Esther and the Politics of Negotiation: An Investigation of Public and Private Spaces in Relationship to Possibilities for Female Royal Counselors

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ABSTRACT

The primary question that this dissertation seeks to answer is, "How might we characterize the narrative depiction of Esther's political involvement in the affairs of the Persian state?" Many scholars have tried to answer this question with regard to how typical or exceptional Esther is vis-à-vis portrayals of other biblical women: Does Esther represent an aberration from gender norms or an embodiment of male patriarchal values? The project undertaken here is to challenge the way in which the entire question has been framed because underlying it is a set of problematic assumptions. The results of the question framed thus can only lead to more interpretive difficulties, either denying the commonalities between Esther and other biblical women, or ignoring the dynamics at play when the very same descriptions are used of men. In addition, the reliance on these two categories has provided a kind of self-perpetuating logic so that scholarship about men and women and their respective roles tends to replicate two separate and divided spheres within academic discourse.

This dissertation begins with a review of scholarship on Esther. Many scholarly assessments of her, whether they see her as typical or exceptional, rely on problematic assumptions; yet within the body of scholarship on Esther there were also a number of insights that suggest a more nuanced approach to evaluating her character. One problem of dichotomous assessments of Esther is that they rely on an assumption of gendered and separate public and private spheres for men and women respectively, a construct that suffers from a number of

theoretical issues. In addition to the general problems with this language, the portrayal of Esther as a politically powerful and persuasive woman connects her to a wide variety of biblical literature, suggesting that she is not the exceptional figure that some have claimed but deeply embedded within a tradition. Moreover, the role that familial and kinship relationships and metaphors play in structuring political life opens up the historic possibility that women may have participated in the political arena, depending on their own family dynamics. None of the evidence regarding Persian women—Esther's narrative portrayal, Greek historiography on Persian royal women, or indigenous Persian sources—provide any reason to assume that women were categorically confined to a private sphere. Thus, this dissertation proposes a movement away from the discourse on public and private, thereby opening up the historic possibility for women's participation in the political role of royal counselor.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am profoundly grateful to my advisor, Professor Jon D. Levenson for all of his patience, insight, creativity, and careful reading of my work. At every part of the process he offered a great deal of encouragement and humor, both of which played a significant role in helping me to complete this project. It was during his course on the book of Esther that I first became so intrigued by book's complexity and nuance, and it was his willingness to let me explore new ideas that gave me courage to develop this thesis.

I owe a great deal to Professors Peter Machinist and Larry Stager, both of whom graciously served on my committee. In addition to their careful reading of my work, both scholars have helped to sharpen my thinking during my time at Harvard and the work of both has significantly influenced the way in which I approached this dissertation.

I am especially grateful to of my colleagues in the Hebrew Bible program who carefully fostered a spirit of true collegiality. My successful completion of this journey was possible because I had a wonderful group of students with whom I studied and worked, including Jim Jumper, John Noble, and all the women in Hebrew Bible, among many others. I truly cannot imagine what the process would have been like without their constant encouragement.

I also am grateful for all the support I have had from my family at home, especially my parents and my siblings: John, Patricia, James, Marcia, Jonathan, Johanna, and Nathan Hancock. So many friends have cheered me on by sending cards, care packages, and words of encouragement when I needed it most. I am grateful especially to Marty and Alicia McCabe and Katherine Shaner, who sustained me with wonderful meals and listened to endless stories over the past several years. Finally, I must express my deepest gratitude to Rodrigo Achurra for being so constant in his love, his willingness to listen, and his support through this process.

Introduction

"If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, vast as it is, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike." This advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as Memucan proposed; he sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house" (Esth 1:19–22).

The book of Esther introduces the problem of gender relationships in the first chapter. The private dynamics between the king and the queen, who refuses to do as her husband asks, quickly become a matter for which the royal sages are consulted. Immediately, the counselors express their fear that this minor dispute will set a national precedent, impacting the relationships between men and women throughout the kingdom.

In the past several decades, a great of deal of scholarship has focused on the implications of patriarchy[1] for women. The primary way that this has impacted scholarly assessments of Esther is to evaluate the book in terms of the degree to which Esther conforms to or deviates from a set of gendered expectations. Biblical scholars have often argued that during periods of centralized authority, women are most often relegated to the domestic sphere. This viewpoint, however, is problematic because while patriarchy may in fact limit women's roles in a variety of different ways, it is far too superficial to imagine that women, or men, operate in just one particular way within society. Individuals gain and lose access to power and status through a variety of means over the course of their lifetime and it is not always fixed along rigid gender

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[1] My argument does not deny gender disparity nor wish to dismiss patriarchy out of hand. Rather, it is my goal to find a more nuanced way to talk about gender dynamics, specifically as they relate to a variety of other social factors.

lines. Furthermore, the notion of a separate and distinct public arena that can be clearly distinguished from the private is anachronistic to the biblical world.

If the terms public and private in relationship to male and female roles served as a useful heuristic device to describe the limitations of patriarchy, it is also served to obscure the nuanced picture presented to us by the textual evidence that we have. One of the problems of focusing on separate spheres as a way of explaining gender dynamics is that the logic and the results of this work become self-perpetuating. In as much as scholars have seen separate spheres for men and women as the essential interpretive framework for understanding patriarchy, and women's role within it, they have then also all too often applied their discussions of social phenomena to either men or women exclusively.

The presumption of gendered dichotomies can be questioned for a variety of important reasons. For biblical scholars that have employed this language, there is a commonly held assumption that the increased centralization of political power that came with monarchy brought a sharper divide between public and private spaces, a move that negatively impacted women. This understanding is based primarily on anthropological analogy. There is more recent work from across a variety of scholarly disciplines that questions the use of these categories and their usefulness in describing women's lives. Furthermore, there is a significant body of work pertaining to historical and social specificities of Israel and the ancient Near East that suggests that these categories are not applicable or useful in that context.

The focus of this investigation is two-fold. In the first place, I hope to make a case for the historical possibility of women's participation in the life of politics, especially as political negotiators and counselors to royalty. Furthermore, there is a historiographical element that I hope to undertake: Esther's literary portrayal as a woman who continues in Israelite political

traditions of women who counsel royalty has implications for how we understand postexilic life. The connection between Esther and other biblical women militates against the portrayal that Esther is in some way "exceptional:" She is not unique in biblical narratives in her ability to participate in and affect change in the political arena. On the other hand, portraying her as entirely conventional (that is, in close conformity to gendered expectations) is an overly simple description. Unlike the laws that are described in the book of Esther, there is no one fixed, unalterable way in which gender is configured throughout the entire Bible.

It is not my intention to idealize gender relationships within the biblical text, but rather to demonstrate the need for a new paradigm with which to evaluate the complex social phenomenon of gender, one that looks at more complicated dynamics of power. In almost every case, power is contingent, relational, and variable. Power depends on not only the fact of gender, but a number of other social realities such as occupation, location, family identity, marital partner, among many other others. To discuss gender in general terms without embedding that social factor within a larger framework or connecting it to other types of social relationships in a given culture is false, and thus obscures more complicated social and political realities. Fluctuating power relationships within the royal households allowed the ongoing possibility of women's access to the particular political role of royal counselor throughout Israel's history. The character of Esther is portrayed as a woman who is in many ways the consummate expression of earlier iterations of various wise women, royal courtiers, and personified wisdom. Access to monarchs and important political figures was born out of familial relationships, allowing certain men and women the opportunity to act in the capacity of royal counselor at times. Because the political system of Israel is modeled on and shaped by familial relationships, it cannot be reduced to dualistic categories of public versus private (male versus female).

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Esther as she is portrayed narratively is not static, but rather a dynamic character who changes over the course of the story. Emphasis on the fluidity of the portrayal of Esther in the literary representation points in the direction of the contingent, unstable nature of power relationships. Women's involvement in the politics of negotiation is not a given nor do women have any type of unequivocal status in abstract terms. Rather, influence and political power were available at times due to a specific set of circumstances through which a woman might gain authority, often in her own family or community, by virtue of the various relationships to which she is connected.

Thus, I hope to shift the question from essentialist ones (to what extent are women different from or similar to men? To what extent can women achieve power in a patriarchal society?) to a more historically inflected one, how does the portrayal of Esther reflect on earlier narratives about the role/position of counselors and what does this tell us about the author of Esther's views about postexilic realities? To dwell on the question of difference is to ask the entirely wrong question of Esther. Investigation of the extent to which she is an embodiment of patriarchal values or a subversion of them obscures the more significant political realities which are at stake in this narrative.

The versions of the Esther story examined in this dissertation include both the Masoretic text and the six Septuagint additions to Esther. At various points in this work, the Greek (LXX) is compared to the MT but despite the very different concerns present in the Greek text of Esther from those of the Hebrew version,[2] the additions and changes in the LXX do not significantly

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[2] The LXX additions of Esther demonstrate a number of concerns that are entirely absent in the MT. Most notably, the LXX includes a number of explicit references to God that are nowhere found in the Hebrew. This includes several long prayers on the part of individuals, including Esther, intended to demonstrate the piety of the Jews in Persia and the divine role in deliverance from enemies, giving the text a more religious emphasis. There are other elements added as well. For example, Adele Berlin notes the shift to a "Hellenistic worldview," including certain stylistic literary conventions. See Adele Berlin, *Esther* (The JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001) 1.

change my argument regarding the inadequacy of using dichotomous gendered categories for evaluating either Esther or women more generally. Several scholars have made arguments about one or another version offering a more positive or negative view of women, although there is no clear consensus about which version has a more positive view. This discussion will be taken up in chapter 1 as suggestive of ways that ideas about gender and gender roles may not be as fixed as some have claimed. I do not find any evidence, however, that any one of these versions of Esther provides sufficient evidence that women were ordinarily confined to the private sphere and deviation from that realm represents an exception to the normal behavior.

