circumstance, a point addressed in the fifth and final chapter, it is then not formally necessary to hear and appreciate these not always so subtle hints to Joseph placed throughout Esther in order to understand the basic story of Esther or its major messages. This point cuts as much against the grain of the current state of intertextual approaches in biblical studies as it is crucial for the line of argumentation followed here. For it is not simply that readers for centuries have read and made good sense of the book of Esther without always thinking of its connections to Joseph, but rather that the reading forwarded in this dissertation — one that devotes nearly all of its attention to such links — does not in fact revolutionize or completely upend the scholarly, or for that matter traditional, understanding of the book.

The point is rather to notice how the instructive dialogue with Joseph repositions the same material by adding new contexts against which to read the same story; it offers points of ricochet and comparison to highlight overarching continuities amidst the more obvious contrasts of the detailed accounts. What happened in Egypt back then is echoed in the now of Persia, and Joseph’s achievements are sounded in the rises of Mordecai and Esther. Even when God’s hand is not visibly intervening in worldly affairs for all to see, the patterns God initiated in the past continue to exert their heavy influence over the present. And bringing these subtler but still present and crucially important notes into correct pitch will occupy the major thrust of this study.
Chapter Two: Linguistic Similarity and Thematic Overlap

The theme of self-disciple, and the controlling influence it exerts over the plot development in Joseph, best expresses itself through Joseph’s varied reception of his brothers’ three descents to Egypt. When his brothers bow down before him just as his dreams had predicted (Gen 42:6), Joseph must control his own urge to end this whole painful mess. And even though no glimpse into the protagonist’s complicated psyche is yet offered, the direction of the narrative hints to the ups and downs bouncing around inside of Joseph’s head. For in fact it was his foolish reporting of the very same dreams that his brothers have unwittingly just fulfilled that landed him at the bottom of that waterless pit in the first place. But despite whatever painful validation he must be experiencing, he is able to keep control of his swirling emotions when his brothers, whose jealousy played the crucial role in kickstarting this convoluted chain of events, first arrive before him in Egypt.

When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them; but he acted like a stranger toward them and spoke harshly to them. He asked them, “Where do you come from?” And they said, “From the land of Canaan, to procure food.” For though Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. Recalling the dreams that he had dreamed about them, Joseph said to them, “You are spies, you have come to see the land in its nakedness.” (Gen 42:7–9)

His harshness is not to be understood as the emotional release that often accompanies retribution, but rather the opening move of his thoroughly planned test.

On the third day Joseph said to them, “Do this and you shall live, for I am a God-fearing man. If you are honest men, let one of you brothers be held in your place of detention, while the rest of you go and take home rations for your starving households; but you must bring me your youngest brother, that your words may be verified and that you may not die.” And they did accordingly. (Gen 42:18–20)
The overarching pattern that criss-crosses against what has already transpired begins to emerge: just as it was Joseph’s own dreams that got him into trouble, so it was the dreams of others that got him out; and just as it was his brothers’ mean-spirited jealousy that engendered this most painful breach in the family, then so will it be his own well-intended magnanimity that might be able to reunite them all again. And it is exactly this that his test is designed to uncover: will his generosity be used against him, as his father’s favor was in Dothan? Or will his brothers finally choose familial unity over their own insecurities, and sacrifice themselves for the good of their family and father? And his command, that they must return with Benjamin if they are ever to see him again, pushes on this most uncomfortable spot. For since they have already disposed of one of their father’s beloved sons, Joseph now puts in place a series of events that will force them to choose between their own safety and Benjamin’s life.

If this opening trip has seen Joseph’s steely self-control allow for his test to be set into motion, then the brothers’ second trip to Egypt is marked by Joseph’s struggle to maintain that same cold, distant exterior. For this time, since Benjamin has come along, Joseph is confronted far too closely with that past he claims to have so completely forgotten (Gen 41:51). And when the brothers are then invited to dine at his house, the vizier, surrounded by all of the reminders of the great success he has found in this foreign land, begins to show the first signs of cracking.

Looking about, he saw his brother Benjamin, his mother’s son, and asked, “Is this your youngest brother of whom you spoke to me?” And he went on, “May God be gracious to you, my boy.” With that, Joseph hurried out, for he was overcome with feeling toward his brother and was on the verge of tears; he went into a room and wept there. Then he washed his face, reappeared, and — now in control of himself — gave the order, “Serve the meal.” (Gen 43:29–31)
That he must leave the room in order to collect himself highlights the point: his testing of his brothers is dependent upon his disciplined self-control. For since his test has not yet revealed the crucial information — what his brothers deepest intentions are, and how they will react when pressed yet again — he knows he cannot allow the emotions welling up inside of him to break his carefully constructed cover. But as Rosenthal points out, it is not just the thematic import of this passage that is worthy of comment, but also its linguistic peculiarity: ויתאפק ויצא פניו וירחץ לחם (Gen 43:31) (280). For that strange root, קפא, used to express Joseph’s catching of his just cracking self-control, also comes at a moment of equal importance in the Esther book.\(^{23}\) And herein lies the point of this first example: in both the Joseph story and Esther book, the theme of self-control is expressed with very similar language and plays an equally determinative role.

For in the Megillah, after Mordecai has finally convinced Esther to approach Ahasueros on behalf of their now endangered people, she finds an unexpectedly gracious king. “What troubles you, Queen Esther?” asks the king in response to her uninvited approach. “And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be granted you” (Esth 5:3). Esther responds in curious fashion, choosing not to address the problem of her people’s threatened safety that she has come to solve. “‘If it please Your Majesty,’ Esther replied, ‘let Your Majesty and Haman come today to the feast that I have prepared for him’” (Esth 5:4). That this unlawful approach had caused her to fear for her life makes her request all the stranger; for even though she seems to be in the perfect position to speak up for the Jews and then walk away unscathed, she chooses

\(^{23}\) This root, always in the hithpael stem with the general meaning “to restrain or control oneself”, is only found only seven times in the entire Hebrew Bible: the three instances that will be discussed in this chapter, i.e., Gen 43:31, 45:1 and Esth 5:10, in addition to 1 Sam 13:12, and Is 42:14, 63:15, and 64:11.
to elongate her involvement in the complicated process of deposing Haman and fighting against his edict.

But like so many other events in this curious book, what seems to fall out of place actually fits in perfectly. For it is directly after this exclusive royal banquet that Haman, on his way home from the party, merry and drunk with his own impressively high status, encounters an intolerably insolent Mordecai. “That day Haman went out happy and lighthearted. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the palace gate, and Mordecai did not rise or even stir on his account, Haman was filled with rage at him” (Esth 5:9). But instead of lashing out with his by now infamous impulsivity, the Persian prime minister surprisingly finds the same sort of self-control that has hitherto been associated with Joseph. “Nevertheless, Haman controlled himself and went home” (Esth 5:10).

Attention then must not only be drawn to the repetition of that seldom-used root, ויתאפק, ויתאפק (Esth 5:10), but also to the thematic overlaps this passage has with the Joseph story. For it is in fact an earlier expression of this very same insult that first engenders the major conflict of the Megillah. In Esther 3, after Haman has mysteriously been promoted to prime minister for seemingly no reason at all, he insists that every one must bow down to him; but Mordecai, in what is most probably his only mistake in the whole Megillah, strangely but

---

24 Rosenthal also hinted to this idea with his sly comment on the issue: “Was soll man ferner zu einem so seltenen Ausdruck wie ויתאפק sagen (Esth 5:10), der sich bei Joseph zweimal findet, einmal 43:31 ויתאפק und dann? Hogan ist toch ויתאפק missed” (“Die Josephsgeschichte,” 280).
continuously refuses.\textsuperscript{25} “All the king’s courtiers in the palace gate knelt and bowed low to Haman, for such was the king’s order concerning him; but Mordecai would not kneel or bow low” (Esth 3:2).

If in Esther 5 Haman is somehow able to control his initial response to Mordecai’s insolence, then in Esther 3, when facing the exact same insult, he is completely unable to check his own anger. Immediately seeking to destroy all of Mordecai’s people as punishment for his unthinkable insubordination, Haman wastes no time turning his murderous intent into state policy. “There is a certain people,” he addresses the king with that cunningly oblique reference to the Jews, “scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king’s laws; and it is not in Your Majesty’s interest to tolerate them” (Esth 3:8). His solution is as wildly incommensurate with the crime as the charges themselves are drummed up. “If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the stewards for deposit in the royal treasury” (Esth 3:9). And when Ahasueros responds to Haman’s chilling evilness with an equally dangerous disengagement, the edict, along with the Jews’ fate, seems as good as sealed. “The money and the people are yours to do with as you see fit” (Esth 3:11).

\textsuperscript{25} In one of the more telling illustrations of the overall movement of the Megillah, it is exactly this action, what I have here in fact deemed a mistake, that plays a crucial role in bringing about the great deliverance of the story. For without this simmering tribal tension boiling over, there would be no edict against Mordecai’s people; and without that murderous edict, Esther and Mordecai would not be able to identify and then vanquish their foe. But that it works out this way, and fantastically so for the Jews of Susa, does not vindicate or validate all of the many fits and starts along the way; the underlying themes of Esther do not suggest any sort of “all’s well that ends well” message. Rather, as I will try to highlight throughout this dissertation for both the Megillah and Joseph story, this text is positioned to highlight the crucial sensitivity to human actions, flawed as they always are, precisely because of the uncontrollable and unpredictable ricochets that they so often then engender.
The contrast then with the sequence of events in the second iteration of the same basic event sharpens into focus. For when Haman, in chapter five, does then find that admirable self-control in the face of Mordecai’s second slight, הרמאס המה (Esth 5:10), he decides to go home ריבא אל ביתו (Esth 5:10) and call on his wife and friends. And after telling them of his own greatness (Esth 5:10–11), Haman quickly gets down to the business of reversing himself and losing that very self-control that got him into this position in the first place. “‘What is more,’ said Haman, ‘Queen Esther gave a feast, and besides the king she did not have anyone but me. And tomorrow too I am invited by her along with the king. Yet all this means nothing to me every time I see that Jew Mordecai sitting in the palace gate’” (Esth 5:12–13). Seeking to calm the enraged prime minister down, his wife and friends offer a solution that ironically plays right into Mordecai’s hands. “Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, ‘Let a stake be put up, fifty cubits high, and in the morning ask the king to have Mordecai impaled on it. Then you can go gaily with the king to the feast.’ The proposal pleased Haman, and he had the stake put up” (Esth 5:14).

But unbeknownst to Haman and his compatriots, on the very same night that they are conspiring Mordecai’s demise, the king is curiously suffering from a bout of insomnia. And in his restlessness, he asks for the book of records to be read out to him. That the portion for the evening just so happens to recount Mordecai saving the king’s life from Bigthan and Teresh’s planned insurrection (Esth 2:21–23) is as much coincidence as it is telling for Haman’s case. For when the prime minister approaches the king that very next morning, seeking royal permission to hang Mordecai on the stake he has already had raised, the king is seeking to honor the very same man Haman is trying to kill.
Haman entered, and the king asked him, “What should be done for a man whom the king desires to honor?” Haman said to himself, “Whom would the king desire to honor more than me?” So Haman said to the king, “For the man whom the king desires to honor, let royal garb which the king has worn be brought, and a horse on which the king has ridden and on whose head a royal diadem has been set; and let the attire and the horse be put in the charge of one of the king’s noble courtiers. And let the man whom the king desires to honor be attired and paraded on the horse through the city square, while they proclaim before him: This is what is done for the man whom the king desires to honor!” (Esth 6:6–9)

As Jon D. Levenson notes, this scene, typified by the irony dripping from the king’s response, is as funny as it is telling.26 “Quick, then!” said the king to Haman. “Get the garb and the horse, as you have said, and do this to Mordecai the Jew, who sits in the king’s gate. Omit nothing of all you have proposed” (Esth 6:10). How ironic that Haman’s one moment of self-control actually brings about his private loss of it, a move that switches the momentum irrevocably against him. For as his own wife this time so sagaciously predicts, Haman’s painful fall has just begun. “If Mordecai,” Zeresh begins with a cold but clean accuracy, “before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish stock, you will not overcome him; you will fall before him to your ruin” (Esth 6:13).

And with this the deeper connection to the Joseph story is made manifest: if Joseph’s continued ability to maintain his self-discipline allows him to test his brothers, then Haman’s one time show of self-control, and his inability to maintain it, actually prevents him from carrying out his heinous edict. That so much of this action is dependent upon that seldom-used root

26 Levenson addresses this very issue in his commentary. “Chapter 6 can be categorized equally well as farce and as omen. The farcical elements involve Haman’s enormously foolish miscalculation as to the man whom the king would wish to honor (vv. 4-9) and the ensuing ludicrous scene in which the prime minister is compelled to serve as a herald for his archenemy, the lesser courtier, Mordecai the Jew (vv. 10-11). The ominous dimension becomes explicit in the words of Zeresh and Haman’s friends in v. 13: The farce just enacted is only a foretaste of the inevitable triumph of the Jew over his enemy.” Esther: A Commentary (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 94–95.
articulates the link back to Genesis. For if Joseph had just barely kept control of himself during his second interaction with his brothers in Egypt, it is his third encounter with them that pierces his once indestructible self-discipline. When he has his brothers’ money put back into their bags, and his goblet crucially in Benjamin’s, he turns that final screw of his grueling test. Overtaking them on their way home, happy to have received Simeon back and relieved to have procured grain without losing Benjamin to the fickle vizier, Joseph’s steward disrupts their cheerfulness with a forceful accusation of theft. And even though the brothers protest with an honest innocence, the evidence has been shrewdly stacked against them: they must return for a third time to that same vizier who has already proved so impossible to figure out.

“What is this deed that you have done?” Joseph demands when they come before him for what is now a third time. “Do you not know that a man like me practices divination?” (Gen 44:15). When Judah then offers to sacrifice himself, pleading with the vizier to detain him instead of his youngest brother who is so beloved to his father, Joseph finally catches a glimpse of what his test has been designed to show. “If I come to your servant my father,” Judah tells the vizier,

and the boy is not with us — since his own life is so bound up with his — when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will send the white head of your servant our father down to Sheol in grief. Now your servant has pledged himself for the boy to my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, I shall stand guilty before my father forever.’ Therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers. (Gen 44:30–33)

If it was Joseph’s testing that broke through his brothers' resolve, then so is it here Judah's selflessness that breaks through Joseph's terrific self-control. And in a story of such reversals, this moment of parallel stands out all the brighter.
Joseph could no longer control himself (לֹא יְכַלֵּל אָבֵד) before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone withdraw from me!” So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear, and so the news reached Pharaoh’s palace. Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still well?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dumfounded were they on account of him. (Gen 45:1–3)

If the Megillah turns on Haman’s one-time display of self-control, then the sea change in the Joseph story comes with Joseph’s uncharacteristic loss of it (Gen 45:1). For it is not only familial reunification that follows this pulsating moment, but also the Israelites’ deliverance from the famine. The brothers return to Canaan this time to bring their father down with them to Egypt, where Joseph will provide for them for the remainder of the devastating famine. That these most important moments are expressed with nearly identical language underlines the link between the two stories: similar language expresses similar themes that influence and even engender similar plot movements. And two more examples of this sort of complex interaction will help to sharpen the foundation on which so much of this dissertation is based: these kinds of intertwined connections are not to be seen as coincidental or evidence for some sort of unconsidered borrowing, but rather the expression of an intended and meaningful relationship between these two interlocking stories.

The literary motif of speeches, and their ability to influence the direction of events, is likewise found at crucial moments in both the Joseph story and Esther book. After Jacob’s sons jealously toss their younger brother into a waterless pit, it all starts unraveling. First comes the famine, and then they lose Simeon to a harshly suspicious vizier. That they also must bring Benjamin back with them if they ever are to return to Egypt doubles the difficulty: not only must they return to their father with yet another brother missing, but they also must try to convince
Jacob to release Benjamin — exactly what he has already tried to prevent — into their increasingly questionable care. When Jacob initially refuses and the famine then intensifies (Gen 42:38–43:1), this struggling family’s position tightens even further. Expressing the impossibility of the stance his father has taken, Judah begins the first of his two impressively powerful speeches.

Then Judah said to his father Israel, “Send the boy in my care, and let us be on our way, that we may live and not die — you and we and our children. I myself will be surety for him; you may hold me responsible: if I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, I shall stand guilty before you forever. For we could have been there and back twice if we had not dawdled” (Gen 43:8–10).

The opening words of Jacob’s defeated response — “If it must be so,” delivered with the resigned consent of a man who knows his decision has been made for him — mark a shift in the direction of the plot. For even though Jacob sends Benjamin with as much reluctance imaginable, his selfless decision to risk Benjamin for the sake of all his sons appears to be met with a sort of cosmic approval. For upon his sons’ second arrival in Egypt, it all starts so well: not only are they honored with an invitation to dine with the vizier, but they also receive Simeon back and buy grain for Canaan. But as quickly as their father’s intervention turned for their favor, so does the ricochet of their own jealousy boomerang back against them. Entrapping them for theft by having their money secretly put back into their bags, and the vizier’s own goblet into Benjamin’s, Joseph turns the tables yet again.