Methodology

This dissertation is a social history, examining both literary and historical sources for evidence that might suggest new possibilities about how women's participation in politics might be understood. This work draws on feminist scholarship both from within the field of biblical studies as well as other scholarly disciplines. Yet while I have drawn on feminist bible scholars, and relied heavily on their work, I also challenge the application of anthropological models about public and private spaces both on the basis of theoretical problems and on the grounds that they do not apply to the specific situation of the ancient Near East nor to the narrative representation of Esther. Thus, I have focused on taking an *emic* approach, one that tries to take seriously the native linguistic expressions and paradigms within the culture. Even if the language that a culture uses to describe itself and its social structures in written texts represents a certain kind of political rhetoric, it also must refer to certain social realities within the culture in order for the rhetoric to be intelligible: it is familiarity with the social structures described in the rhetoric that allows the metaphor to work. The use of a narrative text for an historical examination cannot

prove conclusively what the social realities for women were, or whether or not they were involved in political negotiations. Yet the complexity and variety of ways that women are represented in narrative suggests far more nuance than previous paradigms have assumed, intimating that gender and power are contingent and negotiable variables. Thus, there is likely a great deal of diversity in the kinds of experiences that women had over the course of their lives, particularly in relationship to the degree of power and influence they may have had.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: *Introduction to the Problem: Esther in Scholarship*

Chapter 1 introduces the way that Esther has been presented in biblical scholarship, particularly in relationship to assessments that pertain to her gender. Scholars have seen in Esther completely opposite representations: Some have viewed her as a paradigm for liberation, while others have viewed her as the embodiment of patriarchal values. Esther then, is viewed then as one of two poles: she is either typical or exceptional. Both of these viewpoints are inherently problematic because they assume that there is a fixed expectation across a variety of demographic variables for all women and men, and that behavior outside of this must then be exceptional. A number of positive aspects of biblical scholarship on Esther are also examined that suggest some more nuanced possibilities for moving beyond this simple formulation of public and private.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Problems with the Language Public and Private

This chapter examines the assumptions that undergird the dichotomous portrayals of Esther in that both assessments of her (whether positive or negative) are grounded in an

assumption of public and private spaces. Scholars who employ these categories start with the belief that the normal arena for female activity is the private sphere, while men normally inhabit the public. Some biblical scholars have argued that in times of political instability, there may be more opportunity for women to occupy political roles; but this is severely limited in times of greater political centralization. Yet there are a variety of theoretical problems with this paradigm, and thus the history of the discourse and the problems that attend it are explored here. The picture that emerges from this examination is that the language of public/private is anachronistic and tends to obfuscate the understanding of women's lives rather than to clarify it, especially when specific situations are examined more closely. Even in instances when a particular culture employs this rhetoric, it seems to operate at a theoretical level only; when the specific cultural dynamics are examined more closely, the categories begin to collapse. Thus, the predominance of the language in scholarship indicates far more about the historiographic stance of those who employ the language than about the societies it attempts to describe.

Chapter 3: Esther the Politician: Traditions of Counseling Women

This chapter addresses one aspect of the Esther scholarship presented in Chapter 1; specifically, the viewpoint that Esther represents in some way an exception to standard portrayals of biblical women. Although Esther is one of only a few narratives in the Bible in which the title character is a woman, the narrative about her character alludes to a great deal of previous literature. Thus, one problem with viewing Esther as an exceptional figure who defies gender stereotypes is that she participates in a literary tradition with a number of other figures from both biblical and other ancient Near Eastern literary and historical sources. The relationship between Esther and other wise women who counsel royalty is examined in this chapter. These narratives

in conjunction with historical sources when read together allow for the possibility that one political role available to women was that of royal advisor, a literary tradition in which the story of Esther participates. The literary resonance between Esther and other women of the ancient Near East challenges the specific application of the public/private paradigm to the Esther story.

Chapter 4: Implications of the Patrimonial Household Model on Women's Participation in Politics

Chapter 4 examines to the political structures of ancient Near Eastern monarchies to examine whether or not women might have had access to a role in political negotiations. This chapter focuses especially on the Patrimonial Household Model (PHM) because of the implications of this work for thinking about the relationships between families and households as important in shaping both political structures and metaphors. The Patrimonial Household Model does not specifically address the role of women within patrimonialism. Yet work on this subject is especially significant because the evidence presented indicates the ongoing importance of family relationships and metaphors in both international and domestic political arenas, even during times of political centralization. This work calls into question one previous scholarly assumption that the monarchy or other centralized polity undermined kinship networks. The PHM does not rely on bureaucracy but rather on a network of relationships. Thus, if kinship structures remained even with political centralization, then another pillar of the public/private paradigm is undermined because it is through family relationships that women, like men, might have had access to power, depending on the relationships into which they were born or married. This has implications for the Persian period, although the PHM may not apply in all its details,

because like Ugarit and Israel, Persian society maintained strong family and tribal relationships throughout the Achaemenid Period.

Chapter 5: Esther and Representations of Persian Royal Women

This chapter examines the portrayal of Esther as she is represented in the biblical narrative alongside both Greek and Persian sources. Three specific categories are examined, including the representations of space and gender, the role of royal counselors, and the political position of royal Persian women. In none of these representations can the reliance on categories of public and private be justified. The biblical text of Esther does not portray Esther as segregated in a private sphere, either physically or metaphorically. The Greek and Persian sources on women, although they do not present identical pictures, both suggest the strong presence of Persian royal women in political and economic life. The book of Esther does seem to include a number of stereotypes found within Greek literature about Persians—especially those intended to portray Persian society as weak and effeminate in contrast to Greek culture—but ultimately Esther is not the caricature of Persian royal women found in Greek sources who is vengeful and controlling. Rather, because the story of Esther also draws on a variety of biblical stories, Esther emerges as a woman who is persuasive and authoritative precisely because the stakes are so high: she is impelled to act only under great duress because her very life and the life of her people are at stake.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Problem: Esther in Scholarship

Introduction

> "No other book of the Old Testament has received such mixed reviews by good, God-fearing men [sic] as the Book of Esther."[3]

> "Different people see the same person in different ways. This is true in both life and literature. This is also the case with literary figures. It is acutely so with Esther."[4]

One has only to scratch the surface of the literature on the book of Esther to discover that scholars have subjected the title character to widely divergent interpretations. On the one hand, some have seen Esther as merely a beauty queen, a woman with little else but her appearance to recommend her. Paton—a scholar of the early twentieth century—viewed Esther as remarkable for her looks rather than any particular abilities.[5] Carey Moore in his 1979 commentary on Esther stated in his introduction that Mordecai "supplied the brains while Esther simply followed his directions,"[6] a statement that seemingly affirms the view put forward by Paton.[7] Yet others have seen in Esther a variety of positive possibilities. André LaCocque, for example, describes Esther as a subversive figure, thus categorizing the book of Esther as part of a genre of protest

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[3] Carey A. Moore, *Esther: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 7B; New York: Doubleday, 1971) xvii.

[4] Michael V. Fox, "Three Esthers" in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (ed. Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon; London: T & T Clark, 2003).

[5] Lewis B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908) 96.

[6] Moore, *Esther,* lii.

[7] This is a view about which Moore later expressed great regret. Carey Moore, " 'It Takes a Village' to Produce a Commentary" in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (ed. Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon; London: T & T Clark, 2003) 3–8, at 5 and 8.

literature.[8] These dichotomous viewpoints, under various guises, have continued to characterize scholarship on the book of Esther up through present.

In recent decades, there has been an increased interest in the book of Esther.[9] One cause for the attention, among many others, is the growing body of feminist scholarship. The literature on the book of Esther demonstrates a strong proclivity to read Esther in order to determine what the narrative can tell us about the role of women, either positively or negatively. The focus on this subject is not without textual warrant. In the first place, the title character of the book is a woman. Moreover, the book of Esther highlights the issue of power relationships between husbands and wives in the very first chapter of the book, albeit in a comical manner, demonstrating what Danna Nolan Fewell sees as the "fragility of male sovereignty"[10] in the book. Upon Vashti's refusal to answer the king's summons to the banquet, Ahasuerus had her deposed as queen. At the advice of his advisors, King Ahasuerus declared an edict requiring that "all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike" (Esth 1:20). It is precisely this plot element—the removal of Vashti from the throne—that occasions the scenario by which a Jewish orphan rises to the throne as queen, setting up the entire plot for the book of Esther. Thus the story itself introduces the subject matter of relationships between husbands and wives into

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[8] In his introduction, LaCocque speaks about this subject in relationship to four texts: Susanna, Judith, Esther, and Ruth. Later he discusses the character of Esther more explicitly. André LaCocque, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990) 1 and 71.

[9] It was in response to this growing body of literature that a symposium on Esther was held in 2000 in Omaha, Nebraska, out of which a joint edited volume was published: Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon, eds. *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 380; London: T & T Clark International, 2003).

[10] Danna Nolan Fewell, "Feminist Readings of the Hebrew Bible: Affirmation, Resistance, and Transformation" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39 (1987) 83.

the narrative, hinting to modern exegetes that the subject of male-female relationships is of no small importance in this book.[11]

Timothy Beal sees the focus on relationships between husbands and wives in chapter 1 of the MT of Esther as providing a frame that " '*leaves the mark of erasure,*' "[12] one consequence of which is that "there are traces of that gender-based conflict and the problematics of gender politics it entails."[13] For Beal, then, the introduction in the first chapter is a palimpsest; the narrative that follows is written over chapter 1; beneath the narrative that follows are traces of that first chapter and the themes that are found throughout. Thus, he views chapter one is not merely a plot device by which to set up the main action; rather it influences the whole narrative and thus provides clues for the book's interpretation. The idea that the first chapter provides the interpretive clue for the entirety of the rest of the book is probably overstating the case because the narrative of Esther is exceptionally complex. Yet both Fewell and Beal's observations are significant; they both strongly suggest that gender dynamics are important within the narrative and thus the text of Esther provides sufficient cause for investigating issues of gender and power in the story.

When scholars have focused on the character of Esther in relationship to the fact of her gender, they have come to no consensus on how to view her, echoing the ambivalence toward Esther more generally. Zefira Gitay notes that the biblical text opens up this ambiguity, a fact

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[11] See, for example, the comment of Michael Fox, "In truth, the author is something of a protofeminist. This book is the only one in the Bible with a conscious and sustained interest in sexual politics. The concept of sexual politics can be applied precisely and without anachronism to Memuchan's advice and the ensuing decree in 1:16–22." Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001.

[12] Timothy K. Beal, "Tracing Esther's Beginnings," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna* (ed. Athalya Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 87–110, at 103.

[13] Ibid., 107. The introduction of this theme early in the narrative of the MT suggests to Beal "the possibility of a critique of the very gender-coded order it is introducing" (89).

that has been reflected both in the scholarship on Esther and in the visual representations of her from early on until the present. She describes the two opposite interpretive possibilities evident in both scholarship and visual representation, "Interestingly, not only artists are puzzled with regard to Esther's role in Ahasuerus's court. Bible critics also express two diametrically opposed views concerning Esther's role. Some view her as a fully fledged queen, whereas others maintain that the crown on her head (2.17) has decorative value only."[14] It is precisely this tension within interpretations of Esther that we shall take as the beginning point our discussions on the book.

Some interpreters have found her to be exceptional, noteworthy precisely because she is so different from the portrayal of other biblical women that she stands out as a paradigm of a woman who, against all odds defies gender stereotypes, thus serving as a positive model. One reason for this view of her is tied directly to her portrayal in the biblical text as a woman who is politically effective through the persuasiveness of her words: Esther 7:3–4 records Queen Esther's speech to King Ahasuerus in which she pleads for her own life and the life of her people. Twice previously in the narrative, personal problems have become political, escalating into national crises—first when Vashti refused to appear when the king requested her presence (Esth 1:13–22) and again when Mordecai would not bow before Haman (Esth 3:6–11). Here in her speech, Esther cleverly mitigates bloodshed when she inverts the violent trend toward escalating personal problems that had been established by both the king and Haman, transforming a political crisis—the pending genocide of the Jewish people—into a very personal matter and winning her case before the king (Esth 7:3–4).

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[14] Zefira Gitay, "Esther and the Queen's Throne," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna* (ed. Athalya Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 136–148, at 138.

Conversely she has been read as a woman who conforms closely to gendered expectations, the product of a patriarchal author who has used her character as a way to reinforce a particular ideology of gender and power. Elements in the narrative suggesting to exegetes that Esther is the product of patriarchal values include the fact that her beauty and obedience are highlighted. Furthermore, it is only through her traditional role as a wife that Esther is able to bring about change. Esther does not change the system, but rather finds ways to adapt to the political and social limitations placed on her and use them to her advantage.

Regardless, scholars who have focused on the question of gender, whether their view is positive or negative, tend to frame the analysis in terms of her relationship to patriarchy: According to most descriptions of her, she is deemed to be either defiant of, or in conformity with, patriarchal expectations.[15] These two trends in scholarly appraisals of Esther can be described, in the words of Fewell, as a focus on either "text-affirming" or "text-resistant" readings.[16] Each of these analyses of Esther presumes that there is a regular way in which female roles are consistently configured throughout the biblical narratives. Evaluating Esther, then, means a discussion of the degree to which she conforms to, or deviates from, set societal expectations.

It is the purpose of this chapter to review and evaluate the scholarship on the book of Esther, and the problems with evaluating her as either one of two options: exceptional or typical.

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[15] This observation has been made by others as well. See for example, Timothy Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther* (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 165; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1997) 6; and Susan Niditch, "Short Stories: The Book of Esther and the Theme of Women as a Civilizing Force," in *Old Testament Interpretation Past, Present, and Future: Essay in Honor of Gene M. Tucker* (ed. James L. Mays; Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) 195–209.

[16] Fewell is not describing these types of reading strategies specifically in relationship to scholarship on Esther, although she does discuss Esther in her article, but to describe different trends evident in feminist scholarship in general. Nevertheless, her descriptions of these two models are particularly apropos of the way scholars have assessed Esther. Fewell, "Feminist Readings of the Hebrew Bible," 81–82.

The problem with characterizing her in these two opposite ways is that it relies on an assumption of dichotomous and gendered categories that regulate women's lives, at least in ordinary circumstances. Both the evaluations of Esther that see her as reinforcing and those that view her as defying gendered expectations are problematic because gender was just one of many social realities that determined societal expectations. Yet within the body of scholarship on Esther, there are also a significant number of important suggestions that point toward a more nuanced social and political reality.

Esther in Scholarship

In considering Esther and Ruth together, Esther Fuchs determines that both stories, although they are named after the primary female character, are "told *by* a man's world, but also *for* a man's world. These are not stories of women, but stories of female role models determined and fostered by the strongly developed patriarchal ideology."[17] According to her evaluation of Esther's character, she falls short when compared both to Mordecai and to Vashti: In contrast to the positive portrayal of Mordecai, Fuchs deems Esther to be "pretty, obedient, silver-tongued, and somewhat manipulative;"[18] in contrast to "the willful Persian wife" Vashti, Esther appears "meek and selfless."[19] Through her adherence to patriarchal norms, Esther ultimately reinforces the status quo. Fuchs states, "Ruth and Esther personify the reinstitution of patriarchal order. Only by reenacting the roles assigned to them by the patriarchal system as wives and mothers

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[17] Esther Fuchs, "Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (ed. Alice Bach; New York: Routledge, 1999) 77–84, at 84.

[18] Ibid., 81.

[19] Ibid., 82.

can women become national heroines."[20] For Fuchs, the book of Esther both reflects and reinforces patriarchy, portraying the male fantasy of a female heroine: She affects victory for her people while conforming perfectly to male expectations of women.

 Alice Laffey offers a similar estimation of Esther's character as a woman who is represented in the narrative as merely a sex object. Like Fuchs, Laffey also contrasts Esther's behavior to Vashti's actions. While Vashti defied her husband's command, thus refusing to submit herself to patriarchal expectations, Esther represents "a stereotypical woman in a man's world."[21] Mary Gendler would also prefer Vashti to Esther as a model woman, offering a harsh critique of Esther:

> What about Esther do I find objectionable? In most ways she sounds like an ideal woman—beautiful, pious, obedient, courageous. And it is just this which I find objectionable. Esther is certainly the prototype—and perhaps even a stereotype—of the ideal Jewish woman an ideal which I find restrictive and repressive.[22]

Her concern is not only that Esther conforms to certain limited gender roles, but also that her portrayal shapes expectations for future generations of Jewish women.[23] Fuchs, Laffey, and Gendler believe that the story of Vashti serves as a cautionary tale. The woman who defies patriarchy will not succeed; the woman who conforms to it is held up an as exemplary woman.

Carey Moore's commentary on Esther reflects a view of Esther in which her role is secondary to that of her uncle, Mordecai. He states, "In the Hebrew version it is more asserted than illustrated that Mordecai was wise and good; while beautiful and courageous, Esther

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[20] Ibid., 83.

[21] Alice Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist* Perspective (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) 216.

[22] Mary Gendler, "The Restoration of Vashti," in *The Jewish Woman* (ed. Elizabeth Koltun; New York: Schocken, 1976) 241–47, at 242.

[23] Ibid., 247.

nonetheless seems to be almost two-dimensional."[24] The low estimation of Esther's role in the narrative is reflected in his translation of Esther 2:4, which he translates as "Then, let the girl who most please the king be queen in place of Vashti."[25] The Hebrew verb he translates as "to be queen" could also have been rendered in a more active way, "to reign."[26] He describes this choice as intentional, intended to reflect Esther's lack of status, stating, "Esther was called queen, but she did not rule; even after being queen for five years (see iii 7), Esther still occupied a weak and precarious position—in her own eyes at least—for she was most uncertain about her fate and her powers over the king (see iv 11)."[27] Thus, Moore views the role that Esther occupies in passive terms. She is the wife of the king, not a woman wields political power herself.

Bea Wyler also evaluates Esther in terms of her conformity to patriarchy, but also recognizes that she is doubly disadvantaged, in that she is both a Jew and a woman. Although initially reluctant, Esther does ultimately participate in liberation of the Jewish people, but not in the liberation of women and thus, "What she has learned about discrimination as a Jew is apparently not applicable to her situation as a woman in a male-dominated world. Her emancipation is one-sided and thus incomplete."[28] Wyler described the dual problems faced by Esther: racism and sexism, of which only one problem is resolved. Ultimately then, for Wyler, Esther never escapes the confines of patriarchy, conforming to gender norms. She states that "Queen Esther remains bound to the decrees of men, written in the script and language of her

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[24] Moore, *Esther*, LIV.

[25] Ibid., 15.

[26] Here he is reacting against Paton's translation specifically, choosing over and against Paton's translation to use the passive rather than the active sense.

[27] Ibid., 18.

[28] Bea Wyler, "The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna* (ed. Athalya Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 132.

own husband the king (1.22). She has no influence to bring to bear on this state of affairs for herself or for other women, due to her blindness about her situation as a woman, at the single moment when power is concentrated in her feminine hand (8.1), she hands it all over to Mordecai (8.2)."[29]

For Lillian Klein, the portrayal of Esther is closely tied to the understanding of honor and shame, values that she sees as important in Israelite culture and a central concern throughout the story of Esther. She argues that honor can be achieved in ancient cultures through autonomy, something that can be accomplished only by men. Women can achieve honor only through embodying shame, that is, "they take pride in contributing to their males' honor through preservation of feminine modesty."[30] Underlying her understanding of honor and shame, as associated with men and women, respectively, is the reliance on categories of public and private spaces for describing gender norms. She states, "To protect his honor and social reputation from his wife's shameful behavior, a husband has socially recognized strategies: segregation of his women, insisting that they remain veiled in public, and restricting their social behavior to 'women's spaces.' "[31] Thus Klein is somewhat circumspect about viewing Esther as an exceptional woman because her "actions in the masculine world" are masked by the "*appearance* of feminine shame."[32] She states,

> Esther has been championed as an example of an enterprising woman. Nevertheless, the text demonstrates how she acts behind the mask of 'feminine shame.' Thus Esther epitomizes the book's message and manipulation of the honor/shame theme.

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[29] Ibid.

[30] Lillian R. Klein, "Honor and Shame in Esther," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna* (ed. Athalya Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 149–75, at 150–1.

[31] Ibid., 151.

[32] Ibid., 175.

Klein's evaluation of Esther, then, is that she is a woman who appears to embody gender norms outwardly, while she subverts them subtly. Ultimately, this text offers a message for diasporan Jews who also cannot achieve full autonomy and thus must conform to outward expectations of submission to the dominant political authority, while exerting freedom to subvert expectations in an inconspicuous way.