Shocked and desperate, facing the only thing worse than starvation — a return to their father after losing yet another of his beloved sons — the brothers rush back to the vizier in a last-ditch attempt to try to avert this most terrible outcome. The reversal of fortunes is striking: just as Joseph was kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews and did nothing to deserve being thrown
into that dungeon (40:15), so are the brothers wrongly accused and unfairly forced to return to face bondage in Egypt; and just as Joseph, having no recourse whatsoever to getting himself out of his wrongful incarceration, had to wait for the cupbearer to remember him, so must the brothers, with all of the evidence stacked against them, hope for the impossible clemency of the vizier.

Recounting how this all came about, and why he cannot accept this most painful outcome, Judah begins his second and even more powerful speech by ironically telling the vizier that Joseph is no longer. “My lord asked his servants, ‘Have you a father or another brother?’ We told my lord, ‘We have an old father, and there is a child of his old age, the youngest; his full brother is dead, so that he alone is left of his mother, and his father dotes on him’” (Gen 44:19–20). And against this backdrop, the vizier’s order that they had to return with their youngest brother seems all the harsher. “Then you said to your servants, ‘Bring him down to me, that I may set eyes on him.’ We said to my lord, ‘The boy cannot leave his father; if he were to leave him, his father would die.’ But you said to your servants, ‘Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, do not let me see your faces’” (Gen 44:21–23).

And having setup the problem so directly, Judah now turns the screw forcefully.

Later our father said, ‘Go back and procure some food for us.’ We answered, ‘We cannot go down; only if our youngest brother is with us can we go down, for we may not show our faces to the man unless our youngest brother is with us.’ Your servant my father said to us, ‘As you know, my wife bore me two sons. But one is gone from me, and I said: Alas, he was torn by a beast! And I have not seen him since. If you take this one from me, too, and he meets with disaster, you will send my white head down to Sheol in sorrow.’ (Gen 44:25–29)

Finally, more concerned with his family’s unity and father’s well-being than his own status and safety, Judah demands that he stay as a slave in Egypt instead of Benjamin. And in an
inversion of that hackneyed but still biblical truism, Judah insists that his father shall no longer pay for the sins of his sons.

Now your servant has pledged himself for the boy to my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, I shall stand guilty before my father forever.’ Therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father. (Gen 44:32–34)

Once again my point is not only to highlight the importance of this verse in the Joseph story, for it is this very pledge that causes Joseph to lose control of himself, bringing about the tectonic shift toward reunification that follows, but also that Judah’s final words — אֶל אָבִי אֲשֶׁר תְּצַו יְמֵא אֵלָה אֲשֶׁר בָּרָע אֲשֶׁר לְאָבִי (Gen 44:34) — are strongly echoed by Esther in her speech toward the end of the Megillah. For in Esther 8, faced with the equally pressing problem of Haman’s horrific decree still maintaining as valid and unchangeable Persian law despite the late prime minister’s unseemly demise, Esther uses a nearly identical syntax to address a different foreign ruler.27 “For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming on my people,” she exclaims to the king with that distinctive syntax, “How can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?” בַּאֲבָדֶּנָה רָאָיתִי בַּאֲבָדֶּנָה אֲשֶׁר מַצְוָה אָבִי אֲשֶׁר מַצְוָה אֲבִיתִי אֲבִיתִי (Esth 8:6).

The similarities are striking. Both verses, Gen 44:34 and Esth 8:6, begin with a form of the adverb אֶל followed by a verbal form in the imperfect tense; then comes a conjugated form of the root ה-ר-א, imperfect in Genesis and converted perfect in Esther, followed by a relative clause with a conjugated form of the verbal root מ-צ-א. From Judah, אֲלֵי אֲבִי אֲשֶׁר מַצְוָה אָבִי, it should also not go unnoticed that both foreign rulers are also family members of sorts: the vizier is of course Joseph, even if Judah does not yet know it; and the Persian king is of course Esther’s husband, even if his fickleness has the potential, as was the case in Esther 1, to make him less than protective of his wife.
and from Esther, עמי אָתֵרְיָה בְּרֶשֶׁה אָשְׁרְיָא 입ְשָׁא אָתֻיָּי. Despite the lexical difference between the two objects of אָתְרְיָה אֶשְׁרְיָא, “my father” for Judah and “my people” for Esther, both terms are semantically quite similar. Esther’s people, עמי, are the very sons and daughters of Jacob, who is of course Judah’s father, or, as he says it, אבי. Rosenthal sums up the point: “In ganz gleichem Satzbau spricht Ester in ähnlicher Lage” (281).

The importance of this ähnliche Lage, however, is more instructive than Rosenthal’s suggestive two words can connote. For after learning of Haman’s horrendous decree, Mordecai sees his position, much like Judah’s in Genesis 43, tighten: do nothing and watch his people be massacred, or approach the queen and try to encourage her intervention with the dangerously fickle Ahasuerus. Much as Judah then decided to face his obstinate father and coax him into releasing his beloved Benjamin to descend to Egypt and go before a foreign ruler, so does Mordecai try wrestle his way out of the unenviable corner by convincing his at first reluctant cousin to put her concern for her own safety aside and approach her husband the king. And if Reuben’s first attempt is met with Jacob’s stubborn although understandable resistance, then so is Mordecai’s first pass batted away by the queen’s protective, narcissistic shield. “All the king’s courtiers and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king’s presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him — that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days” (Esth 4:11).

But just as Judah is undeterred by his father’s first refusal and eventually succeeds in convincing him to act out of concern for his larger family, so does Mordecai remain steadfast in the face of Esther’s first objection and ultimately persuades her to risk her own life for the sake
of her entire people: “Do not imagine,” he rejoins in powerful fashion, “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” (Esth 4:13–14).

Just as Jacob, having been convinced by Judah, swings the story back into action by sending Benjamin southward with his brothers, so does Esther, having been convinced by Mordecai to act on behalf of her people, kick the plot of the Megillah back into motion with her approach to Ahasueros. And after taking her life into her hands, much as Benjamin’s safety was placed in Judah’s, she finds her husband unexpectedly magnanimous. “‘What troubles you, Queen Esther?’ the king asked her. ‘And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be granted you’” (Esth 5:3). And her strange deferral — “If it please Your Majesty, let Your Majesty and Haman come today to the feast that I have prepared for him” (Esth 5:4) — forces her hand at the second banquet she arranges. For now, with no time left to delay, Queen Esther has to speak up at the most dramatic of moments. Finally identifying Haman as the man behind the awful edict — “The adversary and enemy is this evil Haman!” (Esth 7:6) — Esther dispatches of Haman as quickly as Ahasueros had promoted him. And when Haman is then wrongly understood to be making a pass at Esther,²⁸ his plan to hang Mordecai is uncovered and

²⁸ An echo to Mrs. Potiphar’s false allegations is also sounded. For perhaps there is something embedded in the king’s jealousy: as I will discuss briefly in the final chapter, if Mrs. Potiphar actually offered Joseph a chance to fulfill his dreams prematurely, to overtake his master by taking his wife, then just maybe the king is finally smelling a sort of insatiable ambition that has tainted his prime minister’s actions from the very beginning. That this may be the one instance where Haman’s blind ambition is not motivating him — simple survival rather is — can actually bring the point into clearer focus: as usual, the king has misunderstood all that is going on around him, but unwittingly still hit the mark. And in the world of the Megillah, this ironically accurate misunderstanding makes the perfect end to Haman’s misguided campaign.
it all comes crashing down for the once high and mighty prime minister. “Then Harbona, one of
the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, ‘What is more, a stake is standing at Haman’s house,
fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai — the man whose words saved the king.’
‘Impale him on it!’ the king ordered” (Esth 7:9).

In much the same way Judah’s speech to Joseph brought the beginnings of resolution to
both of the major tensions of the Joseph story — not only was the family reunited after Judah
broke through the vizier’s steely self-control, but they also were brought down to Egypt where
they could live out the rest of the famine in safety — so too does Esther’s next speech begin the
process of resolving the only conflict still remaining in the Megillah. With Haman having been
cleared from the way, Esther can now finally use Judah’s distinctive syntax to tackle the edict
that the former prime minister had left as his unalterable legacy.

If it pleases the king, and if I have won his favor, and if the thing seems right before the
king, and I have his approval, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by
Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote giving orders to destroy the
Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. For how can I bear to see the disaster which
will befall my people! And how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred!(Esth
8:5–6)²⁹

And if the events leading up to this decisive scene overlapped so consistently with the
buildup to Judah’s determinative speech to Joseph, then so do the aftermaths of these two
speeches also intertwine. For even though the unchangeability of Persian law ties Ahasueros’s
not terribly adept hands, he does allow for Esther and Mordecai to author an edict calling for
Jewish self-defense. “You may further write with regard to the Jews as you see fit. [Write it] in
the king’s name and seal it with the king’s signet, for an edict that has been written in the king’s

²⁹ The syntactical similarity to Gen 44:34 comes out, as noted above, most strongly in the Hebrew: כי
אכפת אוכל ראתיך ברעה אשר הערע אשת עמי אוכפת אוכל ראתיך מברכתי המלדחים.
name and sealed with the king’s signet may not be revoked” (Esth 8:8). The seeds for resolution have been sowed: just as Judah’s speech to Joseph brings about the first impulse for reunification, so does Ahasueros’s response encourage the Jews to fight off the still present and dangerous residue of Haman’s murderous intent. That so much of this movement hangs on that distinctive syntax highlights the relationship: in Esther, just as in Joseph, the swing of fortune pivots on the rhetorical punch of a Jew’s speech to a foreign ruler.

And one final example will push the intentionality of this relationship beyond doubt. In both stories, physical attractiveness does more than just please the admiring observer; it actually engenders many of the ups and downs that mark the major swings of both plots. By the time Joseph’s dashing good looks are addressed, he has already experienced quite an unlikely turn of events. For when he is first introduced, his lower status as a young boy tending the flocks with the sons of his father’s slave women/surrogate mothers is emphasized. “At seventeen years of age, Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers, as a helper to the sons of his father’s wives Bilhah and Zilpah” (Gen 37:2). But as Levenson points out, the very next verse — “Now Israel loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age; and he had made him an ornamented tunic” (Gen 37:3) — pushes in the exact opposite direction, offering a hint of the ups and downs to come.30 For if it was his father’s favor that brought about his brothers’ jealousy, then it really was that same favor that plunged him to the bottom of that waterless pit and landed him as a slave on Potiphar’s estate.

And as was the case in Genesis 37, so is this same contrastive juxtaposition to be found in Genesis 39. This time Joseph’s low and high statuses are no longer expressed through his ever-

changing familial position, but rather through his peculiar status as a slave enjoying the favor of his earthly and heavenly masters. And it is into this context that his good looks fit, for his nearly Eminence-esque attractiveness is expressed at this very moment: “Joseph was beautiful of form and beautiful of appearance,” (Gen 39:6).

Lest his favor afford him any stability, however, it is exactly his good looks that prove to be the source of his next, and potentially even more devastating, fall. And once again the juxtaposition is quite striking, for Potiphar’s wife begins her fateful approach in the very next verse: “Sleep with me!” (Gen 39:7). For when Joseph, like the good young man that he is becoming, refuses the woman’s untoward advances, she twists his clothes and the plot, sending him to jail for his righteousness. And so the story has been primed for Joseph’s next and final swing. For it is only because he is thrown into jail on account of Mrs. Potiphar’s false accusation that he is able to meet the royal cupbearer and baker, whose dreams once again set him on the upward path; and it is only the culmination of this final upward trajectory that puts him in the position to receive and then test his brothers, a series of events that ends with familial reunification and Israelite deliverance. That his handsomeness, itself a reflection of his continued but conflicted favor, attracted Mrs. Potiphar in the first place highlights the importance of this characteristic that may actually be not that superficial at all.

If the notice of Joseph’s good looks is withheld until his dizzying up and down spin had already begun, then Esther’s fine appearance is foregrounded in her introduction with language nearly verbatim to Gen 39:6: “The young woman was beautiful of form and good of appearance,” (Esth 2:7). And just as it appears to have been Joseph’s handsomeness that stirred up Mrs. Potiphar’s sexual desires, sending him on the roller-coaster
ride that ended at just one step below the Pharaoh, so does Esther’s fair appearance bring her to the seat of Persian royalty. For when Vashti takes her stand, refusing to come before the king to be admired by him and all of his drinking buddies, Ahasueros’s counselors come up with quite the plan: all of the beautiful virgins of the empire shall be gathered for a one-night audition with the now bachelor king. In Ahasueros’s Persia, even the queenship is just an expression of his bawdy pleasures.

“Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for Your Majesty. Let Your Majesty appoint officers in every province of your realm to assemble all the beautiful young virgins at the fortress Shushan, in the harem under the supervision of Hege, the king’s eunuch, guardian of the women. Let them be provided with their cosmetics. And let the maiden who pleases Your Majesty be queen instead of Vashti.” The proposal pleased the king, and he acted upon it. (Esth 2:2–4)

When Esther then wins this most unorthodox contest, the point becomes as clear in the text as it is distasteful to a modern audience: Esther rises in the court and attains political power because of her looks.

When the turn came for Esther daughter of Abihail — the uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his own daughter — to go to the king, she did not ask for anything but what Hegai, the king’s eunuch, guardian of the women, advised. Yet Esther won the admiration of all who saw her. Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, in his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins. So he set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. (Esth 2:15–17)

But this most unexpected initial upward motion only kickstarts the real story, as Esther’s proximity to the king actually puts her in a place of great danger. For even though she has not been bidden in 30 days (Esth 4:11), Mordecai tells her that she still must approach the king (4:13–14). And yet again the patterns start to crisscross: just as Joseph’s good looks actually brought him to prison, so does Esther’s beauty potentially bring her to within an inch of her life;
and just as Joseph’s unexpected fall engendered his unbelievable rise to vizier, so does Esther’s brave endangering of her own life actually bring about the deliverance of her whole people. For upon her courageous approach, her mysterious favor exerts its silent force once again, and the king greets her uninvited advance with an unexpected graciousness (Esth 5:3). Esther responds by requesting a series of banquets, and at the second of her two soirees she identifies Haman as the guilty party. And when the king then sides with his queen, whose influence over him has so grown that it now even surpasses that of his once prized prime minister, she cements her own royal status as the deliverer of the Jews in Persia.

It is then not only that both protagonists are good-looking, but also that both of their good looks engender nearly identical plot patterns — rises and falls in the confusing world of foreign courts, reversals of expectations amidst outside dangers and inner tensions, and ultimate deliverance from a peril that threatened so intensely. And to shrink from drawing the appropriate conclusion at this point, to hesitate concerning the intentionality of this complex relationship, would fail to deal with the completeness of the linguistic and thematic evidence. The author of MT Esther knew the Joseph story, and engaged with it throughout the Megillah in sustained and productive dialogue.
Chapter Three: The Paralleled Structures of Joseph and Esther

In his influential article from 1973, W. Lee Humphreys begins by stressing the nationalistic component found in the books of Esther and Daniel. Noticing, however, that both books reach their climaxes with either narrations or predictions of Jewish victories in other lands, Humphreys articulates an intriguing tension: this more nationalistic message, as he would call it, stands in contradistinction to the overall settings of both books, which sees Esther, Mordecai and Daniel all rising to prominence in foreign courts. Humphreys seeks to explain this contrast in the book of Esther with a literary-critical sort of approach. “There was once an independent Jewish tale of the adventures of Esther and Mordecai, which was not yet linked to Purim, and which had the form of a court tale.”\(^{31}\) And while this tale certainly may have entertained its larger audience, it also served a more serious purpose. “The obvious popularity of such a Jewish tale might be reason enough for its supposed existence, but a further basis is here suggested, one that is didactic and theological” (214).

For Humphreys, this original tale of Mordecai and Esther’s exploits, devoid of any reference to the Purim holiday, centers around their ability to navigate in and around a foreign court: they must prevail in their conflict with Haman while still maintaining their loyalty to their king and people. “Esther and Mordecai skillfully seek the royal benefit and in so doing deliver their people. The tale does not permit any tension to develop between their double loyalty to king and co-religionists; the actual benefit of each party coincides” (215). The narrative part of Esther thus provides, as the title of his thought-provoking work suggests, a model for life and success in the diaspora. “Through the vehicle of this popular form of tale there is expressed a particular

---

stance that affirms for the Jew of the diaspora the possibility of living a creative and rich life in the foreign environment, as a part of the complex social, political, and economic dynamics of that world, and also of remaining a devoted and loyal member of his community of fellow Jews” (216). In some disjunction with a majority of biblical literature, as it is unconcerned with Heilsgeschichte and bereft of any mention of the God of Israel, the narrative section of Esther addresses the more worldly, but not always that biblical, issue of not only surviving but rather thriving in a diaspora setting. And it was then only the later addition of the Purim tradition, itself most likely a Jewish reworking of a pagan ritual, that introduced the nationalistic slant to an otherwise tolerant story. “The utilization of the tale of Esther as a festal legend for Purim gave added emphasis to the conflict between Jew and pagan and to the joy at the defeat of the latter” (222).