Other scholars have noticed that although Esther conforms to gender norms, this view is not one which the author of Esther endorses. Instead, some have seen in the person of Esther a representation of the diasporic Jewish community as a whole. This work builds on the observations of scholars who have stressed that the book of Esther was written to provide a solution to theological tensions and problems that came along with Exile and life in Diaspora. Take, for example, the thesis of W. Lee Humphreys, in which he suggests that Esther and Daniel "are tales of a particular type, which, along with their considerable entertainment value, develop a particular theological emphasis addressed to the emerging Jewish communities of the Persian and Hellenistic diaspora. They suggest and illustrate a certain style of life for the Jew in his foreign environment."[33] This argument is echoed by Levenson, who contends that the book of Esther neither highlights nor ignores nationalism, but rather it "speaks . . . of a newly-defined Israel. It tells how 'Judeans' became 'Jews.'"[34] Both Humphreys and Levenson highlight the importance of identity politics—which have both an ethnic and religious component—that are at work in the book of Esther.

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[33] W. Lee Humphreys, "A Life-style for Diaspora: A Study in the Tales of Esther and Daniel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973) 211–223, at 211.

[34] Jon Levenson, "The Scroll of Esther in Ecumenical Perspective," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 13 (1976) 440–52, at 451.

It is in this vein that Sidnie White Crawford both confirms the view of Esther as a traditional woman while offering a far more sympathetic portrayal of her. She argues that Esther serves as a role model for diasporic living. She sees Esther as "the epitome of a cooperative courtier," a character who achieves success by working "within the system."[35] For Crawford, Esther serves a symbolic value in modeling the feelings of disenfranchisement felt by diasporan Jews; her characterization suggests that adaptability is a necessary element for life in the Diaspora.[36] This view presumes that women are symbols of powerlessness, one that the author recognizes but does not authorize. Rather, the author uses the most powerless image possible, a woman, an orphan, and a resident alien as a metonymy for the vulnerabilities experienced by Jews living under Persian rule rather than to directly investigate gender relationships.

In a later article on Esther and Judith, Crawford notes that both Esther and Judith play a role in the subversion of patriarchal norms in their defeat of two men, Haman and Holofernes, respectively.[37] The portrayal of women in the postexilic period as heroes against foreign powers gives narrative shape to socio-political realities. She says,

> The women, in addition to being women and therefore of secondary status in society, are also representative of the Jews. . . . The Jews in the post-exilic period were dominated by foreign powers and thus politically in the cultural position of women; the Gentile male's defeat by the Jewish woman thus resonated along political as well as gender lines.[38]

In contrasting the two women, she follows the work of Fuchs, Laffey, and Gendler who critique the characterization of Esther as an embodiment of patriarchal values,[39] suggesting that this is

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[35] Sidnie Ann White, "Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy L. Day; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 161–77, at 173.

[36] Ibid, 166–7.

[37] Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther and Judith: Contrasts in Character," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (ed. Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon; London: T & T Clark, 2003) 61–76, at 65.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid., 71.

one possibility for Esther's ultimate acceptance into the canon while Judith was not. She states, "It is Esther's essential adherence to this norm that makes her sometimes suspect conduct acceptable to her mostly male audience, and may have played some role in the book's eventual canonization."[40] According to Crawford, Esther conforms to patriarchal values because of her married status, her beauty, and her obedience.[41] In her estimation, Esther adapts to gender expectations, working within the privacy of home, never exercising any kind of public authority.[42] Crawford is mediating, then, between the two poles: she views Esther as a typical woman in relationship to gender, but also recognizes that gender may signify larger political realities of powerlessness. Thus, from her perspective, one cannot evaluate the degree to which Esther conforms to gendered expectations without recognizing how this impacts and reflects the Jewish community's own sense of disenfranchisement.

The view that Esther is a role model, however, has not gone uncontested. Timothy Beal's work challenges this view, suggesting that it is overly simplistic. Beal suggests instead that Esther highlights the complex problems of identity politics, rather than offering a straightforward model to emulate.[43] He views as Esther as a "literary farce that highlights the impossibilities of locating and fixing the not-self, or other (specifically the woman as other and the Jew as other) over against 'us.' "[44] For him, Esther is not a projection of a particular image but rather "the *aggregation* of many identity convergences, shifting alignments, ambivalences, and margin

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[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid., 73.

[42] Ibid., 72.

[43] Timothy Beal, *Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997).

[44] Ibid., ix.

locations."[45] Beal sees social identity as a complex phenomenon, which includes, but is not limited to gender.

In a somewhat different vein from the work of Crawford, liberation theologians have also celebrated Esther as a character who is a paradigm, valuable for the emancipatory possibility that she presents. While Crawford sees Esther of a model of how to work within the system, several theologians have seen her as an example of liberation. The work of Asian-American theologian Roy Sano focused on the story of Esther as a model for the way in which stories can offer a resource to ethnic minority communities to speak about their own histories of oppression.[46] Building on Sano's work, Orlando Costas argued that the book of Esther not only offers language to minorities in the United States to articulate their own experiences, but also offers possibilities to "any theological discourse that seeks to be liberating."[47] Thus, Costas finds the book of Esther to represent a significant challenge to the societal norms. He states:

> The story of Esther offers a paradigm of liberating theological reflection. Its central episode represents a radical questioning of the status quo. It does not accept a negative event as fate or an accident of history. Rather, it identifies it as a wicked historical deed and challenges it in the name of justice. It sees history as open to change for the better because it is led by a providential and liberating God who stands behind the powerless and oppressed.[48]

Sano and Costas focus less on the specific question of gender. However, Costas' evaluation of Esther stresses that she embodies "a radical questioning of the status quo," and thus can be seen very clearly as a subversion of societal norms and expectations."[49]

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Roy Sano, "Ethnic Liberation Theology: Neo-Orthodoxy Reshaped or Replaced?" in *Christianity and Crisis* 35 (1975) 258–64.

[47] Orlando E. Costas, "The Subversiveness of Faith: Esther as a Paradigm for Liberating Theology," *Ecumenical Review* 40 (1988) 66–78, at 66.

[48] Ibid., 67.

[49] For another perspective on Esther as a character who demonstrates liberation and also serves to liberate others, see also, John F. Craghan, "Esther: A Fully Liberated Woman," *Bible Today* 24 (1986) 6–11.

Talmon's observations about the strong connection between the canonical book of Esther and the wisdom tradition earned Esther a high estimation in his analysis. Talmon categorized the book of Esther as an "historicized wisdom-tale," which he described as "an *enactment* of standard 'Wisdom' motifs."[50] He acknowledged that the book of Esther is in no way a set of wise maxims like the book of Proverbs, functioning in a clear and explicitly didactic manner, but rather it is an example of "applied wisdom" illustrating by example that the path of wisdom is the one which leads to success. Thus, he describes Esther as one who "achieves proverbial success (Prov iii 4)" for it is she who "overshadows her uncle and outclasses his adversary Haman in the art of crafty planning and successful execution."[51] One of the most significant aspects of his analysis is that in connecting Esther to wisdom literature, he also sees her portrayal as a continuation of portrayals of other biblical women who are also depicted as a clever: Delilah, Jael, Michal, Rachel, Bathsheba, and the wise woman of Tekoa, to name a few.[52] In his estimation, it was not at all uncommon for biblical women to be portrayed as wise, stating, "Courageous and determined women apparently often were found in wisdom circles." [53] For Talmon, at least, Esther was a part of a larger tradition of women who might take on a more active role in a wisdom context.

Bruce Jones uses Talmon's observations concerning wisdom and concludes that Esther is portrayed in the narrative as "a sage, not a sex-object."[54] In his essay, one of his two primary

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[50] Shemaryahu Talmon,. " 'Wisdom' in the Book of Esther," *Vetus Testamentum* 13 (1963) 419–55, at 426.

[51] Ibid., 449.

[52] Ibid., 450–1.

[53] Ibid., 451.

[54] Bruce W. Jones, "Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977) 171–81, at 177.

tasks is to offer a rebuttal to certain "liberated women" who "have found reason to dislike Esther because of the chauvinistic view of Esther which they see in it."[55] His work is in direct conversation with earlier negative assessments of Esther by feminist scholars, including Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, who see the first chapter of Esther as an argument that women must be obedient to husbands.[56] He says that those who have misunderstood the portrayal of Esther as negative toward women have overlooked the centrality of humor throughout the work as a literary device.[57] Jones explicitly cites Talmon and expresses agreement with him regarding the strong connections between Esther and the wisdom tradition. Despite Talmon's determination that women were often depicted as wise, Jones finds suggests instead the role of sage "is uncommon for a woman" but still finds that Esther "fills it, surpassing even Mordecai."[58] Both see her as embodying wisdom ideals, and thus a more public figure. For Talmon, this places her in a larger wisdom tradition while for Bruce this represents a kind of anomaly.

Although many scholars have followed Talmon's suggestion that Esther has strong connections to wisdom literature, others have questioned this evaluation. Crenshaw, for example, has serious doubts about relating the book of Esther too closely to wisdom literature. In his article, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon 'Historical' Literature," he examines the methods of several scholars who have emphasized the role that wisdom literature has played in impacting other books. His concern is for the establishment of formal criteria for the genre of

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[55] Ibid., 171. His other task is to respond to objections that the book of Esther is problematic because of the "cruelty and nationalism" some saw in it (ibid.).

[56] Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation* (Waco: Word Books, 1974) 93 cited in *Jones,* "Two Misconceptions," 172 n. 5.

[57] Ibid., 171.

[58] Ibid., 177.

wisdom literature. He contends that wisdom cannot be too broadly construed or it is no longer

constitutive of a genre, arguing "The multiplicity of wisdom's representatives and answers must

not force one into a definition that is so comprehensive that it becomes unusable."[59] While

Crenshaw is helpful for thinking about the methods necessary for establishing a literary genre, it

does not undermine the central observations of Talmon regarding a strong connection between

wisdom traditions and the book of Esther, even if it does not employ all the requisite formal

literary markers of wisdom literature.

The observation regarding the limit to Esther's portrayal in relationship to wisdom was

picked up by Kevin McGeough, who contends that although Esther does conform to wisdom

expectations in the beginning of the story, she ultimately moves beyond them. McGeough argues

that wisdom literature focused on the strategies for everyday life that would enable success.

These, however, must be abandoned when there a threat to the normal, everyday circumstances.

He argues,

> Wisdom, then reflects normative and ideal behavior for everyday life. When conditions are
> normal or stable, wisdom provides good guidelines for behavior. When the normative construct is
> threatened, these behaviors are insufficient. Here is where a hero must step in. So the story of
> Esther, although reflecting wisdom values, must provide a character that supersedes those values
> as savior.[60]

In this way, Esther does serve as a role model for the values that she demonstrates, but is not a

character that ordinary people would emulate because her actions were exceptional, brought on

by extreme necessity, not everyday situations. He concludes then, "Thus, although the story of

Esther fulfills liberative fantasies, it is still inherently conservative."[61] McGeough does not stress

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[59] James Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon 'Historical' Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1969) 129–42, at 131.

[60] Kevin McGeough, "Esther the Hero: Going Beyond 'Wisdom' in Heroic Narratives," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70 (2008) 44–65, at 65.

[61] Ibid.

the fact of Esther's gender, but does assess her specifically in relationship to whether or not she offers a model of liberation from social expectations. Ultimately, McGeough finds that Esther does not subvert the status quo, but rather acts in an exceptional way due to the particularity of her specific circumstances. Her behavior, however, is not likely to be replicated by others: Heroes are people that are admired but not imitated in everyday life.

The title of LaCocque's book, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition*, readily identifies him as a scholar who reads Esther as a character who subverts the gendered expectations placed on women. According to LaCocque, Esther is anything but the embodiment of patriarchal stereotypes; rather the book of Esther, along with Ruth, Judith, and Susanna, was written as a response to the gender imbalance that had developed during the postexilic period that looked back to an earlier time of gender equity during the premonarchic era.[62] He sees the book of Esther as a "subversive piece of literature."[63] Along with Susanna, Judith, and Ruth, Esther stands out in the biblical tradition; they are exemplars of women who "break the stereotypes of femininity, not by becoming masculine, but by transcending the male-female polarity while remaining the feminine 'females' that they are."[64] According to this viewpoint, then, there are very negative stereotypes about women prevalent in the postexilic period, but the author of Esther is no way concurs with them; instead he imagines through the narrative another possibility on how women might be viewed. The conviction held by LaCocque that Esther's author is trying to subvert gender expectations, and thus portrays her

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[62] LaCocque, *The Feminine Unconventional*, 1– 6.

[63] Ibid., 71.

[64] Ibid., 117.

as "unconventional," indicates a strong reliance on the idea that there are fixed gender expectations, among which is that women ordinarily do not exercise public roles.

Michael Fox's commentary on the book of Esther focuses a great deal on characterization. Although he views Mordecai as the more exemplary character, he notes that it is Esther alone who the author portrays as dynamic, stating, "The distinctive feature in the portrayal of Esther is change. Esther alone undergoes growth and surprises the reader by unpredictable developments."[65] He sees Esther having undergone a three-part growth process: passivity, activity, authority.[66] Esther's process of growth, as well as the absence of miracles in the story, places the emphasis in the narrative on "human resources—intellectual as well as spiritual—even of people not naturally leaders."[67] In this way, Fox seems to draw on the work of Crawford, concluding that although Esther's actions are not typical, they speak specifically to a postexilic Diaspora context. Fox sees the author of Esther as providing a model by highlighting the importance of "human character" in achieving salvation, rather than divine intervention.[68]

In Fox's most recent edition of his commentary, he included an excursus on "The Image of Woman in the Book of Esther."[69] Fox recognizes that the critique of feminist scholars about the status of women is relevant to the book Esther, which introduces the very theme of relationships between men and women. He examines the critique of Fuchs and Laffey in particular and finds their critiques to be unwarranted. Rather than uphold and idealize stereotypes of women, he suggests that the book, "teaches that *even* a stereotypical woman in a world of

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[65] Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology,* 196.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Ibid., 205.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid., 205–11.

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laughably stereotypical males is capable of facing the ultimate national crisis and diverting the royal power to her own ends."[70] Like Jones, he is aware of the role that humor plays in the narrative, and thus describes the book as a "satire on the *masculine* ego."[71] This is meant less as a critique of constructs of masculinity in the abstract, but rather is a direct attack on the portrayal of "male dominance as manifested in the Persian court."[72] Thus, Fox balances between two positions. On the one hand, he disagrees with LaCocque and Jones who view Esther as an exceptional woman who refutes gender stereotypes. Yet he believes the author of Esther to be sympathetic to her, describing the author as "something of a protofeminist;" because of the way that exaggerated stereotypes allow for an ironic critique of the Persian Empire. As is the case in White's analysis, for Fox, Esther fits perfectly into the roles proscribed for women by postexilic patriarchy, but her adherence to these expectations is not commended by the author, but rather a vehicle for diasporic Jews to voice their critique of foreign powers.

Susan Niditch describes her own work on the book of Esther as taking a position of "structured empathy,"[73] a scholarly position that she defines as one that tries to understand other cultures, whether ancient or contemporary, on their own terms without the need to adopt that worldview as one's own.[74] Niditch, like Fox, emphasizes that Esther is not static: She is presented initially as a *betulah* but matures during the course of the narrative with the central moment of change taking place in Esth 5:15–16. Thus, she sees the theme of maturity as central to the book of Esther. For Niditch, one cannot ask the question about how the author views

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[70] Ibid., 207.

[71] Ibid., 209.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Susan Niditch, "Short Stories: The Book of Esther," 200.

[74] Ibid., 199.

Esther without considering what "this mature and active Esther . . . indicates about its creator's attitudes to women, about woman as a component of this cultural and symbolic map."[75] Focus on Esther's development over the course of the narrative calls into question views that would see gender as a fixed constant in women's lives; the narrative representation at least allows for a variety of possibilities for women in relationship to power over the course of her lifetime.

Niditch views the "structured empathy" of her own approach as being of a similar kind to that of Crawford and Fox, arguing that all three share "the emphasis on the wisdom of expediency."[76] Fox's observation regarding the role that Esther plays in satirizing Persian masculinity adds an additional layer to this theme. She contends that "Fox has pointed obliquely to fascinating theme . . . of woman as the civilizing force in culture and the accompanying related social critique of the male-dominated worlds in which both men and women find themselves."[77] Niditch identifies a literary theme that runs throughout much of the biblical literature in which women function as civilizing agents. For Niditch, these are women who contend with powerful males—usually men who use their power foolishly until they are confronted by a woman through whose persuasive speech outcomes are changed. These women include Esther, Abigail, the woman of Tekoa, and the woman of Abel Bethmaacah—women who function in the narrative as the male conscience, able to coax them into changing their mind against violent or rash behavior.[78] She recognizes that although each of these women works

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[75] Ibid., 201.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Ibid., 202.

[78] Ibid., 202–204.

within the societal norms rather than enact changes at a structural level, the stories about them also have a "subversive underside."[79]

Athalya Brenner introduces an important aspect into her analysis of Esther as a character. Her article examines the book of Esther in conversation with Lewis Carroll's *Alice through the Looking Glass*, a decision that is based on the common theme of "inversion of fate," that characterized both. The two stories employ the literary devices of repetition and symmetry in service of this theme.[80] Her careful reading of Esther alongside Carroll's work highlights the shared motif of significant female characters who wield power instead of the males who would seem to be authority figures. She cautions, however, that before the text is celebrated as liberative for women, we should be cautious because both tales "depict mirror worlds" and thus she concludes, "The situation remains unresolved."[81] Her work emphasizes the difficulties of reading the text of Esther as having a simple or obvious meaning. Brenner underscores the caution offered by Jon Levenson that "The book of Esther is many things, so many, in fact, that it would be a capital mistake to view it from only one angle."[82] For Brenner, then, the relationship to the status quo is neither straightforward nor simple. Esther is not simply an embodiment of, nor a reaction against, patriarchy. The use of reversals, or in her language, of "mirror image" complicates the picture of what is being portrayed as reality and what is portrayed as its inverse.

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[79] Ibid., 204.

[80] Athalya Brenner, "Looking at Esther Through the Looking Glass," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 71–80, at 71.

[81] Ibid., 80.

[82] Jon Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1977) 1.

In recent decades, there has been an increased interest in the various versions of Esther, which include the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and the Alpha text. Various studies, including the work of Michael Fox,[83] Linda Day[84] and Kathryn De Troyer,[85] and Timothy Beal[86] have complicated the picture of how Esther is portrayed in relationship to societal norms by demonstrating that there is no one portrayal of Esther, but there are several. In De Troyer's analysis of the three versions, she draws the following conclusions: 1) The Hebrew text is written by men and imposes gender expectations; 2) the Septuagint slightly relaxes the norm established in the Hebrew text; and 3) the Alpha text has very little concern for Esther except for her functional role in advancing the plot.[87] Beal's analysis of the various textual traditions comes to a very different conclusion: the MT opens the possibility for a "critique of gender codes" that are no longer present in the LXX and AT. [88]

Each of the scholars who have analyzed the various textual traditions tends to repeat the pattern of previous scholarship that evaluates the three different versions of Esther in light of whether they subvert or uphold societal norms. Yet these studies complicate the picture of a simple evaluation of Esther vis-à-vis gendered stereotypes. In Linda Day's work, she specifically

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[83] Fox, "Three Esthers," 50–60.

[84] Linda M. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther* (JSOTSup 186; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

[85] Kristin De Troyer "An Oriental Beauty Parlour: An Analysis of Esther 2:8–18 in the Hebrew, the Septuagint, and the Second Greek Text," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 47–70; see also, De Troyer, "Esther in Text- and Literary-Critical Paradise," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 380; London: T & T Clark International, 2003) 47–70.

[86] Beal, "Tracing Esther's Beginning's" 87–110.

[87] De Troyer, "An Oriental Beauty Parlour," 70.

[88] Beal, "Tracing Esther's Beginning's," 88–9.

states in her introduction that her it is her intention to address the scholarly neglect of the differing portrayals of Esther. She states, "The assessments of Ether's character provided thus far, excellent though they may have been, are inadequate to describe all three Esthers accurately and satisfactorily."[89] In her conclusion, Day suggests that the book of Esther, in all of the various textual traditions, offers important resources for feminist scholars because it demonstrates a plurality of views within the biblical text. Although the scholars represented in this body of work do not endorse the same viewpoint as to which text offers the most liberative possibility, their work intimates that gender realities are a bit more complex. If different versions of the same story might endorse a variety of perspectives on gender, then the cultural expectations for women are likely not quite so fixed as had been previously thought.