Humphreys finds contact to the book of Daniel on exactly this issue — the interplay between Jewish nationalism and a diaspora sort of universalism. Using the well-known notion of a division between the first and second halves of Daniel, he suggests that the court narratives of the first six chapters ought to be seen with some separation from the later apocalypses of chapters 7-12 in content as well as form. For these earlier tales, unlike the visions written during the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes but much like the original Esther and Mordecai story, the point is not to criticize or disparage the foreign nations and their courts, but rather to explore ways for Jews to navigate them successfully while remaining true to their ancestral traditions. And if the Mordecai and Esther tale was focused on highlighting how Jewish religious and Persian governing concerns can in fact be in some sort of harmony, then the tales of court intrigue in the book of Daniel add a fresh, and a bit more extreme, wrinkle to this variation on a
similar theme. “This is the new emphasis of these tales of Daniel and his companions — it is such devotion that enables one to meet the dangers, even if at times it also seems to contribute to them as well” (221).

If the addition of the Purim material to the Esther and Mordecai narrative gives the Megillah its nationalistic quality, then it is the affixing of the apocalyptic visions to these universalistic court tales that gives the book of Daniel its polarizing Jewish slant. “In the case of Daniel 1-6, the joining of this collection to the series of apocalyptic visions, with their harsh judgment upon all foreign nations and rulers, and their narrowly exclusive view of the course of world events, also served to heighten the element of conflict within these tales between the Jew and his environment” (221). Although this nationalistic aspect, this heightening of the conflict between the Jew and his environment, is less pronounced in Daniel than it is in Esther, Humphreys still offers his judgment of the message that this revised context for the court tales demands.

In this instance, as in the case of the tales of Esther and Mordecai, tales that had their origin in the post-exilic diaspora and that present a style of life for the diaspora Jew which affirms most strongly that at one and the same time the Jew can remain loyal to his heritage and God and yet can live a creative, rewarding, and fulfilled life precisely within a foreign setting, and in interaction with it, have been taken over into a new framework that stresses an exclusiveness and even a nationalistic stance over against and in conflict with the foreign context of the Persian and hellenistic diaspora. (223)

On one level, Humphreys is surely correct to hear the notes of different strands in the book of Esther. There seems to be little doubt that the commemoration of Purim picks up on pre-existing ancient Near Eastern festivals and offers an etiology for the distinctly Jewish celebration, suggesting this validation of a Jewish Purim may have been historically distinct from the literary traditions about Mordecai and Esther. He is on shakier ground, however, when he
asserts that different themes present in the book of Esther can be separated cleanly from one another and then attributed accordingly to these different compositional layers. For a look even to the most nationalistic of all the events in Esther — the Jews’ killing of their enemies in Esther 9 — will show that this expression of so-called nationalism is actually just as linked to the events that engender the universalistic messages associated with Esther and Mordecai’s rises in a foreign court as it is to the so-called nationalistic promulgation of a particularly Jewish holiday. And as we will see, not only does attention to the integrated structure of Esther complicate any attempt to untangle specific threads of distinct literary layers inside MT Esther, it also raises a serious objection to Humphreys’ attempt to separate particular events and their corresponding themes from their contextual placement in the larger plot movement of the Megillah.

Adele Berlin notes how the violence of the penultimate chapter of the Megillah has troubled commentators of all different backgrounds for about as long as tradition has held this book as canonical.

Chapter 9 portrays scenes of violence and revenge on a massive scale in the form of the massacre by the Jews of over 75,000 non-Jews. To make matters worse, the massacre is replayed a second time. This then becomes an occasion for celebration and merrymaking for all Jews everywhere. It is no wonder that this chapter did not resonate well with later readers, especially Christians, and many Jews, too, are uncomfortable with what they see as heartless and bloodthirsty Jewish revenge. That the massacre is not an act of revenge but is an act of self-defense taken by Jews against their enemies, explicitly stated in 9:2, does not lay their discomfort to rest.  

---

32 Berlin, Esther, 81.
For Berlin, however, this discomfort is the product of a mistaken reading, one that fails to see the dominant influence that the humorously satirical part of the book ought to exert over the whole Megillah.

A better way to relate to the events of chapter 9 is to see them as part of the carnivalesque farce that permeates the whole book and defines its genre. Scenes of tumultuous riots and violent mock-destruction are completely at home in farcical and carnivalesque works; in fact, they are their hallmarks. Chapter 9 is the climax of the carnivalesque, the peak of disorder. Exaggeration and irrationality reach new heights, even for this book. But it is all in fun; nothing here is real. It is emotional release at its wildest. (81)

She continues with this sort of interpretation, turning to literary criticism for help in defining this sort of carnivalesque genre. And somewhat strangely she concludes that revenge plays no role in Esther 9, that this ending is simply the sort that the genre of the book demands.

“What we have in chapter 9 is the orgy, the riot, the revelry that fits so well with farce and carnival. The violent free-for-all in which the Jews kill their enemies is transmuted into the revelry of the festival.” In fact, she even reverses her previous suggestion — which she rightly notes the text of Esther itself plainly states — that this aggression is self-defense. “It is not a matter of revenge, or even of defense, but a matter of the natural order of things in a perfect, enemy-free, world” (82).33

33 In a recent Harvard ThD dissertation, Thomas Wetzel takes a different approach to the violence in the book of Esther. Suggesting that God may be found, at least in this most curious book, in the presence of the Jews themselves (152–57), and that the unresolved rivalry with Amalek from 1 Sam 15 may still be clouding the bright force of the divine presence from shining through (102), Wetzel argues that the Jews’ violent victory, their complete vanquishing of their and God’s foes, is needed to begin shifting the cosmic axis back toward its correct order. “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 covenental 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.” “Violence and the Survival of Israel in the Book of Esther” (ThD diss., Harvard University, June 2015), 163.
For a commentator so attuned to the interconnections found throughout the Megillah, Berlin here curiously misses the importance of perhaps the most important one. For as she even later will note, the Jews’ killing of their enemies does not fall on some random day, but on exactly that day for which Haman had authorized his decree. The Jews’ aggression is thus as intended and purposeful as it possibly could be — a conscious and considered overturning of the violence planned against them. A far cry from, if not the exact opposite of, “the peak of disorder,” the specific reversal of Haman’s decree shows the highly ordered structure of the violence. Even if it is “emotional release at its wildest,” then it is an emotional release carried out with precise calculation.

Moreover, the reversal in Esther 9 is not just a reversal of Haman’s murderous decree alone, but rather an inversion of the initial direction of the whole plot. For when Haman issues his murderous edict in Esther 3, he is already responding to Mordecai: earlier in the chapter, after Mordecai had refused to bow down to the newly-appointed prime-minister, Haman became so incensed that he could not even be satisfied by killing off just the offending party; instead, he had to seek to kill all of the offering party’s people. “When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel or bow low to him, Haman was filled with 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, Mordecai’s people, throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus” (Esth 3:5–6). And then, after Haman had convinced Ahasueros to sanction and sign the decree, Mordecai uncovers this

Recognizing this point, but somehow still not adequately dealing with its implication, Berlin comments on Esth 9:1: “The day has now arrived on which Haman’s decree was to have taken effect — the day on which the enemies of the Jews looked forward to overpowering them. But because of Mordecai’s decree, the opposite took place and the Jews triumphed over their enemies. This is the greatest and most important of the many reversals in the story, and it sums up the underlying theme of Jewish security in the Diaspora. The outcome of events is given at the start; it is not a question whether the Jews will win, but how they will win and how great their victory will be” (83).
hatched plan and boldly approaches the king’s court in the completely inappropriate garb of sackcloth and ashes. Addressing Esther, who has also only just recently been promoted to queen, Mordecai suggests that she has attained this lofty and most unexpected height for this very moment. “Who knows?” he suggestively asks, “perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis” (Esth 4:14).

And even Esther’s rise is a reversal of sorts. When Vashti boldly refuses her husband the king’s command, she is swiftly deposed, making room for the equally swift and unexpected rise of an orphaned Jewish girl. If it is then Vashti’s refusal to come before the king that seals her fate, it is Esther’s approach to him in Esther 4 that begins the process of sealing hers. For after Mordecai convinces her to seek the king’s favor on behalf of her people, Esther breaks the Persian law by approaching the king — the exact opposite offense of Vashti’s — and is also greeted with the exact opposite response. “What troubles you, Queen Esther?” the king asks her, directly following her approach with an unexpected generosity, “And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be granted you” (Esth 5:3). And as we know, this unlawful approach not only helps to bring about the Jews’ deliverance, but also Haman’s fall. For at the second banquet Esther requests, she finally exposes Haman as the guilty party lurking behind the decree sanctioned against her people.

Berlin offers a different but intriguing interpretation, suggesting that Esther does not actually demur and Mordecai therefore does not need to convince her, but rather they simply communicate in a more indirect way. She makes this point when commenting on Esth 4:12: “Is Esther implying that she is not often called and therefore does not expect an invitation in the near future, or that, since she has not been invited recently, she should bide her time a bit longer until the next invitation comes? In either case, Mordecai urges quick action. To sum up, Esther is not refusing the task that Mordecai set before her; she is proposing a plan whereby it can be accomplished, and at the same time warning of the risk inherent in it. She risks losing her own life, which is not only a problem for her but, more to the point of the dialogue, means that she would then be unable to plead for the Jews” (48).
What’s more, another equally important reversal is embedded in this topsy-turvy buildup. After Mordecai has refused to bow down to Haman for what is now a second time (Esth 5:9–10), the Persian prime-minister, on the advice of his wife, itself a reversal of the foolish decree issued at the beginning of the book (Esth 1:22), decides to remedy this disrespect straightaway. With the third noteworthy approach to the king in the book thus far, Haman seeks permission to reverse his own decision from Esther 3 and kill just Mordecai for his insolence. What Haman does not know is what the reader does: the king, right before Haman’s fateful approach, has learned that it was Mordecai who saved his life from the planned insurrection of Bigthan and Teresh; and so, at this most important moment, the king is seeking to honor the very man Haman is conspiring to kill. When Haman then lists off all honors that he hopes and fully expects to receive, the glee with which the reader reads of Mordecai’s ascent is matched only by the shock and disappointment Haman surely experiences when the king offers his delightfully ironic judgment. “‘Quick, then!’ said the king to Haman. ‘Get the garb and the horse, as you have said, and do this to Mordecai the Jew, who sits in the king's gate. Omit nothing of all you have proposed’” (Esth 6:10).

So by the time Esther 8 rolls around, and Haman has been deposed and hanged for his offenses on the very stake he had prepared for Mordecai, the counter-edict that the Jews are able to craft for their own defense is one that — contra Humphreys — is not at all to be separated from the tales of Mordecai and Esther’s falls and ultimate rises. Their killing of 75,000 of their enemies, however troubling it may be for a modern or ancient audience, cannot be brushed aside as the nationalistic, and therefore separate, impulse of only the editor responsible for the inclusion of the Jewish festival of Purim; nor can it, a la Berlin, be tossed aside as the necessary
and therefore somewhat diminished conclusion that any burlesque tale would necessarily require. No, the integrated nature of the plot shows this violent end to be just as tied to the more universalistic picture of Esther’s rise in and Mordecai’s navigation of a foreign court as it is connected to the more particularistic, or so-called nationalistic, depiction of Purim as a Jewish holiday. For even if the original historical impulses are separated and the literary layer consisting of Esther and Mordecai’s tales is distinguished from the inclusion of the Jewish celebration of Purim, the interconnected plot of Esther does not allow for the Jews’ killing of their enemies to fall cleanly to one side or the other of this proposed historical divide. This violent end to the book, it must be concluded, is equally at home as the fitting conclusion for Mordecai and Esther’s victory over Haman just as it serves, troubling as it may be, as the honored memory celebrated on the Jewish holiday of Purim.

* Arguing that Joseph and Esther share a literary genre, the Diasporanovelle, Arndt Meinhold identifies some 12 components common to the two stories that make up both Gattungsformular. And like many of these features, the very first one, die Vorgeschichte, highlights the integrated and interconnected nature of both plots. To introduce this Vorgeschichte in Joseph, Meinhold writes:

Kleinviehnomaden) ausscheidet (Gen 37:28, 36), um nach Ägypten, also ins Fremmland, in eine (welt-)politische Situation gebracht zu werden.  

If it is Haman’s casting of the lot, the דַּעַת itself, and Mordecai and Esther’s ability to reverse it, that seals Haman and the Jews’ fate in the Megillah, then it is Joseph’s opening dreams that do so in the Joseph story. For just as his dreams correctly foretell of his brothers’ bowing down to him in Egypt, so too do they set in motion the series of events that brings Joseph down to Egypt in the first place. When his brothers, already upset with him, jealous of the favor he enjoys from their father, hear the contents of his suggestive dreams, they deepen their spat with their annoyingly favored little brother. “They hated him even more for his talk about his dreams” (Gen 37:8). When his father then sends him on that ill-fated mission to check up on his already bitter brothers, a move that not surprisingly results in the festering tensions finally boiling over into open hostilities, they are all the more spiteful toward him. Tellingly, however, it is not his famous multi-colored coat, the first sign of his strange favor, that the brothers so remember, but rather his dreamer status that so reignites their spite. As he approaches, the malice rings out in their voice, “Here comes that dreamer now!” (Gen 37:19).

And of course it is exactly this exchange that lands Joseph in spots of bother — first at the bottom of a waterless pit, and then as a slave turned prisoner in Egypt. When Reuben, and then Judah, intercede, the brothers agree not to kill their brother, but rather to throw him to the bottom of a dry well. One man’s loss is another’s gain, and the Midianites (or perhaps the Ishmaelites) then arrive to pull Joseph up out of the well, bring him down to Egypt, and sell him into slavery. Here his ups and downs begin anew, ultimately bringing him within one seat of

37 On the source critical issue for this passage, see, for example, Baden, Composition, 34–44.
the Pharaoh, and in control of the very grain that his brothers, struggling in Canaan from the intensifying famine, will have to come to buy. And when they do, they first need to pay their respects to the Egyptian official in charge. “Now Joseph was the vizier of the land; it was he who dispensed rations to all the people of the land. And Joseph’s brothers came and bowed low to him, with their faces to the ground” (Gen 42:6). That they are, at this point, still unaware that they are actually fulfilling Joseph’s premonitory dreams only doubles the irony, for it was their bristling at his predictions in the first place that helped push this whole sequence into motion.

Not only foreshadowing what is to come, but also “preparing the terrain for the entire story,” as Meinhold phrases it, this *Vorgeschichte* also directly engenders what follows: Joseph’s rise in Egypt, “der kleine Aufstiegsbericht.” The interconnections that this chapter (Genesis 37) contains and then spawns illustrates the integrated character of the structure of the story as a whole. With a plot line in which each episode is dependent upon the previous — if not for his father’s favor and his strange dreams, his brothers never would have thrown him in the pit; if he had never found his way to the bottom of a waterless pit, he would not have made his way to Potiphar’s estate; and without being sold as a slave to Potiphar, his rise in Egypt would never have come about — the *Vorgeschichte* not only foreshadows but also brings about the *Aufstiegsbericht*.

And in Esther, this exact same kind of interlocking relationship between the *Vorgeschichte* and the *Aufstiegsbericht* is also found. While Vashti’s fall, unlike Joseph’s dreams, does not foreshadow the movement of the whole Megillah, it does set the stage for the small *Aufstiegsbericht* that follows. Moreover, this *Vorgeschichte* also foregrounds a number of important themes and motifs that recur throughout the Megillah: the whimsical nature of the
king, and his strange over-dependence on his advisors; the private expressed as the public; and the adherence, or disobedience, whatever the case may be, to the unalterable Persian law, often expressed through the action of approaching the Persian ruler.

Even though it is surely Esther’s good looks and mysterious favor that most directly propel her to the queenship, Ahasueros would not be looking for a new partner had Vashti simply obeyed him. For when Vashti refuses the king’s summons, understandably staying away from her drunken and shameless husband, her disobedience is public. Anyone who was anyone was at Ahasueros’s never-ending banquet, and the remedy for such an insult, according to the king’s sophomoric notion of domestic relationships and just governance, rectifies what he views as the injustice by crassly inverting it: if his own queen disobeyed him, then every woman in his whole empire must always obey their husband; if his wife refused to come before him, then every virgin in his whole empire will be forced to come to him at his lewd beck and call. This, then, is the setting for Esther’s rise, the perfect setting for her good looks to find favor. For by the time Esther is called to do exactly that which Vashti refused, it somehow seems as if the stage has been perfectly primed for her. Not only is she good looking, perhaps the most important qualification in this X-rated contest, but she also seems to have a sort of agreeableness to her —

Levenson also highlights the importance of this theme that runs throughout the Megillah. Speaking of the king and the banquets he throws, he writes, “Indeed, his resources are so enormous that it takes — and he can afford — a hundred and eighty days to show it off, not to mention a second instance of comparable exhibitionism of seven days’ duration (vv. 4–5). At the zenith of his success, ominously ‘merry with wine,’ Ahasueros finds himself in the humiliating position of having his own wife refuse his invitation (vv. 10–12). He can show off the beauty of his trappings and his fabrics; that comes with the office. But he finds himself powerless to show off the beauty of his own wife: that comes with a person and requires human relations skills that he sadly and conspicuously lacks. What is still worse, he compounds the problem by treating his personal deficiency through official means, promoting an embarrassment into a state crisis and his problem with Queen Vashti into a problem of all men with their wives (vv. 13–20). The ludicrous outcome is that the man who cannot rule his wife becomes the all-powerful emperor who formally enjoins all male subjects to rule their wives (vv. 21–22). The personal has become the political, or, to state the reverse, the political has been exposed as nothing more than the personal on solid gold stilts” (Esther, 13).
she unquestioningly obeys Mordecai’s command not to tell of her Jewishness, and she finds favor with Hegai, listening to his advice and bringing nothing with her when she goes to see the king — that Vashti’s refusal in Esther 1 seemed to lack. Esther’s rise is thus not nearly as random as it first appears; it actually is a mirrored reflection of the patterns originally put in motion in the Vorgeschichte. Just as Joseph’s rise in Genesis 39 is totally dependent upon his fall in Genesis 37, so too is Esther’s particular climb to the queenship dependent upon Vashti’s very specific dismissal from it.

This paralleled, interlocking plot structure continues. Once both characters have enjoyed their initial rises, they both act decisively in the face of impending danger. After Joseph has risen to second-in-command of the jail in which he has been wrongfully incarcerated, he then correctly interprets the cupbearer’s and baker’s dreams. When the restored cupbearer is on his way back to the Pharaoh’s court, Joseph asks him to remember his experiences in jail, that the cupbearer might inform the Pharaoh of Joseph’s wrongful imprisonment. That the cupbearer forgets, however, only sets up the perfect moment: the Pharaoh himself is the next to be struck with mysterious dreams he cannot make sense of, and the obvious echo to the cupbearer’s own life jogs his failing memory at exactly the right moment. The Pharaoh then has a clean-shaven and freshly-clothed Joseph brought before him, and his task is clear. “I have had a dream,” the Pharaoh tells Joseph, “but no one can interpret it. Now I have heard it said of you that for you to hear a dream is to tell its meaning” (Gen 41:15). And Joseph does not disappoint: the cows, just like the ears of grain, are years — five more of plenty, and then seven of famine to follow. His policy recommendation then comes as swiftly as his interpretation is convincing.
Accordingly, let Pharaoh find a man of discernment and wisdom and set him over the land of Egypt. And let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers over the land, and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. Let all the food of these good years that are coming be gathered, and let the grain be collected under Pharaoh's authority as food to be stored in the cities. Let that food be a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will come upon the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish in the famine. (Gen 41:33–36)

Duly impressed, the Pharaoh agrees to Joseph’s suggestions and moves to implement them right away — with Joseph, once again moving to second-in-command, although this time over the whole land of Egypt, in charge of the food-rationing effort. And when the famine comes, Egypt is the only land prepared with stockpiles of food. That this averts the danger of the famine for the Egyptians is, of course, not really the point of the story; the point, rather, is that this sagacious plan actually brings about the beginnings of the reunification of Jacob’s fractured family.

Meinhold names this whole sequence “Eigene Aktivitäten der Hauptperson, um die Schwierigkeiten abzuwehren,” but I prefer to stress how the particular Schwierigkeiten Joseph faces affect both those in Egypt, a land he for now calls home, and the homeland of his family. For the particular solution he finds to fend off these particular difficulties brings relief not only to the particular problem at hand — Pharaoh’s confused state after his dream, Joseph’s wrongful imprisonment, and the danger that the impending famine will bring — but it also leads directly toward the resolution of the longer drama of the story — a slow but steady reunification of the feuding brothers both among themselves and with their father. It is only due to Joseph’s prescient food-storing policy that the brothers descend to Egypt in the first place, and it is only because of the height Joseph has attained as a result of his interpretive and political abilities that he is able to welcome his brothers, albeit in a somewhat hostile fashion at first, and concoct and then carry
out his grueling but ultimately successful test of them. It is then not just that there are difficulties, but rather the specific obstacles Joseph faces; and it is not just that Joseph bats them away with his by now expected smarts and tact, but rather how he does it — dream interpretation that results in his own rise to power — that so links this part of the story to that which preceded and will follow it.

And as Meinhold once again correctly hints, a very similar pattern emerges in the Megillah. After Esther has attained the queenship, a very particular challenge presents itself: the rise of Haman and the murderous edict he cons the king into sanctioning. And just as Joseph used his special skill of dream interpretation to deal effectively with the danger of the approaching famine, while also bringing himself out of jail by helping the confused Pharaoh, so must Esther use her special skills, her good looks and the favor she finds with all who see her, to influence the unalterable Persian law in an effort to fend off the great danger facing her people. For when Esther approaches the king unbidden, it must be the favor she finds with him that spares her from the fate she so feared and causes the king to raise his scepter toward her. And what she does with this chance that this mysterious favor affords her is highly reminiscent of the events that preceded her unexpectedly friendly audience with the king: she calls for a banquet, the very same setting that saw Vashti’s fall and, with it, the initial opportunity for her own rise.

Moreover, Esther’s great last act also comes at a banquet. Fingering Haman as the guilty party behind the terrible edict leveled against her people, Esther turns yet another party tense, testing her favor against Haman’s, the only other character in the book who seems to attract the un-instigated positive attention of Ahasueros. When Haman foolishly tries to plead his case to Esther, who is representing the party he has so egregiously defamed and endangered, the king
returns from his ill-advised jaunt to the garden at exactly the right moment: Haman, lying on Esther’s couch, is understood by the impressively insightful Ahasueros to be making a pass at his queen at the worst possible moment. With Haman now swiftly deposed and hanged on the very stake that he had erected for Mordecai, this terribly entertaining plot movement is also inherently tied to the king’s previous banquets and Esther’s previous favor; moreover, with Haman’s deposal and Mordecai’s rise, it also — like Joseph’s resolution of the obstacles he faced — sets up the final resolution of the plot. On the very day that the Jews were supposed to be killed, they strike back and complete the most fantastic set of reversals: Vashti does not approach Ahasueros and is deposed; Esther does and is made queen. Mordecai is not impaled on the stake erected for him by Haman; Haman himself is. The Jews are not massacred on the 13th of Adar; they take the offensive against their enemies on the 14th and 15th. As delightful as they are for the reader, these interconnections are equally critical to the overall coherence, shape, and development of both plots.

* Somewhat reminiscent of Humphreys, David J.A. Clines argues that this final Purim section of the Megillah is to be understood as distinct from the rest of the book, the product of a different, later authorial hand. But in a tone far more definitive than Humphreys’ subtle and nuanced argumentation, Clines makes this break at the end of Esther 8 with complete confidence, asserting that the plot of the narrative actually concludes at the end of this not very conclusive chapter. For even though the Jews have at this point not yet defeated their enemy, Clines believes they might as well have already done so. “The gladness and joy, the feast and holiday, signify that the matter is settled, not that their [the Jews’] fate still hangs in the balance. So clear is it that
that Jews are destined for life that pagans spontaneously attach themselves to the Jewish community.” In fact Clines is so sure of the original plot ending at this point, so sure of the distinction he makes between Esther 1-8 and 9-10, he thinks he can even put his finger on the very way that this later author of Esther 9 misunderstood Esther 1-8, and thereby unwittingly revealed his “hamfisted” pen.

The narrator of ch. 9 has presented a Jewish massacre of anti-Semites rather than Jewish self-defense against an imperially sponsored pogrom. It cannot have served his purpose either as storyteller or as propagandist to have made this massacre the sequel of the conflicting decrees, and we can only conclude that the author of ch. 9 imperfectly understood the thrust of chs. 1–8. He knew chs. 1–8 only superficially as a story of Jewish triumph over a heathen plot — which indeed it is — and lacked the subtlety to imagine a victory that could not be quantified by a body-count. (40)

What Clines seems not to have understood, however, is what Meinhold does — that the structural importance that Esther 9 plays for the whole story is not to be discarded for the speculation of literary taste dressed up in the fancy garb of source or textual criticism. For even if we accept Clines’ suggestion — that by the end of Esther 8 the Jews have already vanquished their enemies, even though they have actually vanquished almost no one at all — we would not be able to appreciate one of the most important points of the whole Megillah: the reversal of all

---

39 David J.A. Clines, The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1984), 65. Clines also suggests, and I find somewhat strangely so, that Haman is the only enemy the Jews have. Are we really to think that this story, one that clearly plays on the insecurity of a people living outside of their ancestral land, would have had much cultural impact and lasting power had its readership understood no other possible antagonist lurking somewhere in the Persian empire? Are we to assume that Haman, as prime minister, is supposed to have absolutely no followers whatsoever? For it seems to me that herein lies the very point — in a foreign land, a powerful enemy is enough to turn a relatively accepting and well-minded majority into a rather dangerous proposition for a minority already on the defensive.

40 And even if this were true, Levenson notes why it would still be unlikely for the story to end so abruptly at this point. Responding directly to this issue, he writes, “In this connection it should be noted, first, that biblical narratives seldom end at the point of climax but usually wind down, often with more cultic or genealogical material, and second, that any form of Esther that ended without a description of what happened on Adar 13 would be strangely and atypically unsatisfying. As Paton remarks, given two contradictory royal edicts in force, one ordering attacks on the Jews and the other ordering Jewish attacks upon anti-Semites, ‘[l]ively times are to be anticipated.’ As we shall see in the next chapter, lively times are indeed to be the order of the day” (Esther, 117).
reversals that works itself out in Esther 9. Calling these events “Der Gewinn aus der Erhöhung Mardochais für das eigene Volk,” Meinhold discusses this victory. “Überschäumende Freude bei den Juden, Gelage, gute Tage, eine Vielzahl von Proselyten aus Furcht und Machtzuwachs für die Juden sind als Gewinn für das eigene Volk zu verstehen. Vergeltung und Vernichtung der Feinde dienen der Selbsterhaltung des eigenen Volkes” (II, 86-87). More to the point, however, is how this component of the story stands in relation to the rest of the plot line, the role it plays in the development of the overall book. It is not just that the Jews win, as Clines seems content to leave it — just as it was not just that Esther became queen, but rather that she became queen after Vashti was deposed for not coming before the king and Esther selected as her replacement after she comes before the king; much as it is not just that Joseph becomes vizier of Egypt but that he does so by interpreting dreams, the very thing that foreshadowed his ultimate rise but also landed him at the bottom of a waterless pit — but how they do it.

For it is by precisely the sort of over-aggressiveness that so repels Clines, Humphreys, and, for that matter, Berlin too, that this story of reversals is able to come to its final resting point. With the same amount of venom Haman intended for the Jews, so do the Jews unleash on anyone who may have agreed to conspire against them. And that this all works itself out on exactly the same day that this massacre was supposed to go in the other direction leaves not the subtlest of hints that the person responsible for putting this particular ending onto the book of Esther certainly understood a few things about the story correctly: Mordecai as prime minister, just like Esther as queen, was not, in fact, safe when only Haman had been killed; and like everything else in this book, so must this final twist find expression through the most improbable of all reversals.
My point is therefore not that the entire book of Esther was necessarily written by one person with one elegant pen at one time, but rather that the whole story, even the last few chapters, are now fully integrated into the larger plot movement. That we find a similar situation with the Joseph story — both in the larger picture and at a level of closer detail — suggests yet another intriguing similarity between these two texts: they also share a literary structure that is marked by a highly integrated and interconnected series of events. And when this consideration is added to the linguistic and thematic evidence already presented, the conclusion becomes all the clearer. These connections do not represent some sort of accident, coincidence, or nebulous association between the two stories, but rather that the author of the book of Esther knew and purposefully incorporated linguistic, thematic, and structural aspects of the Joseph story into his new book.
Chapter Four: The Contrast of Daniel

Having seen how the overarching structures of Joseph and Esther also exhibit crucial overlap, particular sections from the book of Daniel will now be examined for a point of contrast. For even though Daniel 1–6 also contains linguistic and thematic similarities to both Joseph and Esther, its markedly different literary shape, as will presently be drawn out, prevents these echoes from shaping the movement of the court narratives in any sort of continuous or sustained fashion.

Such an examination can begin with Daniel 1, where, along with the inauspicious note of exile, the story begins with what seems like a hint to both Joseph and Esther; and this first example will begin by highlighting important similarities with the Joseph story. Having already removed the Jews from their homeland, Nebuchadnezzar then starts a search for the wisest and most handsome men among the displaced Judeans. And when Daniel is situated in Nebuchadnezzar’s court with the other good-looking and wise Jews of the Babylonian exile, he takes his opportunity with the handsomeness and favor given to him by God. Adhering strictly to a vegetarian diet, he makes himself even better looking than before and attracts the attention of the foreign king. Not one to disappoint, his exceeding wisdom, which seems to be exactly what his good looks are expressing, cements his status as the best and wisest of the lot and confirms his rise in the Babylonian palace. And once again a linguistic parallel articulates these vaguer thematic connections specifically. Daniel’s good looks, which, like Joseph and Esther’s, also play such a pivotal role in his selection, are phrased in nearly identical terms: מראה טובי (Dan 1:4).

Just as Joseph and Esther’s deep falls and sharp rises kick the action of their respective plots into motion, so too does this unpredictable first chapter begin a set of stories that engage
one of the most important tensions underlying all three narratives: how are Jews to navigate the murky waters of living outside the land, remaining true to their ancestral traditions while not running too far afoul of their worldly rulers? It is then in this context that Daniel, much like the other two major characters surveyed in this study, distinguishes himself.

God made all four of these young men intelligent and proficient in all writings and wisdom, and Daniel had understanding of visions and dreams of all kinds. When the time the king had set for their presentation had come, the chief officer presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. The king spoke with them, and of them all none was equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so these entered the king's service. Whenever the king put a question to them requiring wisdom and understanding, he found them to be ten times better than all the magicians and exorcists throughout his realm. (Dan 1:17–20)

As Joseph separated himself from the Egyptian wise men with his exceeding wisdom and Esther herself from the other young women of the Persian empire with her particularly inviting beauty, Daniel seems to separate himself from the rest of the crowd with both. He is not only better looking, but also wiser; and even Nebuchadnezzar, the eternal enemy of the Jews, must choose him.

With this fainter hint of an association among all three of these texts, Daniel 2 strengthens the connection to the Joseph story; at the same time, however, this very connection also highlights a crucial structural difference between these two stories. When Joseph is first presented to the Pharaoh, the Egyptian ruler addresses the handsome and now clean-shaven Israelite standing before him with a turn of phrase productive throughout this whole story: “I have dreamt a dream,” (Gen 41:15). In fact this productive literary motif began with Joseph himself a few chapters earlier: after his brothers have seen his multi-colored coat, understood it as a sign of their father’s favor for their younger brother and hate him for it, his dream sequence then begins with a nearly identical linguistic construction. “He dreamt a
dream” (Gen 37:5), once again a verbal form of the root הָלָם paired with its cognate accusative. When Joseph then narrates this to his brothers, in what is perhaps the one mistake he makes in the whole story, we once again find this language. Imploring his brothers, Joseph exclaims, “Listen to this dream that I have dreamt!” or in Hebrew, שמעו את החלום הזה אשא (Gen 39:6). And even though “this dream” is not the formal object of “I have dreamt,” the echo of this verse and the one directly preceding it ring strongly in the Pharaoh’s narration of his own dreams in Genesis 41.

Moreover, like so many things in this story, Joseph’s dream sequence is doubled, and his second dream is introduced and then narrated with nearly identical language. After being sarcastically rebuked by his spiteful brothers for the contents of his seemingly self-serving first dream, Joseph compounds his mistake and explains to them his second. And this sequence too is narrated with that distinctive cognate accusative phrase, “Again he dreamt a dream,” עוד ויחלם (Gen 39:9). And once again, Joseph then echoes this narration of events in his own reporting to his brothers, “I have dreamt a dream again!” עוד חלמתי, using exactly the same language that Pharaoh will use to address him just a few chapters later. This phrase is then also picked up

41 As I tried to explain in a previous footnote (ch2, n3), actions that I think must be deemed mistakes in both the Joseph story and Megillah often result in opposite fortune. And here too is such a twist on display. For even though Joseph’s reporting of his highly suggestive dreams to his brothers is most certainly a show of his own selfish excitement, it is also the original impulse for sending him on his way to greatness. The interconnectedness of Joseph once again comes to the fore: only because he foolishly tells his brothers of his own illusions of grandeur do they then throw him in the pit (Gen 37:5–24); and only because he is cast into the pit does he then find his way, with the help of some opportunistic traders, to Egypt, where he will eventually become second in command over the entire land. That his rise in Egypt is also inherently linked to dreams underscores the many layers of Joseph’s childish approach to his brothers. As in the Megillah, where Mordecai’s strange and unadvisable show of public insubordination to the rash and unpredictably violent Haman paradoxically helps engender the great Jewish deliverance, so here does Joseph’s immaturity kickstart his own rise and the Israelites’ later deliverance in Egypt. Such angled and unpredictable ricochets do not, however, excuse or somehow justify Joseph’s original mistake; but they do offer a telling glimpse into seemingly contradictory negotiation between human action and divine control more; they do offer a more specific, and strangely self-referential, taste of Joseph’s famous words: “Although you intended me harm, God intended it for good” (Gen 50:20).
on by Jacob, who, like his older sons, chastises Joseph for the suggestive content of his night visions. “What is this dream that you have dreamt?!”