Problems and Possibilities Posed by the Literature on Esther

Part I: Problems

As we have seen, those who have focused on the problems of patriarchy in regard to Esther's portrayal have tended to emphasize that women were likely constrained to the private sphere.[90] Take for example the language Klein uses to compare Esther to Vashti. She says, "A basic difference is that Vashti is *one* woman confronted in *male space* with *many men* as judges; Esther is among *many* women confronted in *female space* with *one man* as judge."[91] Her descriptions of way that Vashti would have been viewed at the king's feast as compared with the

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[89] Day, *Three Faces,* 14.

[90] This subject is taken up in detail in the following chapter. The quote here is merely intended to be illustrative of this kind of language.

[91] Klein, "Honor and Shame in Esther," 157. In another instance she described Mordecai's inability to communicate with Esther as being constrained by similar physical limitations to different spaces, "Consistent with the established separation of authorized male and female spaces, all communication between Esther and Mordecai is not direct but through a eunuch—a 'safe' demi-male—as messenger" (163).

king's judgment of Esther's in the midst of other women presumes that the king's feast was an all-male space while the evaluation of women in a beauty context happened in an exclusively female space. Neither of these, however, is clearly described as such in the biblical narrative.

The review of scholarship at the beginning of this chapter has demonstrated that when women are understood as being ordinarily constrained to the private sphere, two opposite possibilities for interpretation emerge: they are either typical or exceptional. Both of these diametrically opposed viewpoints have been specifically applied to interpretations of Esther's character. Yet there are several problems with this view. One problem with assessing women as typical, and thus embodying gender stereotypes, is that in order to do this, they must be evaluated with a different set of social standards than those applied to men. When women are viewed as special case, discussions germane to other aspects of biblical studies are often ignored.

Those who would view Esther as an embodiment of male values cite several kinds of evidence for this. In the first place, Esther's beauty is a central aspect of her portrayal. Second, feminist scholars have noted that she is compliant, obeying Mordecai's orders as well as conforming to social mores. Third, her actions in the narrative are closely tied to the traditional female roles, especially that of wife. There are several problems, however, with these evaluations of Esther because they do not take into account parallel evidence for each of these categories in relationship to men, who are also described in terms of physical beauty, obedience, and by traditional family relationships of father and husband.

Each charge against Esther could be answered by a more nuanced evaluation of the larger cultural implications of each of the items listed. In the first place, to describe Esther as beautiful is not necessarily to portray her as an object. Rather, as Brenner has demonstrated, many men and women in the bible are described as physically beautiful, especially those who are significant

actors or have received some kind of divine favor. She states, "The survey of basic/general terms for human beauty reveals that, in so far as these terms are concerned, there is no marked difference between references to female or male beauty. While female beauty is described more often, most of the available terms serve to depict both genders."[92] Among those who are described as having physical appeal or stature are Saul (1 Sam 10:23), David (1 Sam 16:7, 12),[93] and Joseph (Gen 39:6), to name just a few. Yet it is the character of Joseph with whom Esther is described in nearly identical terms (Gen 39:6; Esth 2:7). Beginning in the late nineteenth century, a number of scholars have the connections between Esther and the Joseph story.[94] Thus, it is likely that Esther's description as "beautiful" is intended by the author not to indicate her inferior status as a woman, but rather the divine favor that she, like Joseph, receives.[95] In light of the fact that the Masoretic text of Esther makes no reference to God, the deliberate inclusion of this language is highly suggestive of theological interests that are work within the text far more than an attempt to objectify Esther. Esther's beauty does also facilitate the plot of the story in which Esther's beauty wins the king's favor and earns her status but it also serves as shorthand, indicating her favored status.

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[92] Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and "Sexuality" in the Hebrew Bible*" (Biblical Interpretation Series 26; Leiden: Brill, 1997) 45.

[93] The portrayal of David's appearance is a little bit complicated. On the one hand, he does not seem to represent at this stage a person of great physical stature in contrast to Saul. Thus, God cautions Samuel not to judge individuals based on their outward appearance. David's physical attractiveness, however, is also emphasized very clearly in the narrative.

[94] See, for example, Ludwig Rosenthal, "Die Josephgeschichte mit den Buchern Ester und Daniel verglichen" *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 15 (1895) 278–85; and idem, "Nochmals der Vergleich Ester-Joseph-Daniel" *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 17 (1897) 126–28. Many other scholars have also affirmed this connection. For example, Sandra Berg sees Joseph as a model after which the Esther story is fashioned. Sandra Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure* (SBLDS 44; Missoula: Scholars, 1979).

[95] The fact that both Joseph and Esther receive a mysterious favor by others in the court as an indication of divine favor is emphasized by Levenson, *Esther*, 60.

One could make a similar argument about the characterization of Esther as obedient. As Berg amply demonstrates, the motif of obedience and disobedience is a significant theme throughout the book of Esther, but the motif is not confined to the characterization of Esther alone.[96] If we look at the story a bit more closely, several figures give and take orders. While it is true that Esther does ultimately listen to Mordecai's request, she does so only by risking defying a royal command not to approach the king unsolicited. Regardless of whether she listens to Mordecai or not, she will ultimately have to defy either the king or Mordecai and obey the other; there is no option to disobey both at the same time. Moreover, Esther also commands Mordecai regarding what he should do after agreeing to approach the king, telling him,

> "Go gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish" (Esth 4:16).

What is especially interesting about this part of the story is that we are told that Mordecai followed Esther's orders precisely (v. 17).[97] Nowhere does the story stress that female obedience is a value that is upheld unequivocally. In addition, a number of other biblical narratives give examples of ways that this theme is evident, but there is no evidence for specific gendered expectations regarding obedience and disobedience.[98]

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[96] Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 72–82.

[97] In fact, it is this moment that Fox sees as the turning point in Esther's characterization. Once she accepts her responsibility, she becomes a commanding and authoritative figure, not merely an obedient young woman. He states, "She resolves to do her duty, and a change immediately comes upon her. She *commands* Mordecai—in the imperative, with no polite circumlocutions—to assemble the Jews in Susa for a public fast. . . . In convening such an assembly and issuing directives to the community, Esther is assuming the role of a religious and national leader, and doing so prior to Mordecai's own assumption of that role. She has taken control, giving Mordecai instructions, enjoining a fast on the Jews, and deciding to act contrary to law. Her behavior marks a woman determined to work her way through a crisis, not one cowed into obedience" (Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 199–200).

[98] For example, Moses is reluctant, but initially obeys Yahweh's command to go to Egypt (Ex 3–4); Saul follows Samuel's commands, which leads to his anointing as the future king of Israel (1 Sam 9–10); and Samuel listens to Eli's directives (1 Sam 3), to name just a few. In addition, there are instances in which a woman disobeys orders and is rewarded, including the story of Rahab who lied rather than obey the order of the king of Jericho to produce the spies she had hidden, instead helping them escape. For this act of defiance, she and her family members

A third criticism of Esther's characterization has been that it is only through fulfilling traditional gender roles that she gains success. The fact that Esther's power is born out of her relationships to men, especially her access to the king as a wife has been commented upon by feminist scholars. This does not, however, relate solely to women either. For everyone, power was mediated through an intricate web of relationships, especially familial ones. Women might gain power through marriage or because of who their father was. Conversely, men also gained certain status based on both lineage and marriage.[99] David's marriages to various women were likely a deliberate political strategy to help consolidate a power base. Moreover, there are instances when status could be conferred on individuals not only because of whom one's father's was, but also based on the mother, especially in cases where there were multiple wives. Thus, Jacob favors the sons of Rachel, his favored wife (Gen 37:3), and Solomon gains access to David's throne through the machinations of his mother, Bathsheba (1 Kings 2). It is important, then, to recognize the centrality of familial relationships and their impact on political life in order to better analyze the role that both men and women played in private and public ways. Family roles and relationships may have constrained women at times to certain kinds of activities, yet it is also through family relationships that women also may have had access to power, especially if they were born or married into a powerful family.[100]

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were saved (Josh 2, 6:22–25). The narrative indicates not only human but divine sanction on her actions: she is rewarded for her actions. Thus, biblical narratives do not uphold female obedience as an absolute value but rather obedience and disobedience are evaluated according to the specific circumstances.

[99] For a good example of how marriages played a part in David's rise to power, see Jon Levenson, "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and History," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978) 11–28; see also Levenson and Baruch Halpern, "The Political Import of David's Marriages," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1980) 507–518. Levenson and Halpern conclude that David's marriages to various women were a significant part of his early political strategy, allowing him to consolidate power.

[100] Titles connected to traditional male roles, such as father, often can indicate a kind of status. Yahweh, for example, is called both "father" and "husband." There is also evidence that traditional female roles might be used as titles in ways that indicate status in a parallel fashion to the way that the term "father" does. Thus, Deborah,

In viewing women's activities as separate and categorically of a different kind than those of men, there is a risk of analyzing the descriptions of women as if the same social and literary conventions operating within the narrative suddenly change when it comes to analyzing women's experience. For this reason, the use of gendered and dichotomous language for women's roles runs the risk of obfuscating complex realities. On the other hand, to view Esther as an exception ignores the fact that Esther is portrayed as politically effective and wielding a great deal of authority like many other biblical women before her, participating both in a diplomatic discourse and a rich literary tradition.

In Esther 7, the queen pleads with king on behalf of her people. The easy verbal interchange between personal and political matters in Esther's speech portrays her as a woman who is both familiar with and adept at using the language of diplomacy and negotiation that was common throughout the ancient Near East.[101] Both the dramatic and the comical political failures of the king and Haman, as well as the manner in which Esther's words evoke other women in biblical literature who are skilled in the art of negotiation, serve to highlight the portrayal of Esther as a skilled royal counselor.[102] In advising the king against violence, Esther participates in

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prophetess and judge of Israel is referred to as a "mother in Israel" (Judges 5:7). Also, in 1 Samuel, a woman pleads with Joab on behalf of a city of which people "used to say in the old days, 'Let them inquire at Abel'; and so they would settle a dispute." For this reason, the city is described as a "mother in Israel," an argument that apparently has persuasive power because Joab does not attack but spares the city (2 Sam 20:18).

[101] Levenson describes Esther's speech to the king as "masterful" on the grounds that she has used her own relationship to the king as leverage, "She is pleading for her own life but also implying, without being so tactless as to say it directly, that the king is about to the lose the person dearest to him and most with intimate with him." He compares this style of speech to the one in which Moses pleads with God on the people's behalf in Exodus 33, likewise enlisting "his own personal favor in the eyes of the LORD (vv. 12 and 13 [twice]). . . .Like Esther, Moses is the sovereign's darling, and like her, he pleads not simply for himself but for his people, boldly risking the favor that he has won in hopes of having it extended to the entire nation of Israel. And in each case the gamble succeeds" (*Esther,* 101).

[102] This is a topic that will be taken up in a later chapter at more length.

a tradition with other wise women who appear in biblical narratives,[103] with the personification of woman wisdom,[104] and with stories about successful courtiers in foreign courts.[105] The view that Esther is exceptional fails to account for connections to both biblical literature and ancient Near Eastern diplomacy language.[106]

Part II: Possibilities

The wide variety of divergent opinions on Esther demonstrate some of the problems with viewing her as an embodiment of gender stereotypes or the antithesis of them; yet within the scholarship surveyed above, there are also a number of important contributions that help to

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[103] 1 Samuel 25, 2 Sam 14:2–21, and 2 Sam 20:14–22 are all examples of wise women who offer counsel to a king (or king's representative), which has the effect of preventing violence. See Claudia Camp, "The Wise Women of 2 Samuel: A Role Model for Women in Early Israel?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981) 14–29; eadem, "The Female Sage in Ancient Israel and in the Biblical Wisdom Literature," in *The Sage in Ancient Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. G. Gammie and L. G. Perdue; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 185–203; and Silvia Schroer, "Wise and Counselling Women in Ancient Israel: Literary and Historical Ideals of the Personified Hokmâ," in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature* (ed. A. Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 67–84. Camp argues that several of these figures indicate a social reality behind the portrayal of Woman Wisdom in Proverbs in her articles. Schroer expands on Camp's arguments, broadening the corpus to include other women in biblical literature. Neither one clearly connects these women to Esther, but there are many verbal and thematic parallels that make this move a possibility that will be expanded on in the course of the dissertation.

[104] Shemaryahu Talmon, "'Wisdom' in the Book of Esther," *Vetus Testamentum* 13 (1963) 419–55. Talmon was the first to argue for a connection between the book of Esther and the wisdom tradition, arguing that the characters in Esther embody common types in wisdom literature. Thus he thinks that Esther should be understood as a "*historicized wisdom*-tale" that demonstrates "*applied* wisdom" (427). Although he does not explicitly cite this example, Proverbs 8 depicts wisdom as a woman who acts in ways that are in some ways similar to Esther's own actions. See for example, Prov 8:15–16: "By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just;/by me rulers rule, and nobles, all who govern rightly."

[105] Several scholars have noted connections between Esther and the story of Joseph. See for example, Arndt Meinhold, "Die Gattung der Josephgeschichte und des Estherbuches: Diasporanovelle;" Part I, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 87 (1975) 306–24; Part II, *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 88 (1976) 72–93; and Moshe Gan, "Megillat "Esther Be'asparqlariyat Qorot Yoseph Be'misrayim" *Tarbiz* 31 (1961–1962) 144–49. Others—such as Ludwig Rosenthal, "Die Josephgeschichte, mit den Buechern Ester und Daniel verglichen" *ZAW* 16 (1895) 278–84; and W. Lee Humphreys "A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973) 211–23—have seen connections between Esther and Daniel. Finally, see also Susan Niditch and Robert Doran "The Success Story of the Wise Courtier: A Formal Approach" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977) 179–93. In this article, they examine thematic elements connecting Esther to tales of courtiers in foreign courts including Daniel, Ahiqar and Joseph.

[106] There are also theoretical problems with employing the description of "exceptional" to women. Julie Asher-Greve states, "Feminist historians consider the idea of an exceptional woman a phenomenon of 'andronormative' historiography," describing how this problematic approach has impacted representations of the figure of Semiramis in both scholarship and culture. See, Julie Asher-Greve, " 'Semiramis of Babylon' to 'Semiramis of Hammersmith' " in *Assyriology, Orientalism, and the Bible* (ed. Steven W. Holloway; Hebrew Bible Monographs 10; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006) 322–73, at 324.

suggest a different approach to assessing gender in the book of Esther. In the first place, we have

seen that among the various versions of Esther, including the MT, LXX, and AT, there is a

degree of variability in how Esther is portrayed, some of which may well have gender

implications. The work of Beal, de Troyer, and others reminds us that among the various

versions of Esther, including the MT, AT and LXX, there are a variety of different

representations, suggesting that there is not a fixed perspective regarding women's role to which

everyone subscribes.

Second, scholarship on Esther has demonstrated that Esther's narrative portrayal

indicates that she is not a static character. Several scholars, including Fox and Niditch, have

described the change in Esther's characterization as an individual who moves from a passive to a

more active role. The development of a character in the narrative from passive to active opens up

a provocative historical possibility about the fluidity of women's status. Just as with the narrative

portrayal of Esther, so it was likely true of women in the Persian period: Status and authority

could and did change (whether positively, as in the case of Esther; or negatively, as is seen with

Vashti).[107] These changes, however, are not limited to women but are echoed in the rise and fall

of the men in the narrative; Haman who rises to a high status but loses it; and Mordecai who

fortunes shift several times in the narrative but ultimately involve his attaining a very high

position in the king's court. In fact, the theme of rise and fall in one's status is a rather consistent

theme throughout a number of court narratives, including stories such as Daniel, Ahiqar, and

Joseph.

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[107] A similar picture regarding the fluidity of status among nobles is confirmed by evidence from the Persian Empire. Pierre Briant describes the status given to nobles as conferred in part because of lineage, but it was contingent upon "royal favor" in Achaemenid Persia. Nobles could receive gifts, land, or political office because of the loyalty displayed to the king, but he notes, "These royal promotions also imply that the nobles could lose their prestige status from one day to the next. Conversely, those of a lower rank might be propelled toward the summit of the social hierarchy." See Pierre Briant, "Social and Legal Institutions in Achaemenid Iran," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (ed. Jack Sasson; New York: Scribner, 1995) 1:517–528, at 519.

Third, the story of Esther is one of great complexity. As Levenson remarked, "The book

of Esther is so entertaining, so comical, and so subtle that to speak of its "message" can be

profoundly misleading. Like all great literature, it demands at least that the term be in plural: A

book whose structure is amenable to many angles of vision surely has more than one

message."[108] This a very similar observation to that made by Brenner, who cautions us to be

careful before becoming too comfortable with any one reading of Esther for everything within

the story is couched in language of reversal, presenting to us a mirror image of reality, and thus

inherently distorting perceptions. Whether story of Esther is liberative for or detrimental to

women is not a simple and straightforward matter.

A great deal of scholarship on Esther has also emphasized the importance of ethnicity as

a social construct within the book. The work of Beal, Crawford, Humphreys, and Wyler, among

others, indicates that social identities overlap and interact in complex ways. This suggests that

other factors may well be taken into consideration in reflecting on how women are portrayed,

including, but not limited to the category of ethnicity and one's status vis-à-vis the dominant

political power. At times, gender may serve to represent other types of powerlessness, including

the experience of being a resident alien, or as a means by which to parody those with political

control in a subtle way. Yet ethnic and gender identities also intersect with each other and other

social factors in a variety of ways and thereby do not merely serve as metonym for one another

but also influence those other social factors..

In very different ways, then, the scholarship that has been surveyed makes important

suggestions about how to read the book of Esther. Although the majority of scholarship has

relied on one of two diametrically opposed views of Esther in relationship to gender, the

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[108] Levenson, *Esther*, 12.

suggestions that have been listed above point in the direction of a more nuanced approach to gender analysis in the biblical narratives.

Conclusion

The portrayal of Esther has relied on the central question: To what extent is this representation typical of women's experience and to what extent is it exceptional? As we have seen, much of the discussion about Israelite women's role has relied on the dichotomous categories of public and private.[109] The consequence of employing this language has to been to presume that these are separate categories—both physically and conceptually—and that these domains are gendered. This kind of thinking ordinarily designates "public" spaces as inhabited by males while women occupy spaces that are "private." Thus, scholars who have focused on Esther's beauty, obedience, and traditional domestic roles have concluded that Esther is a typical woman, an embodiment of patriarchal norms. In some instances, such as Crawford's analysis, we found that Esther is typical but that this is not necessarily a view with which the author sympathizes. Yet on the other hand, some scholars have found Esther to be exceptional, one who is able to defy the expectations and act in the public sphere, violating gender norms. The argument that we shall pursue here is that either one of these poles is inherently problematic because they are grounded in the faulty assumption that there were separate and gendered spaces to which men and women were ordinarily restricted.

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[109] The matter of how the categories of public and private are at work in biblical analysis has been briefly examined here but will be taken up at more length in the next chapter. For some examples of language that is very explicit about this, see, for example, Naomi Steinberg's statement, "Role behavior for men is localized primarily in the public sphere; where the interests of the public and private sphere overlap, men are the chief actors. Women's role behavior is confined to the private sphere of society." "Gender Roles in the Rebekah Cycle," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 39 (1984) 175–88, at 185. See also Michael Patrick O'Connor, "The Women in the Book of Judges," 277–93, at 279 for another example of this view.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Problems with the Language Public and Private

"Historians sometimes become imprisoned by the preconceptions, categories, and concepts that we bring to our "texts". . . We see or hear or read what we have been trained to recognize, applying predetermined categories perhaps beyond the point of sensible or reasonable interpretations."[110]

"More recently . . . feminist theorists have questioned the universality and usefulness of the public/private distinction. Such theorists contend that the dichotomy mystifies or misleads us into thinking of life in two separate boxes and makes it easy to assume that each of us fits more naturally into one box or the other, according to our sex. . . .Our colleagues in history remind us that the lives of the men and women they study are far more complex than such a clear dichotomy would suggest."[111]

Introduction

The first chapter examined some of the problematic ways in which scholars have often assessed Esther in describing her to be either defiant or paradigmatic of patriarchal gender expectations. This tendency assumes a model of dichotomous and gendered spaces, a model that obscures social complexities. This chapter will demonstrate the way in which biblical scholars have applied these concepts to both Esther, and to biblical women more generally, and some of the theoretical problems with these approaches.[112] Scholarship from a number of other disciplines outside of biblical will serve to explain the history of this discourse and a variety of ways in which this language obscures more nuanced historical dynamics when specific situations are evaluated more closely. It is the task of this chapter, then: 1) to map out the scope of the

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[110] Carol Lasser, "Beyond Separate Spheres: The Power of Public Opinion," *Journal of the Early Republic* 21 (2001) 115–123, at 115.