And if all this were not confusing enough, this very same expression is also used by both the cupbearer and baker. In the first instance in which Joseph’s words are echoed back to him, Joseph, the newly-appointed chief guard of the Egyptian prison, notices that his two new prisoners seem a bit out of sorts. When Joseph approaches them to find out what is bothering them, they respond with a very familiar phrase. “We dreamt dreams, and there is no one to interpret them” (Gen 40:8), once again a verbal form of מַלְאָךְ and its cognate accusative.

It is then exactly this threefold repetition of this phrase that the opening of Daniel 2 seems to be conjuring. For this chapter also begins with a verbal form of מַלְאָךְ and its cognate accusative, “Nebuchadnezzar dreamt dreams,” or חלומּות ינָבכֶדנֶנַּאר חלָם (Dan 2:1), thus invoking the Joseph story from the opening words. This verse continues to allude to Joseph: in the same way that the Pharaoh’s dreams “agitated his spirit,” so too do Nebuchadnezzar’s agitate his, חלָמות ינָבכֶדנֶנַּאר החתפּות רוחו (Dan 2:1). And just as the Pharaoh’s agitation pushes him to call on his wise men and sorcerers to interpret his confusing dream, so too does Nebuchadnezzar call on his wise men and sorcerers to interpret his troubling dream: ויקרא ויאמר למלך לברך כל חכמה ו שכל חכמה (Gen 41:8), and ויאמר המלך לברך את חכםים ותרכם חכמה (Dan 2:1). And so, in order to draw out the point I am making, I have here substituted my more literal, if not a bit clumsier English, translation: “We dreamt dreams.”

---

42 I have here, as usual, used the NJPS translation. However, here I have decided to change the translation slightly. The NJPS of verse eight reads, “We had dreams,” which is a less literal rendering of the Hebrew, חלום וחלמים. And so, in order to draw out the point I am making, I have here substituted my more literal, if not a bit clumsier English, translation: “We dreamt dreams.”
In both cases the wise men’s inability to interpret their ruler’s dreams creates the opening for Joseph and Daniel to rise. When the Egyptian sorcerers fail Pharaoh, the restored cupbearer intercedes on Joseph’s behalf and Joseph, the handsome young Israelite, is brought to the royal court; when the Babylonian sorcerers fail Nebuchadnezzar, Arioch intercedes on Daniel’s behalf and this handsome Jewish man is brought before Nebuchadnezzar. And just as these lead-ups exhibit linguistic and thematic similarities, so too do the exchanges between Joseph and Daniel with their respective rulers show noteworthy overlaps. When the Pharaoh addresses Joseph with that distinctive phrase, “I have dreamt a dream,” he then goes on to explain why he has had Joseph rushed out of jail and brought to the seat of power, “I have heard that you listen to dreams to interpret them” (Gen 41:15). And as quickly as the Pharaoh offers Joseph the slightest bit of agency, our by now so completely upstanding young protagonist is just as quick to move all of the credit back to God: “It is not I!,” he exclaims in response, “But rather God who will look after the Pharaoh’s well-being” (Gen 41:16).

In very similar fashion, when Daniel is presented to the Babylonian king after the wise men cannot make sense of his dream, Nebuchadnezzar addresses Daniel just as Pharaoh did Joseph. “Can you really make known to me the dream that I saw and its meaning?” (Dan 2:26). And just as Joseph responds with humble piety, so too does Daniel explain to Nebuchadnezzar that only God can complete the impossible task the Babylonian ruler is demanding. “The mystery about which the king has inquired—wise men, exorcists, magicians, and diviners cannot
tell to the king. But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries, and He has made known to
King Nebuchadnezzar what is to be at the end of days” (Dan 2:27–28).

Moreover, the interpretations given by these two handsome Israelite men also show broad
similarities. Just as Joseph turns Pharaoh’s seven cows and seven ears into state policy, so too
does Daniel turn the four materials of Nebuchadnezzar’s dreamed statue into world politics. That
both foreign rulers accept the interpretations provided by their Jewish wise men and then honor
and raise them up in their respective foreign courts completes the link: Joseph becomes second-
in-command over all of Egypt for his interpretative abilities just as Daniel becomes governor
over the whole province of Babylon for his interpretative prowess.43

These same overlaps, however, draw out an important distinction in the function of dream
narratives in both stories. In the Joseph story, the dream motif is not at all limited to Genesis 41,
but, as we have seen, runs throughout the whole novella. Not only does its sustained presence
create a constantly self-referential quality, it also helps to tighten the connection between the
distinct elements of the plot. For in one sense it is really Joseph’s dreams that not only plunged
him to the bottom of that pit, but also gave him the chance to interpret the cupbearer and baker’s;
for had he not been discarded by his brothers, he never would have been in the position even to
meet, let alone be come on to so repeatedly by Potiphar’s wife. If his own dreams begin his
downfall and the cupbearer’s and baker’s his rise, then it is Pharaoh’s dreams that cement his

43 Some fifty years ago, Norman Porteous also noted this relationship. In his commentary to Daniel 2, he
remarks, “One is reminded of the somewhat similar narrative in Gen. 41 which tells how the Egyptian
Pharaoh had a dream which troubled him, and how, as in the story under consideration [Daniel 2], a
Hebrew youth, endowed with the gift of interpretation by God, is able to interpret the dream and so
confound all the magicians and wise men of Egypt who had shown their complete incapacity to solve the
astounding ascent. For when he interprets them correctly, not only is his policy recommendation
accepted, but he himself is also promoted.

The plan pleased Pharaoh and all his courtiers. And Pharaoh said to his courtiers, “Could
we find another like him, a man in whom is the spirit of God?” So Pharaoh said to
Joseph, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is none so discerning and wise
as you. You shall be in charge of my court, and by your command shall all my people be
directed; only with respect to the throne shall I be superior to you.” Pharaoh further said
to Joseph, “See, I put you in charge of all the land of Egypt.” And removing his signet
ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; and he had him dressed in robes of
fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck. He had him ride in the chariot of his
second-in-command, and they cried before him, “Abrek!” Thus he placed him over all the
land of Egypt. (Gen 41:37–43)

In Daniel, however, while this motif punctuates different moments throughout the court
narratives and, in so doing, recalls important parts of the Joseph story, it does not interconnect
the events as it does in Joseph. For even though Nebuchadnezzar’s premonitory dreams and
Daniel’s correct interpretation of them returns in Daniel 4, this second dream narrative is not a
direct outgrowth of the first. Strangely turning to the first person, this episode begins with
Nebuchadnezzar as the new narrator.

I, Nebuchadnezzar, was living serenely in my house, flourishing in my palace. I had a
dream that frightened me, and my thoughts in bed and the vision of my mind alarmed me.
I gave an order to bring all the wise men of Babylon before me to let me know the
meaning of the dream. The magicians, exorcists, Chaldeans, and diviners came, and I
related the dream to them, but they could not make its meaning known to me. Finally,
Daniel, called Belteshazzar after the name of my god, in whom the spirit of the holy gods
was, came to me, and I related the dream to him, [saying], “Belteshazzar, chief magician,
in whom I know the spirit of the holy gods to be, and whom no mystery baffles, tell me
the meaning of my dream vision that I have seen. (Dan 4:1–6)

The echoes to Daniel 2 — and even back to the Joseph story — are already strong: once
again a foreign ruler dreams; once again his wise men cannot make sense of it; and, once again
he must call in a young, good-looking Jew to interpret his troubling visions for him. This time,
However, the Jew finds his revenge against the great Babylonian king. For after Nebuchadnezzar recounts to him the contents of his dream — something he strangely refused to do in Daniel 2 — Daniel is left the unpleasant task of making its not so favorable interpretation known to the king.

Then Daniel, called Belteshazzar, was perplexed for a while, and alarmed by his thoughts. The king addressed him, “Let the dream and its meaning not alarm you.” Belteshazzar replied, “My lord, would that the dream were for your enemy and its meaning for your foe! The tree that you saw grow and become mighty, whose top reached heaven, which was visible throughout the earth, whose foliage was beautiful, whose fruit was so abundant that there was food for all in it, beneath which the beasts of the field dwelt, and in whose branches the birds of the sky lodged — it is you, O king, you who have grown and become mighty, whose greatness has grown to reach heaven, and whose dominion is to the end of the earth. The holy Watcher whom the king saw descend from heaven and say,

Hew down the tree and destroy it,  
But leave the stump with its roots in the ground.  
In fetters of iron and bronze  
In the grass of the field,  
Let him be drenched with the dew of heaven,  
And share the lot of the beasts of the field  
Until seven seasons pass over him—

this is its meaning, O king; it is the decree of the Most High which has overtaken my lord the king. You will be driven away from men and have your habitation with the beasts of the field. You will be fed grass like cattle, and be drenched with the dew of heaven; seven seasons will pass over you until you come to know that the Most High is sovereign over the realm of man, and He gives it to whom He wishes. And the meaning of the command to leave the stump of the tree with its roots is that the kingdom will remain yours from the time you come to know that Heaven is sovereign. Therefore, O king, may my advice be acceptable to you: Redeem your sins by beneficence and your iniquities by generosity to the poor; then your serenity may be extended.” (Dan 4:16–24)

That all of this befalls Nebuchadnezzar is the point of the pericope: worldly power, and any claim to it, means nothing in the context of the awesome and almighty authority of the divine. And for sure this whole dream sequence reminds of the previously discussed ones in Daniel 2 and Genesis 41, but the point here is that the development in Daniel 4 in no way
requires the events of Daniel 2 in the same way that the sequence of the Pharaoh’s dreams, and Joseph’s interpretation of them (Genesis 41), is wholly dependent on the cupbearer’s and baker’s (Genesis 40) and Joseph’s (Genesis 37). While there are obvious and important connections back to the previous court narratives scattered throughout Daniel 4, none of them actually demand the particular character and content of this chapter. Even if we conclude that Daniel is only called to Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4 because of his rise in Daniel 1, such an interconnection, weak as it may be, would not demand the strange contents of the foreign ruler’s dream and its bizarre reflection in reality; even if we did say that it was, at least in part, the contents of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in Daniel 2 that evinced the sort of arrogance for which he is being humbled in Daniel 4, he certainly would not have to be turned into an animal for this process to play itself out. The point that cannot be skirted is that the stories that make up the court narratives, stories that certainly contain moments of resonance and connection among them, are not directly dependent upon each other. And that this stands in such contradistinction to the way the different scenes in the Joseph story and Esther book are woven together not only helps to show how Daniel’s interaction with these two stories is more removed, but, from a different angle, also highlights the particularly close nature of Esther’s interaction with Joseph.

Turning to examine Daniel’s relationship to the book of Esther, once again similar sorts of ricochets seem to bounce back and forth between the two texts. For Daniel 5, much like the opening chapter of the Megillah, begins with a motif that is most productive in Esther — banquets thrown by a fictitious foreign king. This chapter begins, “King Belshazzar gave a great banquet for his thousand nobles, and in the presence of the thousand he drank wine” (Dan 5:1), in very similar fashion to Esth 1:3, “In the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all the
officials and courtiers—the administration of Persia and Media, the nobles and the governors of the provinces in his service.” And even though the language has changed to Aramaic, the linguistic echo is faint but still discernible: both kings give banquets, and in both cases this feast is for the nobles of the kingdom, and even though the language has changed to Aramaic, the linguistic echo is faint but still discernible: both kings give banquets, and in both cases this feast is for the nobles of the kingdom.44

At the Persian banquet, Ahasueros waits until he has had a bit to drink before sending his order for the queen to be brought before him: “On the seventh day, when the king was merry with wine, he ordered Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs in attendance on King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman” (Esth 1:10–11). And at the Babylonian party, so too does Belshazzar wait for his wine to kick in before he orders for the vessels from Jerusalem to be brought before him: “Under the influence of the wine, Belshazzar ordered the gold and silver vessels (עכשפא דָּבָא לְמַן) that his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken out of the temple at Jerusalem to be brought so that the king and his nobles, his consorts, and his concubines could drink from them” (Dan 5:2).45

The linguistic and thematic similarities continue. Belshazzar’s banquet, which begins so merry, deteriorates with the same speed and intensity as Ahasueros’s does. In Esther 1, when Vashti refuses her happily intoxicated husband’s summon, the king becomes enraged. “The king was greatly incensed, and his fury burned within him” (Esth 1:12). In Daniel 5, as the guests of

44 As far as I can tell, Rosenthal (“Die Josephsgeschichte,” 281) was again the first to note this connection.

45 The emphasis on the vessels in this verse is also an echo of the opening banquet in Esther, where Ahasueros’s golden vessels also receive special attention with similar language: “Royal wine was served in abundance, as befits a king, in golden beakers (בכלי זהב), beakers of varied design” (Esth 1:7).
the Babylonian court are enjoying their drinks and praising their gods, a mysterious hand appears and the mood of the once merry and tipsy king changes just as dramatically. “The king's face darkened, and his thoughts alarmed him; the joints of his loins were loosened and his knees knocked together” (Dan 5:6). And just as Ahasuerus turns to his sagacious counselors for guidance in his moment of rage, “Then the king consulted the sages learned in procedure" (Esth 1:13), so too does Belshazzar turn to his advisors for help in deciphering the mysterious writing in his moment of alarm, “The king called loudly for the exorcists, Chaldeans, and diviners to be brought” (Dan 5:7).

In a pattern that should by now be quite familiar, Belshazzar’s advisors are unable to help and the queen must intercede to bring in Daniel, a good-looking young Jewish man, to interpret the cryptic markings on the wall, engendering his rise in the Babylonian court yet again. And when Daniel once again arrives before a Babylonian king, the foreign ruler explains his problem and then offers a handsome reward. “Now if you can read the writing and make known its meaning to me, you shall be clothed in purple and wear a golden chain on your neck and rule as one of three in the kingdom” (Dan 5:16). And this is exactly what happens: Daniel correctly deciphers the writing on the wall, and even though its message is damning to the king — “MENE—God has numbered [the days of] your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL—you have been weighed in the balance and found wanting; PERES—your kingdom has been divided and given to the Medes and the Persians” (Dan 5:26-28) — the fictitious Babylonian monarch keeps his word and has Daniel honored just as he had promised. “Then, at Belshazzar's command, they clothed Daniel in purple, placed a golden chain on his neck, and proclaimed that
he should rule as one of three in the kingdom,” or in Aramaic, "אמור להם בלשניהם שלושה לuntsא, (Dan 5:29).

And this verse is echoed back in the Esther book on two different occasions: chapter eight, and the narration of Mordecai’s being honored in Persia; and chapter six, and the ironic, even farcical, scene of Haman’s misunderstanding followed by Mordecai’s initial rise. After Esther has outsmarted Haman and revealed him to be the author of the murderous decree leveled against the Jews, Ahasuerus orders for him to be hanged. But even though the evil Persian prime minister has been deposed, his edict still remains valid and Esther must approach her husband with one last request. “If it please Your Majesty, and if I have won your favor and the proposal seems right to Your Majesty, and if I am pleasing to you — let dispatches be written countermanding those which were written by Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, embodying his plot to annihilate the Jews throughout the king’s provinces. For how can I bear to see the disaster which will befall my people! And how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred!” (Esth 8:5–6). And once again the king agrees to Esther’s demand, allowing her and Mordecai to write a counter-decree in the king’s name and stamp it with the royal seal. And after all of this, once Mordecai’s elevated position has been cemented, he emerges honored just as Daniel does. “Mordecai left the king’s presence in royal robes of blue and white, with a magnificent crown of gold and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool,” or מרדכי יצא מלפני המלך ולבושו שלוש כוכבים ועטרת גדולה时光 ומרדכי וארגמן (Esth 8:15). The sort of clothing Daniel receives in 5:29, purple to represent the royal (ארוגנה in Aramaic) is reminiscent of the purple mantle of fine wool that Mordecai is wearing, וממריד ברימ וארוגנה; and the golden chain around
Daniel’s neck, also echoes the golden crown Mordecai has on his head, צוארה על ד שאהcommitted.

This important verse, Dan 5:29, echoes even a second moment in the Megillah. In Esther 6, a chapter Levenson aptly characterizes as “farce and omen” (Esther, 94), Haman has come to the king’s chambers in order to ask for permission to execute Mordecai, his mortal enemy, for refusing to bow down to him. The king, however, having suffered from a spell of insomnia, has just heard that Mordecai saved his life from Bigthan and Teresh’s planned insurrection. Wishing to honor Mordecai, certainly not hang him, the king then asks his painfully ignorant prime minister, “What should be done for the man the king wishes to honor?” (Esth 6:6) Haman, ever the narcissist, is convinced that the king must be referring to him, and begins rattling off all of the many honors he hopes, and fully expects, to receive: royal clothes, a royal horse, and a royal diadem upon his head (Esth 6:8). And as if this were not enough, the insatiable Haman also needs public adoration: he suggests that this man also be taken through the city to cries of his royal favor. In Hebrew, this whole verse reads, נטן הלבוש והפסנ של מיוחד המלך איש יד על והסוס הלבוש ונתון המלך איש את ולבישו בלשון פנים המלך אשר איש את והלבישו בקטר (Esth 6:9).

That it is Mordecai who is the recipient of all these honors is the crux of Levenson’s sagacious point — this dramatic turn of events is not only a sort of sarcastic joke, for it also marks the beginning of Mordecai’s improbable rise and Haman’s dramatic fall. The crux of the point here, however, is that this verse shows important linguistic similarities to Dan 5:29. Haman’s suggestion to the king, that the man whom he wishes to honor be clothed in royal garb, unveiled committing, is expressed in nearly identical fashion in Dan 5:29.
public affirmation Mordecai receives, “And they shall proclaim before him: This is what is done for the man whom the king desires to honor!” is echoed by the public declaration of Daniel’s rule in 5:29, “They proclaimed that he should rule as one of three in the kingdom.”

Once again, however, these linguistic and thematic similarities also call attention to an important difference. In the Megillah, this scene plays a crucial role in setting up the overall resolution of the plot. The reversal, as Levenson has noted, is not only funny, but also portentous. For it is exactly at this moment that the swing in the momentum of the plot is most poignantly articulated: Mordecai is on the rise, and Haman about to fall before him. But it is not only the prefiguring of this conclusion that this scene so boldly articulates, but it also, as Meinhold’s work so nicely captured, could have only come about because of that which came before it. Only because Esther approached the king, and only because she strangely hesitated in asking for the king to help her people, does she instead decide to host a banquet for the king and Haman — a strange twist, to invite the man she is trying to defeat to a party. And only because Haman comes does he have occasion to walk by Mordecai, who yet again refuses to bow down to the prime minister. And only because Haman is, strangely enough, able to control himself (ויתאפק) when confronted with Mordecai’s repeated insubordination does he then divulge his hatred of him to his wife and friends, who then brilliantly suggest that he hatch a plan to hang his now mortal enemy.

If this wholly integrated movement is what brings about this most ironic moment in the Megillah, then what follows is equally dependent on it. After Haman has been royally embarrassed, having to parade Mordecai around with all of the honors he had intended for himself, he, understandably so, hurries home. And there, after once again divulging all the details
to his wife, it is Zeresh who issues a proclamation that is this time more on target: “If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish stock, you will not overcome him; you will fall before him to your ruin” (Esth 6:13). And at this exact moment, with such powerful and foreboding words rattling around in his already rattled head, he is summoned to Esther’s second banquet. That his unraveling is completed at this second of Esther’s not so merry parties makes the point: not only entertaining, this episode in Esther 6 is highly integrated into and crucial for the rest of the book.

The same, however, cannot be said of Daniel 5, and the episode narrated there. For, as I suggested with respect to Daniel 2 and 4, it is not that Daniel 5 is not connected at all to what is around it; but rather that the plot line of this chapter is not completely dependent upon the happenings of the rest of the book. For in fact, in what may seem like a rejoinder to this suggestion, Carol Newsom makes the compelling claim that Daniel 3-6 really do have an overarching cohesion, and that chapter 4 stands at the climax of it. As Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3 thought that his statue was worthy of praise and his over-the-top punishment would defeat any insolence, so too does the Babylonian king in Daniel 4 think that he is the great builder of his empire and the ultimate ruler over his domain. And in both cases, the fantastic events that follow prove otherwise. Moreover, these events are then also recalled in the happenings of the next few chapters. Daniel 5 is yet another story about Daniel’s interpretive prowess and a foreign king’s damning arrogance, and Daniel 6, in a strong echo of Daniel 3, includes a doxology quite similar to the one found at the end of Daniel 4 — the chapter that holds so much of this together. Newsom makes her elegant point.
Daniel 4 plays a climactic role in the sequence of stories in Dan 1-6. Although deriving from originally independent traditions, chs. 1-4 have been carefully edited together to provide an extended account of the global transformation of Nebuchadnezzar’s consciousness from a king who considers himself to be the most powerful figure in his kingdom to one who recognizes that his extraordinary greatness is but a gift from the Most High God. Chapter 5, which in the MT has been closely linked to ch. 4 through an extended summary of those events (5:11-12, 18-21), uses the redeemed Nebuchadnezzar as a foil over against his weak and arrogant son, Belshazzar. Chapter 6, though about Darius the Mede, recapitulates the theme of the supremacy of the Most High, concluding with a doxology that strongly echoes those in Dan 4.46

Even in the somewhat disjointed section of the court narratives, Newsom argues, this chapter stands in the middle, recalling the earlier narratives and being recalled by the later ones.

However, while fully granting Newsom’s fine point, it is still crucial to note that this sort of “climactic role” is to be differentiated from the climaxes found in both the Joseph story and Esther book. Unlike the opening of Genesis 45 and Esther’s second banquet scene, the events of Daniel 4 do not solve any major conflict or serve as the final resolution of a plot movement that extends beyond the confines of this episode. Since there is no single, unifying plot movement in these court narratives — no familial drama expressed through the stress of a famine, no single murderous edict and the Jews’ efforts to save themselves from it — then the center can hold the pieces of this disparate plot together only through thematic association, and not by unifying or resolving the disparate elements of the plot in the same way that the tighter structures of Joseph and Esther allow.

This comparison with Daniel brings an important point into sharper relief: the book of Esther was not somehow destined, simply by means of its content, language, or style, to follow the structure of Joseph. For the book of Daniel also shares the linguistic and thematic affinities,

but is still to be firmly distinguished from our chain of comparison on structural grounds. And
this threefold connection stands at the heart of the argument concerning the intentionality of
Esther’s usage of Joseph: it is not only that the author of Esther purposefully alluded to and
engaged with the story of Joseph through linguistic and thematic similarities, but also that he
took the literary form of Joseph as a sort of model from which he built his own, new narrative.47
For it is in large part due to the structural similarity between Joseph and Esther that the short
notice concerning Esther’s good looks can ricochet so continuously against such a similar
movement in the equally integrated plot movement of Joseph; that the seldom-used root קַפָּא can
influence the events of the Megillah, where Mordecai’s rise is so dependent on Haman’s fall, as
much as in the Joseph story, where familial reunification is so intertwined with the vizier’s steely
self-control. That the obviously distinct form of Daniel does not support such a sustained
relationship — dreams and banquets stand at the heart of the stories in Daniel 2 and 5, but their
presence and function in the book are not wholly dependent on their somewhat looser
relationship to the events that surround them — in no way takes away from their existence and
importance, but it does suggest that the nature of Daniel’s relationship to both texts is
categorically different from that of Esther’s to Joseph.

47 Of course I must admit my reliance on but also distinction from both Rosenthal, and his suggestion that
Joseph was taken as a Vorbild for linguistic reasons (“Die Josephsgeschichte,” 284), and Gan, who
suggests that the Megillah was built under Joseph’s influence (“Megillat ‘Esther,” 144).
Chapter Five: Esther’s Audience

In a recent book, Jonathan Grossman has argued for two distinct layers of meaning inside the Megillah: a plain and simpler sense, and a deeper more allusive one that his interpretation is designed to reveal. And more often than not, Grossman suggests, these two levels do not overlap, as an example from Esther 2 makes clear. For according to Grossman’s plain sense reading, the text here actually portrays Ahasuerus in a positive light. Somehow not evincing the callousness that is so often associated with the mass gathering of and forced sexual encounters with scores of virgins, Grossman thinks that the most basic meaning of the story is intended to highlight Ahasuerus’ warm-heartedness toward the fairer sex.

The gathering of the women reflects not only the the king’s power but also, as noted, his generosity: the king showers all the young women of the kingdom with every sort of benefit. This impression is first created by the attendants’ suggestion that the king should appoint officers “in every province of your realm” and that they should bring to the royal palace “all the beautiful young virgins.” In the ancient world, kings prided themselves on the size of their harems. Here, Ahasuerus demonstrates his power and prowess by gathering a great many women. (58)

But for Grossman, as is often the case in his exegetical strategy, the straw man that is this plain sense reading only sets up the deeper, and far more important, revealed meaning. And for this dissertation, the methodological difference between these two approaches is as important as the exegetical one: for it is, in Grossman’s program, only the hidden readings that can hear and appreciate links to other biblical texts in the book of Esther. And in such a system, this sharp dichotomy forces the hidden sense to be so often at odds with the plain one.

Such a process begins to work itself out in Grossman’s exegesis of Esther 2. For if the narrative itself, according to Grossman, actually promotes a positive picture of Ahasuerus, then it

is only at the hidden level, achieved through a series of covert but crucial allusions to other biblical texts, that Ahasueros’s otherwise favorable depiction can at all be undermined. “A reader who is open to the hidden reading will sense the biting criticism that pervades the entire chapter [Esther 2]. The author’s criticism of the way in which the new queen is chosen hints, as in so many other instances throughout the narrative at a different narrative describing a search for a companion for the king” (58). My disagreement is sharp, for I contend that even readers who are not open to or capable of more sophisticated methods of reading can still hear the biting criticism of Ahasueros ringing loudly and clearly throughout Esther 2 and the rest of the Megillah.

The first of these invoked texts, Grossman informs us, is from the end of the David story and the beginning of the succession narrative. Reminiscent of David’s authorizing a search to find a young woman to keep him warm in his old age, Ahasueros seeks a new female companion to keep him more than just warm in his prime. Coupled with a few linguistic similarities, Grossman believes these two considerations to be more than enough to prove an intentional and author-oriented intertextual relationship: David has his emissaries sent out throughout his kingdom to look for a pretty young woman, ובכלה יאשה בכל גבול ישראל (1 Kgs 1:3), much as Ahasueros does in Esther, ובכלה יאשה_THAT ב陲ולה Тоיהת מראות, and, in the very next verse, “all of the provinces” are invoked, בכל פדינה, much like the passage from 1 Kings speaks of the “entire area of Israel.” But it is the differences between these two events, Grossman suggests, that holds the key to exposing the all-important hidden reading and revealing the real meaning of this chapter.

In contrast [to Ahasueros’s gathering of all the virgins], the proposal of David’s servants is that the king’s emissaries should go all about the country seeking a fair maiden; the one whom they deem suitable shall be brought to the king’s palace. The difference is not
trivial — especially from the perspective of the women themselves. The women who spend the night in the palace but ultimately are not chosen as queen may not return to their families or marry another man. After each has had her liaison with the king, she “leaves in the morning for a second harem” (2:14), where she must live as one of the king’s concubines. The personal tragedy of each of them is obvious: each woman can only live in hope that one day the king will remember her and call upon her again for another one-time encounter. (59)

While Grossman may in fact be right — that the difference may not have been all that trivial to the women characters in both stories — his conclusion, however, lacks any real punch. “The association with the alternative scene, the finding of a companion for David, invites criticism of Ahasuerus and his treatment of women. As the story of David demonstrates, the process could have been undertaken in a different way” (59). Left then in the unconvincing position of holding up the troubled King David as the biblical hero joining the chorus of growing voices demanding equal pay for equal work, he is forced to conclude that it is not the process of letting Ahasuerus chose a wife by spending an amorous evening with as many of the virgins in his whole empire as he pleases that is problematic, but rather how this otherwise completely acceptable courting process is carried out.

The next text to which Esther 2 alludes is, according to Grossman, the Joseph story, and he again takes just a cursory look at a few linguistic similarities to prove an author-oriented and intentional intertextuality. Both texts record “appointing officers,” (Gen 41:34, Esth 2:3); both employ the root for “keeping,” ש.מ.ר; and both include a phrase for “pleasing,” המלך בעיניו מיטב (Esth 2:4). For some reason less concerned this time with the differences between these two texts, Grossman sees a direct comparison between the gathering of the maidens in Esther and the storing of the grain in Joseph. “The perspective offered in this comparison gives readers the sense that the king treats the maidens like grain that
must be gathered. The ‘gathering’ of the women from every place to the palace, where they are ‘kept’ in the hand of Hegai, indeed arouses an image of collecting objects or storing food in times of need” (60).

But such a one-to-one comparison blatantly disregards the crucial differences between the contexts in which these events are embedded. When Joseph recommends that the grain harvested over the next five years of plenty be gathered and then stored for the coming seven years of famine, the Pharaoh, all of Egypt, and really, for the biblical author, the whole world is in great and impending danger. The course of action Joseph recommends is thus driven by his desire to encourage the Pharaoh to implement a policy that best addresses the complicated situation and responsibly serves his subjects. By contrast, Ahasueros has all the maidens in his vast empire gathered to his palace to solve a problem that not only causes no danger, but one that he himself has created. Had he just not so rashly deposed Vashti for her respectable if not perhaps a bit naive refusal to approach him, then there never would have been a state crisis in the first place.

The point, then, is not to deny that this relationship to the Joseph story may in fact at this point add an extra layer to the criticism leveled against Ahasueros, but rather that it only does so in an additional sort of way. For the main thrust of the criticism of the inept Persian monarch comes — contra Grossman — most powerfully from the narrative of Esther itself. And moreover, this not all that subtle criticism of Ahasueros at this early moment in the book of Esther is centered on exactly the point under discussion — his at times cruel and completely ineffective treatment of women. When he in his drunken stupor shamelessly summons the queen of Persia to come before him so her beauty can be marveled at by her husband’s subjects and drinking buddies, his total lack of control over his own wife — and this coming from a man who
is supposedly the most powerful in the whole world — is on clear display for all at his huge party to see. And so he turns his personal insecurity into unbendable but also completely untenable state policy: if he has no influence over Vashti, then all wives in his entire empire must always obey their husbands. The irony and critique are as biting as they are obvious: Ahasueros’s treatment of women is as foolish as his rule is clueless. Any affinities with the David or Joseph stories may at this point deepen or add an extra layer to this devastatingly leveled critique, but they are certainly not needed to create it.

In almost every case this example proves illustrative: the connections to Joseph found in Esther neither reverse nor contradict the reading that the narrative of the Megillah itself suggests; rather, they add emphasis to moments and ideas already present and productive by suggesting auxiliary, suggestive contexts for the transpiring events in Persia. And, for one last rap on my drum, a final example of a linguistic similarity articulating a thematic one will help to illustrate this last, and most crucial, idea.

*  

When Genesis 43 opens, the Israelites find themselves in a very difficult position: the famine is intensifying, but they can buy no more grain from Egypt, the only place where food is still available, unless they bring their youngest brother Benjamin down with them — exactly what their father has already forbidden (Gen 42:38). That Joseph is, at least to some degree, the architect of this whole situation makes the biting irony all the more acute: when Joseph was still at home and the apple of his father’s eye, it was his being thrown into the dry pit by his brothers that made Benjamin, now ostensibly the only remaining son to Jacob’s beloved wife, all the more
precious; that Joseph is now the one endangering Benjamin, his only full brother, signifies yet another powerful reversal in a story chock-full of them.

Even though the reader knows that this time the brothers are telling the truth, that the vizier of Egypt has actually demanded that Benjamin accompany them on any future trip, Jacob’s refusal is still understandable. For each time he has sent his sons away, they have always returned with one less — first Joseph, and then Simeon. And as a sort of replacement for Joseph, Jacob cannot risk Benjamin’s life too — and sending him on a journey with his brothers is, as has now been proved twice, more than just a risk. Recounting their exchange with the vizier of Egypt, the brothers try to explain to their father how it has come to all of this.

When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had befallen them, saying, “The man who is lord of the land spoke harshly to us and accused us of spying on the land. We said to him, ‘We are honest men; we have never been spies! There were twelve of us brothers, sons by the same father; but one is no more, and the youngest is now with our father in the land of Canaan.’ But the man who is lord of the land said to us, ‘By this I shall know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me, and take something for your starving households and be off. And bring your youngest brother to me, that I may know that you are not spies but honest men. I will then restore your brother to you, and you shall be free to move about in the land.”’ (Gen 42:29–34)

And in case things were not yet quite uncomfortable enough for this embittered and embattled family, their discomfort increases when the brothers finally get to unpacking. “As they were emptying their sacks, there, in each one's sack, was his money-bag! When they and their father saw their money-bags, they were dismayed. Their father Jacob said to them, ‘It is always me that you bereave: Joseph is no more and Simeon is no more, and now you would take away Benjamin. These things always happen to me!’” (Gen 42:35–36). And with a suggestion about as

49 On this issue, see Levenson, Death and Resurrection, 163.
wrongheaded as the entire mess in which they now find themselves, Reuben seems to prove his father’s reluctance to send Benjamin along with his other sons correct. “Then Reuben said to his father, ‘You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my care, and I will return him to you.’ But he said, ‘My son must not go down with you, for his brother is dead and he alone is left. If he meets with disaster on the journey you are taking, you will send my white head down to Sheol in grief’” (Gen 42:37–38). As Professor Levenson once quipped in class, “Every father who loses a son wants nothing more than to lose two grandsons as well.”

So when the famine intensifies in the very next verse (Gen 43:1), Jacob finds himself caught between the Scylla of starvation and Charybdis of losing Benjamin. Offering the first example of his rhetorical prowess, Judah, just as he does in Genesis 44, talks his way out of a seemingly impossible corner.

Then Judah said to his father Israel, “Send the boy in my care, and let us be on our way, that we may live and not die—you and we and our children. I myself will be surety for him; you may hold me responsible: if I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, I shall stand guilty before you forever. For we could have been there and back twice if we had not dawdled.” (Gen 43:8–10)

Judah’s reassuring is as powerful as his delivery is effective: you must send Benjamin or he, along with the rest of us, will surely die. Having the terms of his decision dictated to him, Jacob must agree to the more mature sounding and persuasive Judah. But his consent is not to be mistaken for any abolitionment of his still lingering, innermost fears; his is not the blind courage that does not even perceive the danger, but rather a father’s resignation to his grown-up children: all too aware of the dangers of the outside world, but no longer able to keep his still beloved but

---

50 Professor Levenson, in his “Joseph and Esther” seminar, Spring 2013, Harvard University.
no longer that little offspring away from them, he somewhere knows that he must release his sons to the dangerous but necessary journey that awaits them all.

Then their father Israel said to them, “If it must be so, do this: take some of the choice products of the land in your baggage, and carry them down as a gift for the man—some balm and some honey, gum, ladanum, pistachio nuts, and almonds. And take with you double the money, carrying back with you the money that was replaced in the mouths of your bags; perhaps it was a mistake. Take your brother too; and go back at once to the man. And may El Shaddai dispose the man to mercy toward you, that he may release to you your other brother, as well as Benjamin. (Gen 43:11–14)

That, however, he recognizes the difficult but real possibility of El Shaddai not staving off what seems to be so inexorably approaching his sons finds expression in Jacob’s final words, phrased with a powerfully brave resignation and a peculiar, and therefore quite memorable, syntax. “If I am to be bereaved, I will be bereaved,” (Gen 43:14).

When Esther 4 opens, the Jews of Susa find themselves in an equally uncomfortable predicament. For 10,000 talents of silver, the wicked but somehow still favored Haman has convinced the king to authorize, unwittingly so, an edict calling for the extermination of his new queen’s people. That it is Mordecai who finds out about all of this and then seeks to remedy it is as ironic as Joseph’s demanding that Benjamin be separated from his father. For it was Mordecai himself, and his strange refusal to bow down to Haman, that engendered this horrible edict in the first place. Showing straight away the depth of his great character, Haman’s first move as prime minister is to insist that all bow low to him. And when Mordecai strangely refuses, the seeds for this major conflict of the Megillah are sowed. “Some time afterward, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite; he advanced him and seated him higher than any of his fellow officials. All the king's courtiers in the palace gate knelt and bowed low to Haman, for
such was the king's order concerning him; but Mordecai would not kneel or bow low” (Esth 3:1–2).

When the other courtiers then ask Mordecai why he is refusing the king’s law — with language reminiscent of Mrs. Potiphar’s repeated approaches to Joseph — he never answers; but he also does not budge from his position of insolence. When Haman then hears of Mordecai’s repeated insubordination, the reader is given his first glimpse into a rage that will play a large part throughout the rest of the Megillah. “When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel or bow low to him, Haman was filled with 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, Mordecai’s people, throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus” (Esth 3:5–6). After the casting of lots to determine the timing of his wholly unnecessary pogrom, Haman approaches Ahasueros to seek royal permission for his murderous intent.

Haman then said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in Your Majesty's interest to tolerate them. If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the stewards for deposit in the royal treasury.” (Esth 3:8–9)

The king, displaying his by now characteristic pliancy, agrees without further inquiry (Esth 3:10–11). The identity of the people he has just condemned to death, why their presence is so intolerable in his massive empire, or even just when this aggression will be carried out — all of this is apparently of no interest to the heavily satirized Persian monarch. And when the decree

51 As briefly mentioned in chapter one, Rosenthal also called attention to this linguistic similarity as well (“Die Josephsgeschichte,” 279).
is written and then sent out across the empire, the Jews’ fate, gloomy as it is, seems equally sealed.

Learning of all of this, Mordecai begins his response to the terrible news with about as much success as Reuben’s initial attempt to convince his father in Genesis 43. Appearing in sackcloth and ashes at the palace gate — which is yet another violation of the apparently unbendable Persian Law — Mordecai attracts the wrong sort of attention from his kinswoman Queen Esther (Esth 4:1–2). Learning of his presence in the court, Esther’s first reaction seems to be one of embarrassment, sending him a change of clothes so that he can at least dress himself properly for his surroundings (Esth 4:4). And only upon Mordecai’s refusal to accept the clothes she had sent does the queen look into what might have brought Mordecai to this unenviable and unattractive position.

When Esther's maidens and eunuchs came and informed her, the queen was greatly agitated. She sent clothing for Mordecai to wear, so that he might take off his sackcloth; but he refused. Thereupon Esther summoned Hathach, one of the eunuchs whom the king had appointed to serve her, and sent him to Mordecai to learn the why and wherefore of it all. Hathach went out to Mordecai in the city square in front of the palace gate; and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and all about the money that Haman had offered to pay into the royal treasury for the destruction of the Jews. He also gave him the written text of the law that had been proclaimed in Shushan for their destruction. [He bade him] show it to Esther and inform her, and charge her to go to the king and to appeal to him and to plead with him for her people. (Esth 4:4–8)

Much like Jacob at first denied Reuben’s request, so does Esther initially demur from Mordecai’s. Reminding Mordecai of a law of which he should need no reminder, Esther sends an equally charged message back to Mordecai. “All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces,” she tells Hathach to report to Mordecai, “know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law
for him—that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days” (Esth 4:11). If Jacob, at least at first, is unable to put the well-being of his family over the safety of his youngest son, then Esther at this point is faced with a similar variation of the same fear — she cannot seem to put the well-being of her people above her paralyzing concern for her own safety. And if Judah convinces Jacob that the welfare of all includes the welfare of Benjamin — “that we may live and not die — you and we and our children” (Gen 43:8) — then Mordecai successfully convinces Esther that a threat to her people is also a threat to her. In his famous rejoinder to the still somewhat selfish queen, he says, “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” (Esth 4:13–14).

And just as Judah’s powers of persuasion result in Benjamin approaching a foreign leader, so does Mordecai’s rhetorical prowess result in Esther approaching a foreign ruler — and both at great peril to themselves. The resonances continue: just as the foreign official Benjamin approaches turns out to be family, his missing brother Joseph, so is the foreign leader Esther is approaching family of sorts, her husband Ahasueros. And if Jacob hopes to curry some favor with God for his sons by sending the vizier double the amount of money, treats from the land of Canaan, and even a word of supplication to God, then Esther also tries to swing momentum in her favor for the dangerous task facing her by implementing a three-day fast. Returning word to Mordecai to inform him of her final consent, she now commands him. “Go, assemble all the
Jews who live in Shushan, 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” (Esth 4:16). It is then not really that surprising that Esther, faced with a situation so reminiscent of that which faced Jacob, brings her short response to an end with an expression of her innermost emotions with a turn of phrase nearly identical to Jacob’s: “If I am to perish, I will perish,” or in Hebrew, with that same distinctive syntax, אבדתי ואבדתי (Esth 4:16).

Just as Joseph upends all expectations, completely twisting the already twisted direction of the plot, when he eventually receives Benjamin and his brothers graciously, identifying himself and thereby beginning the process of familial reunification, so does Ahasueros completely defy expectation when he receives Esther with a graciousness so overwhelming that it even dwarfs Joseph’s, offering her up to half the kingdom for an offense that could have been punishable by death (Esth 5:2). Indeed the reverse of this very action — Vashti’s refusing to come before the king when summoned (Esth 1:12) — was met with complete rebuke (1:12–21). In any case, in both stories the reversals are so complete that the very opposite of the fears so earnestly expressed by both characters comes about: Jacob is not bereaved of Benjamin, but rather reunited with Simeon and even Joseph, whom he had long considered to be dead; and Esther does not perish, but rather delivers herself and her people from their impending destruction, dethroning their enemy Haman on the way.

But it is certainly not this comparison that generates the presence and productiveness of these themes; in both stories, these events and ideas define the subtle hints of the story lines and dictate the major movements of the plots. What it does do, however, is to bring the differences into sharper relief only to show that, even at these moments of disjunction, the overarching and
overlapped patterns of the admittedly distinct details often remain the same. Even if both Jacob and Esther’s fears are, at heart, selfish ones, what they are actually afraid of is quite different: Esther for her own life, and Jacob for his son’s. And that Jacob’s life is so tied up with Benjamin’s (44:30), that we could even say that by fearing for Benjamin’s life Jacob is really just fearing for his own, actually brings the point home all the more. Jacob’s life has become completely devoted to his favored sons, and Esther’s to her own — positions from which they both must move.

And it is exactly this movement that characterizes both characters’ next actions. For despite their understandable and overwhelming fears, they both choose to act for a greater cause — the continued well-being of their family and people. Swinging the plots back into motion, both of these moments of hesitation evince that Jacob and Esther are now beginning to see how their uncomfortable but still vital roles fit into the larger drama unfolding all around them. The details have changed, but the larger pattern of Jews’ setting aside their selfish concerns to deliver their people from peril maintains. And attention to the complex interaction of these differences and similarities is as much a rejoinder to Grossman’s flatter understanding of these intertextual relationships as it is imperative to the line of interpretation followed in this dissertation. Even in moments of disjunction, overarching points of connection between the two stories still exert their heavy influence over distinct courses of events.

* 

The double-edged sword of chosenness, Levenson argues, is the pivot on which so much of the Joseph story turns. That this most peculiar force often cuts in unexpected ways stands at the center of his insightful point.
The problematic [of chosenness] derives from the disparity between the frailty of the human ego and the mysterious operations of the choosing deity. Human nature, the story makes clear, is not constituted so as to facilitate the acceptance of chosenness. The one chosen is sorely tempted to interpret his special status as a mandate for domination: such is the impression that Joseph’s father and brothers reasonably receive from the little brother’s insensitive report of his two dreams. Those not chosen are unlikely to view their status with grace and quiet acceptance. The fratricidal jealousy of Joseph’s older brothers reaches a new level of fiendishness, but after the examples of Can and Esau it comes as no surprise. If the challenge of the chosen is to bear their exalted status with humility and altruism, the challenge of the unchosen — and chosenness is meaningless unless some are not chosen — is to play their subordinate role with grace and with due regard for the common good.52

This theme is best expressed through the pattern of humiliation and exaltation that runs throughout the story, and the threefold sequence of Joseph’s rises and falls. Even though the story begins by highlighting Joseph’s favor — his father loves him more than his brothers — it is exactly this favor that, in more ways than one, engenders his first major fall. For not only does the special attention that Joseph receives from his father begin to turn his brothers against him, it also encourages his own youthful immaturity and foolish arrogance. Narrating his self-aggrandizing dreams to the very people he would rule over, he gives no thought to how his already jealous brothers might react to his controversial predictions. If anything their incredulity only eggs him on, for he reports his second dream to his father as well. That Joseph thus bears at least some of the responsibility for his first fall speaks to Levenson’s point about the conflicting and often confused function of chosenness in this story: if his brothers are at this point unable to accept their status as the not chosen, then he is equally unable to accept the responsibility that comes with his chosenness.53

52 Levenson, Death and Resurrection, 154–55.

53 For more on this topic of chosenness in the Joseph story, see Joel S. Kaminsky, Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 59-78.
His second rise and fall — out of the pit but then just as quickly back down again into slavery in Egypt — is marked by his transition away from this naiveté and even oblivious arrogance. For when he arrives on Potiphar’s estate, not only does he enjoy the rise that his favor so rapidly brings him, but he also is tested on the very point on which he so miserably failed in his earlier dealings with his brothers. Mrs. Potiphar’s repeated approaches present him with the very opportunity he had so excitedly predicted just a few chapters earlier: take the master’s wife, and the master is soon to follow. Her come-on is certainly more than just sexual; it also represents a chance for Joseph, as his night visions presaged, to elevate himself over the rest. That he so steadfastly refuses shows his transition is in full swing. No longer only interested in his own great destiny, he strongly displays the discipline and respect his trying experiences have taught him. Levenson makes a similar point.

The element that in Genesis 37 proved nearly fatal — Joseph’s utter insubordination — is here reversed, as the young man refuses to set himself highest in the household by appropriating the one symbol of his master’s continuing supremacy, his wife. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, the appropriation of a ruler’s wife announces a claim upon the throne and thus constitutes an act of rebellion (e.g., 1 Kgs 2:13–25). It is precisely this that Joseph, withstanding a great temptation, explicitly and emphatically refuses to do. (Death and Resurrection, 156)

The third and final phase in this threefold pattern completes Joseph’s psychological transformation — the very thing that his dizzying series of ups and downs has, at least in part, been reflecting. For it is not only his mature outlook that he shows at Potiphar’s estate, but also his admirable commitment to it, even in the face of personal damage that begins to mark his transformation. If sexual temptation and even visions of power were not enough to pull Joseph into bed with Mrs. Potiphar, then perhaps simple self-preservation might be; but no, our

54 Or perhaps, as Professor Levenson once wisely pointed out to me, Joseph is now so prudent to recognize that his own great destiny requires self-control.
protagonist is now so committed to his convictions — something that, as Levenson pointed out, was sorely missing in Genesis 37 — that he even will sacrifice his own freedom for the sort of integrity that only comes with honesty and moral rectitude in the face of any and all challenges. And if his mysterious favor kickstarts his rise in jail (Gen 39:20–23), then we must also admit that this time he helps his own cause. No longer interpreting dreams that portend his own great future, he now wisely uses his talents to predict the futures of others. Waiting patiently, even after he has interpreted the cupbearer’s dream correctly only, then to be forgotten by this now restored servant (Gen 40:23), he bides his time until his moment comes, and takes it with the confidence and humility of a man who knows of but is no longer enamored with his divine favor. That this final sequence lands him in the seat right next to Pharaoh cements Levenson’s long-reaching point: for Joseph, the path to exaltation goes through humiliation; and by the same token, real rulership is marked by a commitment to serve.

That so much of this finely orchestrated and highly dramatic sequence is attributed to God (Gen 45:5–8, 50:20) should not prevent us from seeing its deep-seated and productive parallels in the Esther book; nor should it, à la Grossman, elicit some sort of direct, one-to-one comparison — with the book of Esther somehow losing since it does not contain any mention of the deity.55 No, we should rather note how even though the details have once again changed, many of the most important and influential features of the overlying patterns remain the same.

55 But in an omission that seems to suggest of a desire to shy away from the challenging theology presented by a text that does not mention God explicitly, Grossman does not actually draw out the differences between these two points of the stories. See, for example, his chapter entitled “The Secret Turning Point,” where he, discussing Esther 4, writes, “From the author’s point of view, God prepared the ground for the impending redemption and arranged a solution even before the problem had arisen” (119).
For as Joseph must recognize that the path to real rulership goes through serving others, and the humiliation that so often accompanies such a commitment to serving one’s ideals, so must Esther learn that her path to influence in the Persian court is inherently linked — perhaps even paradoxically so — to her dedication to her own people. And this seems to be exactly what she loses track of her in her dizzying, most unexpected, rise. If Esther’s being chosen as queen does not separate her from her origins or even from those responsible for raising her, if it does not encourage her to disobey the ideals instilled in her during her youth, as that one quick but crucial verse makes so clear (Esth 2:20), then it does seem to have numbed her to the different realities that those who do not enjoy her special sort of favor constantly have to face. For as was already briefly noted, when Mordecai appears in the Persian court covered in sack and ashcloth, it does not occur to her to consider the difficulty that he must be in; instead of looking for what forced him into such an embarrassing situation, she focuses on just the embarrassment his desperate actions has brought her. Much like Joseph in Genesis 37, Esther has not yet fully reckoned with the obvious but crucial fact that not everyone is as favored as she, not everyone as good-looking as she, not everyone so destined for great heights as she.

But if the drama of Joseph’s transformation comes out in how drawn-out it is, how each step along the inexorable but somehow also still seemingly impossible march toward familial reunification is narrated to and then felt by the audience, then the drama of Esther’s transformation is marked by its arresting abruptness. Without the slightest of hints, Esther all of the sudden becomes a woman worthy of her royal title; in one scene, in her one and only conversation with Mordecai, her own youthfulness quickly makes way for the qualities that mark real rulership. Rising as a young and pretty maiden, whose temperament must have suited the
infamously immature Ahasuerus, Esther acts like the somewhat frivolous young woman she must be when confronted with a problem far more serious than arousing the king’s desires in bed. With a not so subtle tip of the hat to Daisy Buchanan, her surface understanding of this complex problem poignantly, even embarrassingly, comes to the fore: to alleviate Mordecai’s pressing concerns of life and death, she does what we might deem the biblical equivalent of crying over Gatsby’s beautiful shirts (4:4).

But the immaturity of her initial response is matched only by the rapidity of her brave transformation, and here too the story offers a glimpse into this pivotal process. For when Mordecai responds to her foolish offer of clothing by explaining to her all that has happened, she remains unmoved. Even though she has replaced her own embarrassment with her own safety, a consideration slightly higher up the moral totem pole, she still, amidst all that is going on, cannot move her focus onto anything but herself.

Esther told Hathach to take back to Mordecai the following reply: “All the king's courtiers and the people of the king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him—that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days.” (Esth 4:7-11)

Mordecai, also unmoved by Esther’s selfishness in the face of such upheaval, tries to convince her again. As Joseph’s change of character is marked by his threefold fall, so is Esther’s developed by Mordecai’s two messages, the second of which proves decisive.

When Mordecai was told what Esther had said, Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: “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.” Then Esther sent back this answer to Mordecai: “Go, assemble all the Jews who live in
Shushan, and fast in 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!” (Esth 4:12-16)

If it was Joseph’s principled humiliation that engendered his rise to exaltation, then it is Esther’s selfless dedication that engenders her own. For directly after she utters those three words so reminiscent of Jacob’s, her influence over the whole Persian empire becomes unmatched: Haman starts coming to her banquets, the king offers her up to half the kingdom, and Ahasuerus eventually takes her side over the prime minister’s whose rise he himself engineered. That she is exalted in the process speaks again to Levenson’s long-reaching point: legitimate leadership comes through service, just as it is the humbled who attain real and deserved exaltation.

Surely Joseph is not needed to hear these notes in Esther, but this sustained comparison offers an instructive backdrop against which they are to be heard. Just as Jacob had to release his favored son selflessly for the sake of his entire family, so must Esther selflessly appear before the king for the well-being of her entire people; the brothers must learn to accept, however painful it may be, the difficult supporting role of the unchosen; and so must Mordecai learn to take his cues from the young Jewish orphan turned queen he helped to raise. And, just as Joseph only becomes fit to lead after he has demonstrated his commitment to serving both his masters (earthly and heavenly) and constituents, even at great cost to himself, so can Esther only realize the full potential of her lofty perch once she decides to use the power her role affords her for the good of her whole nation.

The implication of this point is not to be missed: Esther too, like Joseph before her, has been chosen for this role. Not some random string of coincidences nor some light-hearted
comedy — the mere fact that the book of Esther exhibits the literary skill to entertain in no way limits its function to the theatrical — the sustained and meaningful dialogue with Joseph demands that Esther, along with the Jewish deliverance in Persia it narrates, be read in context with Joseph and the divinely orchestrated Israelite deliverance in Egypt. Even though the details are always changing, history has a way of also still somehow repeating itself.

And so do the responsibilities that accompany chosenness also remain. For even when God chooses not to reveal his choices all that directly, even when this double-edged sword is not brandished in the light of day, it can certainly still cut in many different and unexpected directions. The challenge in the Megillah is thus different from the one expressed in Joseph, but still equally difficult to untangle: Esther must first recognize her mysterious but still present favor without the helpful editorial comments so rarely present in life but so frequently littered across biblical literature and then accord her actions with the complicated landscape surrounding her. Even if God’s presence is not present, his choices still are, and the book of Esther, much like the story of Joseph, bears witness to that unique combination of havoc and deliverance that only the divine can bring.
Conclusion: Theological Implications

Having established that the author of Esther knew and purposefully invoked the Joseph story throughout the Megillah, three important theological implications of this relationship must be considered. The first addresses Esther’s place in the canon, and seeks finally to dismiss that strangely persistent notion of a secular book.\footnote{For a learned overview and poignant objection to this claim of secularity, see Wetzel, \textit{Violence}, 22–34.} For even though any comparison with Joseph admittedly does not bring the Megillah into the larger, distinctly biblical movement of \textit{Heilsgeschichte}, it certainly does prove that Esther is best understood when its historical and canonical links to the ancient Israelite literary and theological tradition are appreciated.

And even though Michael Fox takes direct issue with this point, a close examination of his argumentation reveals how he pushes an accurate historical notice, that “Esther was not written as part of the Bible,” beyond its reasonable and documentable reach.

Not only could the author not have known that there would be a Bible, but the lack of reference to God probably shows that he did not intend his book to be regarded as sacred scripture. If, then, we seek to interpret the author’s intention, regarding that as source and determinant of the primary (though not sole) meaning, we must try to read the book as an independent unit, unconstrained by the canonical context it was later to enter. That context can elucidate the authorial meaning of Esther by providing material for comparison and showing something about the author’s background, but it cannot determine its meaning, for any book can diverge from its tradition as well as draw upon it.\footnote{Michael V. Fox, \textit{Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther} (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 238.}

But as this study has conclusively shown, the mere fact that a text later made its way into the biblical canon in no way prevents a different biblical author from having known and used it. For the evidence strongly suggests that this distinctly historical relationship, even though it has large points of overlap with the canonical, can still be isolated, highlighted, and fully articulated.
And the strange slant of Fox’s suggestion — that simply because Esther was not yet part of the Bible, it is therefore best read as an independent unit — helps to draw out a second important insight suggested by the argumentation of this dissertation. For even though the energies here have been focused on the particular character of Esther’s relationship to Joseph, the larger implication of this comparison nicely illustrates the generative and conditioning importance of the entire historical context of the Megillah. For as Professor James Russell once wisely pointed out to me, the Persian context of Esther — and for that matter, it should also be added, its ancient Near Eastern — must also not be forgotten.\textsuperscript{58} And even the most cursory of looks to the literature shows how crucial this is, as nearly every scholar agrees that the institution of Purim, a Jewish refashioning of an ancient Persian or perhaps even Babylonian festival, is one of the most important goals of the book.\textsuperscript{59}

My interest in this is not to try to untangle all of the many threads that may have played their part in the creation of Esther’s Purim, but rather to offer a rejoinder to Fox’s position: that an author’s intention is inherently intertwined with his historical context. For at least from a historical perspective, the most important message of the whole book can only be understood when it is considered against the relief of its ancient Near Eastern and Persian counterparts. Unless, then, Fox wants to question the intentionality with which Purim is instituted in the Scroll, he cannot relativize the importance of the author’s most formative setting. For just as the

\textsuperscript{58} My thanks to Professor Russell for reminding me of the decisiveness of this Persian context, and directing me to his important article, "Zoroastrian Elements in the Book of Esther," in \textit{Irano-Judaica II: Studies Relating to Jewish Contacts with Persian Culture Throughout the Ages}, ed. Shaul Shaked and Amnon Netzer (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1990), 33–40.

\textsuperscript{59} See, for example, any number of commentaries: Levenson, \textit{Esther}, 22; or, even Fox himself, \textit{Character}, 3. For the most complete exploration of both the Babylonian and Persian precursors, see Moore, \textit{Esther}, XX–XLIX.
intrinsic interrelation of intention and context must be respected, so must the intertwining of the meaning of a text and its particular background be here appreciated. And once it is then recognized that Joseph too was part of Esther’s historical setting, the generative and influential force of the earlier story becomes all the clearer.

The third engages the much-debated question of God. And here a strong caution against crudely applying the theology of Joseph to Esther must be offered; the presence of God in Joseph is as particular to that narrative as the absence of the divine in Esther is productive in the Megillah. But the issue does not end here, as this important discrepancy is in fact indicative of a larger continuity. The patterns God initiated in the past, the author of Esther subtly but firmly reminded his audience, continue to shape and at times even control the present. A deeper understanding of reality does not perceive only the surface dimension, just as the ancient Israelite theological tradition did not base its conception of nor belief in the divine only on God’s immediately perceivable presence and action.

And just as Joseph is not the end of the story of the Israelites in Egypt, as the exodus is still to come, neither does Esther end the tale of the ancient Jews in Persia. The Megillah most poignantly reflects this theology of the meantime: because Mordecai and Esther have found their way to align their actions with the larger patterns controlling their surroundings, the story of the Jews in Susa, much like its earlier counterpart in Egypt, continues. And that Purim is instituted to commemorate at least some reflection of this idea is not the slightest of hints in this admittedly more subtle direction.

For as has been stressed throughout this dissertation, the instructive similarities between these two stories intersect at many different levels, thereby suggesting these different ricochets of
conclusion. It is not just that both Joseph and Esther are good-looking, nor that their good-looks are expressed in nearly identical terms, but rather that their distinctive attractiveness sets into motion an eerily similar series of events that are equally determinative for both plots. In both cases, at least at first, the favor that the characters’ beauty seems to suggest actually works against them: Joseph’s handsomeness attracts the unwanted attentions of his master’s wife, who, upon his continued and upstanding refusals, lies to her husband to turn her jealous feelings of rejection into his unfair incarceration. Esther, simply as a result of being a beautiful young woman, is taken to the king’s herem, and forced to spend a night with the bawdy Persian ruler. And when she is then chosen to be the next queen, most certainly a result of nothing more than her charming conversation, the danger only increases, as it is her proximity to Ahasuerus that forces her to risk her life and approach her husband unlawfully on behalf of her now threatened people. That both characters then rise from these moments of discomfort and difficulty, and to even greater heights to boot, makes the point: Esther becomes the influential Jewish queen, who finds a way past her own fears and outside enemies to save her people; and in very similar fashion, Joseph stays patient in jail and takes his one opportunity with Pharaoh with that humble but assured confidence, putting him in the position of authority to reunite himself with his family and save them from the famine that is still to come.

And even though Fox claims to be interested only in the disjunctive nature of Esther’s relationship to its still indeterminate literary context, the response now grows in strength: any historically sensitive reading of Esther cannot ignore these over-arching points of contact. The sons and now also daughters of Israel continue to rise in foreign courts, and continue to wield their authority to deliver their people from outside dangers. Human expectations continue to be
inverted, and familial reunification — Joseph and his brothers and father, Esther and her kinsman and guardian Mordecai — continues to follow such improbable sequences of events. Actions that seem unforgivable, only resulting in what so seems to be the worst of all possible circumstances — Joseph at the bottom of a dry pit, Mordecai in sack and ashcloth in the Persian royal palace — actually play their parts in engendering the most complete of Jewish triumphs. Somehow, the Israelites keep coming out on top, even outside of their own land.

The overlapping of these structures extends farther. For it is the well-documented pattern of God’s slow but steady receding throughout Genesis that culminates in the Joseph story. In a book that begins with his awesomely authoritative creation of the world and powerfully ominous presence stalking through the garden, never once in this final act does God speak plainly or intervene directly. But in a strange way, as touched upon earlier, this sharp contrast actually expresses an underlying and influential similarity: for by the time Gen 50:20 rolls around, that same control God exerted over the first chapter of this most famous book seems to surface once again.

After Jacob dies at the end of Genesis 49, his older sons begin to worry: Will Joseph continue to maintain this delicately-crafted familial unity despite all that they have put him through? Or will he, much as they did, drastically change his tune once out of their father’s watchful eye? And knowing that their only chance for continued survival in Egypt rests solely on the very brother they so wronged, the brothers fall prostrate before Joseph for one last time.

---

60 On this issue, see, for example, E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 293.

61 Nahum Sarna, in his commentary, makes a similar point but with a slightly different focus. Arguing against claims that the story may be of a secular nature, he suggests that the few moments when God is matched are of such crucial importance that his “guiding hand imparts meaning and direction to seemingly haphazard events.” *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 254.
His brothers went to him themselves, flung themselves before him, and said, “We are prepared to be your slaves.” But Joseph said to them, “Have no fear! Am I a substitute for God? Besides, although you intended me harm, God intended it for good, so as to bring about the present result—the survival of many people. And so, fear not. I will sustain you and your children.” Thus he reassured them, speaking kindly to them. (Gen 50:18-21)

In a story so completely comprised of unexpected upheaval, it is then only fitting that the last reversal of fate is actually no reversal at all. Finally the exhausting ups and downs settle as the devastating ricochets of Joseph’s favor, his brothers’ jealousy, and their father’s oversight come to rest. It is then in the calmness of this relaxation that God’s control of the events even in his direct absence crystalizes; but the intensity of his unrelenting sovereignty is as strong as the contrast presented by the error-ridden realm of worldly maliciousness. Joseph’s wise magnanimity no more exonerates his brothers than it takes away from God’s complete agency, for they now must live on prosperously in Egypt with the worst form of survival guilt: knowingly benefiting from an undeservedly fortuitous twist of fate, wholly dependent upon another’s gracious self-sacrifice of which they themselves were not quite capable.62

And so any impulse to highlight God’s saving grace must balance itself somewhat precariously against the poignantly full illustration of the characters’ conflicting dimensions.

---

62 Of course Judah does present himself for Benjamin in Genesis 44, showing his terrific development as a character and bringing about the deserved familial reunification. But this does clear the brothers of their earlier wrongdoing; if anything, the direction of the narrative pushes in the other direction by highlighting just how awful their spiteful deed was. For not only is their uncontrollable jealousy, and their immature inability to control its hateful impulse, to be contrasted with Joseph’s developed wisdom and moral sense, but also now with their own brotherly care. Their transformation underscores their change as much as it does the desperate need for such change in the first place.
That in this case God remains in control is not a principle to be universalized, but rather the expression of a specifically conditioned response to the particularities of history and context. In the most unexpected of places, God orchestrates a great Israelite deliverance; amidst the devastating effects of famine, God makes the Israelites prosperous and the Egyptians slaves.

And it is precisely this most immediate theological matrix this is so strongly reflected in Esther. For if the movement in Egypt picks up as a result of Joseph’s wrongful imprisonment, itself only a result of Mrs. Potiphar’s highly unusual and unseemly advances, then so is the real pressure of the Megillah ratcheted up only after Mordecai strangely refuses to bow down to his obvious superior. And of course, his specifically public insubordination is not tolerated. “There is a certain people,” Haman responds with that malicious calculation,

scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm, whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws; and it is not in Your Majesty's interest to tolerate them. If it please Your Majesty, let an edict be drawn for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the stewards for deposit in the royal treasury (Esth 3:8–9).

When Ahasueros then agrees (Esth 3:10–11) and the chaos becomes more than palpable, the now more than just simmering tension between Jew and Amalekite takes firm grip over the direction of the whole story. And just as Mrs. Potiphar’s false, maliciously intended accusation against Joseph actually sets into motion a series of events that not only sees Joseph climb to

---

63 It seems to me that von Rad comes close to this universalizing tendency in his influential article concerning the links between the Joseph story and wisdom literature. (Gerhard von Rad, “Josephsgeschichte und ältere Chokma,” VT Supplements 1 [1953]: 120–27.) For even though he stops short of specifically arguing that the messages of the Joseph story are to be extended outward, he does suggest that they are expressions of wisdom ideals that are universalistic in character. The distinction is of course crucial to von Rad’s point — it is Joseph embodying wisdom, not wisdom as a reflection of the universal Joseph — but I think the subtle suggestion maintains: the controlling God of the Joseph story is to be found in other much more generally applicable contexts, and the spreading movement is therefore not so far away. My point here is not to disagree with this for sport, but rather to prioritize the highly particular nature of the story over against any universalizing tendency.
second-in-command but also reunite his family and deliver them from the famine, so does Mordecai’s foolish spat with Haman actually uncover the latent anti-Jewishness that must have been lurking in at least some corners of Susa; in much the same way that the famine, which seems so destructive at first, is actually needed to bring about the reunification of Jacob and his sons — for, with no famine, they never would have found Joseph in Egypt in the first place — so too do the Jews of Susa actually require Mordecai’s rivalry with Haman in order to identify their enemies and then vanquish them. Perhaps Mordecai, like Joseph before him, knows what the reader and brothers must wait to find out: while the conflict with Haman, just like the familial one in Genesis, wreaks havoc in this world, it accords with a plan that escapes human grasp just as much as it controls worldly events.

These then are the sort of deep-seated similarities and productive overlaps that characterize Esther’s usage of Joseph. That later readers, both those responsible for the formation of the canon and those heir to the biblical tradition, also affirmed such overlaps and encouraged them to be considered no more proves the historical nature of the relationship than it can disprove it. But an informed reading of the two texts can offer something approaching definitiveness: similarities of language, theme, and structure strongly suggest that the author of Esther did know Joseph, and purposefully and repeatedly alluded to it throughout his exciting telling of the Megillah.
Bibliography