[111] Nannerl O. Keohane, "Preface," in *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History* (ed. Dorothy O. Helly and Susan M. Reverby; Essays from the Seventh Berkshire Conference on the History of Women; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992) ix–xii, at xi.

[112] In later chapters, the application of these theories to the specific historical and narrative contexts will be considered.

current discourse; and 2) to identify potential problems with the assumptions that undergird this language.

Public and Private in Biblical Scholarship

Evidence that the categories of public and private spheres are integral to gendered assessments of Esther is abundant in the scholarship already surveyed regarding Esther. Sidnie White Crawford underscores this point in contrasting Esther with Judith. According to Crawford, Esther "fulfills gender stereotypes by her actions" in that "she does not take power publicly." Her lack of public power indicates that she "upholds the patriarchal social order" and, in Crawford's opinion, likely contributes to the book's acceptance in the canon while the book of Judith was not.[113] This presumes, then, not only that women were normally relegated to private spaces, but that violation of this norm could have negative consequences, a value that continued to be upheld by future interpreters of the book.[114]

Lillian Klein's work on the categories of honor and shame operative in Esther is predicated upon a similar viewpoint: A man's honor is protected through constraining his wife to private spaces.[115] She goes on to describe what this means for women:

> Female spaces and female things are centered around the family residence . . . and all things remaining within the home are identified with the female; those taken from the inside to the

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[113] Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther and Judith," 72–73.

[114] There is some reason to doubt that the primary concern of early interpreters of Esther was to uphold her as a paradigm for the specific reason that she had confined herself to private spaces (as opposed to figures such as Judith, who had not). As Leila Bronner notes, rabbinic interpretation included Esther, along with Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, and Hulda, as one of the seven prophetesses of Israel, an interpretation that implicitly at least, describes her in a more public capacity. In addition, in a *midrash* on the prayer for Benjamin in Gen 49:27, Esther is listed (along with Ehud and Saul) as one potential candidate for the descendant of the tribe to fulfill the prophecy. For a discussion of rabbinic interpretations of Esther, see Leila Bronner, "Esther Revisited: An Aggadic Approach," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna* (ed. Athalya Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 176–206, at 192–5.

[115] Lillian R. Klein, "Honor and Shame in Esther," 151.

outside—the male 'space'—are identified with the male. . . . Accordingly, women are excluded from male social assemblies.[116]

Klein does recognize that Esther subtly subverts the power structure, but only while maintaining the appearance of the proper social order. Thus, Klein concludes, "The text allows that, in threatening situations, social paradigms may be creatively interpreted as long as the prescribed gender role is publicly observed."[117] The most important aspect, then, of the public-private dichotomy, according to Klein's analysis, is the external and visible maintenance of the system in order to preserve everyone's honor, especially that of men.[118]

For Bea Wyler, what is most distressing about the constraint of women to the private sphere is that is has implications for contemporary gender relationships. Because her analysis of Esther found that she was liberated as a Jew but not as a woman, and thus, her emancipation was "incomplete," Esther's story poses a dilemma for contemporary Jewish women. She says, "As Jews, we have good reasons to celebrate Purim . . . . As women, we have no reasons to celebrate, for following 1.22, our subjugation still stands. We are still struggling for our rights as human beings and our place in public life."[119] What is striking about her analysis is that she sees women's exclusion from public spaces in contemporary society as rooted in a history of such dichotomous thinking.[120]

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[116] Ibid.

[117] Ibid., 175.

[118] A similar understanding of gender roles is expressed in a later book by Klein, in which she sees male dominance as a reality that led to women's need to capitulate and develop strategies to work within that control. See Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

[119] Bea Wyler, "The Incomplete Emancipation," 134.

[120] One of the main arguments advanced in this work is that the public-private divide is a particularly modern conception, one that was not applicable to the world that produced Esther but rather a retrojection of modern categories onto an ancient societies, a matter that will be taken up later in this chapter and elsewhere.

In a similar vein to the scholar cited above, Nicole Duran describes Esther's life in the Persian court in terms of the physical divisions of spaces between men and women, a separation that had consequences for women's activity. She states the following,

> As far as we know, the king's court is entirely the realm of men, the women being kept, in a sort of cabinet to be taken out individually when desired.[121] The boundary between the women's space and the men's space is navigated only by eunuchs, who being neither male nor female may have authority over the women within the women's place and also may move freely into the men's court, to bring in what women are requested.[122]

The discussion of women and private spaces, then, has often been understood both as a conceptual and a physical reality. It is both the limitation of women to certain activities and to certain physical domains.[123]

André LaCocque's analysis of Esther as an "unconventional" woman employs a similar logic. In comparing Mordecai to Esther, he says,

> But his heroism, if it can be called thus, is strongly qualified and overshadowed by the female character who, eventually will brand her name on the book. This is the story of Esther, not Mordecai, which is certainly another most important aspect of the tale. For, to a story already politically subversive is added another dimension of subversion.[124]

LaCocque's language does not explicitly employ the terms public and private, but his analysis is predicated upon a very clear set of social expectations for men and women. Here, the gendered

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[121] In fact, we do not actually know that this was the case. It seems that Duran here is basing her idea of separate spaces on an idea of harem life that is likely drawn from analogy to the Ottoman Empire. A discussion of royal Persian women's life will be investigated later in chapter 5. There are, however, a number of reasons to doubt that harem is even an appropriate word to use in relationship to Persian royal women. For a description of this, see Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (trans. Peter T. Daniels; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002) 280–6, esp. 285.

[122] Nicole Duran, "Who Wants to Marry a Persian King? Gender Games and Wars in the Book of Esther," in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible* (ed. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan; Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies 44; Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 71–84, at 77.

[123] See also Nicole Duran, "Having Men for Dinner: Deadly Banquets and Biblical Women," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 35 (2005) 117–124 for a discussion of the way in which Esther works within proscribed gender roles to bring about violence in comparing her to Jael, Judith, and Herodias who likewise using feasting for a deadly purpose.

[124] André LaCocque, "The Different Versions of Esther," *Biblical Interpretation* 7 (1999) 301–22, at 307.

norm is that the heroic role is most often filled by men, an expectation that has been overturned, thus rendering the story as a "subversive" tale. In this way, " 'heroism' passes from Mordecai to Esther, from warrior to the martyr."[125] It seems then, that in LaCocque's estimation, although Esther is subversive and takes center stage in the drama, she does so as a "martyr," suggesting that even a subversive woman in the Bible does so in a more passive way.

Lawrence Wills employs the categories of public and private to describe the historical situation for biblical women in contradistinction to the narrative portrayal of them. According to Wills, despite the fact that women are active in biblical narratives in a variety of ways, it is likely that this does not reflect the situation of actual women. He states, "In reality, women probably did not enjoy such freedom of speech and significant, public action, but in the narrative world they do."[126] Rather, it is likely that this literary depiction in both "classical Hebrew and Greek literature" derives instead "from male projections of an archetypal dramatic world in which women, like goddesses, have power and substance."[127] This situation, however, changes during the Hellenistic period, a reality that he believes is reflected both in historical records and literary accounts of women, including the book of Esther. For Wills, then, the constraint of women to private activity seems to be limited to the preexilic period, while in "Greece and Rome and among Jews as well, women really did begin to interact with men on social and business level."[128] Yet it is clear that that distinction between two separate domains, public and private, is

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[125] Ibid.

[126] Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Myth and Poetics; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995) 11.

[127] Ibid., 12.

[128] Ibid.

a primary paradigm within which the activity of women—and its relationship to narrative accounts of them—is assessed.[129]

The perspective on gendered spaces has impacted analysis of Esther for scholars of other fields outside the realm of biblical scholarship. Susan Zaeske—a scholar whose work focuses on the intersections of rhetoric, politics, and gender—examines the book of Esther as a model for a rhetoric that is not based on a "unitary, male-dominated history of rhetorical theory." Although the book of Esther does not explicitly claim to be rhetorical theory, Zaeske argues that it has operated as such throughout history for a number of oppressed and marginalized groups, including Jews, women, African-Americans, and lesbians.[130] In the book of Esther, she would see a "rhetoric of exile and empowerment."[131] Her essay analyzes the story of Esther in relationship to its interpretive history, specifically as it has been used as a paradigm of emancipation for a variety of women, including Christine de Pizan and Sojourner Truth. In analyzing Esther as a type of pragmatic rhetoric, she focuses on the way that space contributes to this rhetoric. She says,

> Quite the opposite of Vashti, Esther is not called to male space, though she desperately desire access to it in order to petition for her people. Esther must decide whether to maintain in the feminine space of the harem, which is seemingly devoid of the potential for political rhetoric, or to transgress the male space of the palace courtyard, where rhetoric is regulated by strict laws. In the end, Esther not only defies gender prescriptions, but also breaks the law by crossing into male space.[132]

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[129] Wills appears to suggest that the constraint to private activity was beginning to break down by the time of Esther's composition (along with other similar literature). What remains problematic, however, is the suggestion that there are separate categories of public and private, an assertion that is inherently problematic, as this chapter will suggest.

[130] Susan Zaeske, "Unveiling Esther as Pragmatic Radical Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 33 (2000) 193–220, at 194.

[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid., 201.

Zaeske views Esther a model of liberation because she transgresses the public-private divide, entering into "male" space. She does not specifically call this space public, but does describe it as the arena in which political rhetoric can occur effectively, as distinct from "female" space, where there is no access to political power.

The view that women are limited to certain spheres is not exclusive to literature on Esther but permeates scholarship on biblical women more generally. In her analysis of Judith, Amy Jill-Levine sees her activity in the public sphere as only a temporary transgression, one that "endangers hierarchical opposition of gender, race and class, muddles conventional gender characteristics and dismantles their claims to universality and threatens the status quo."[133] This situation is later reversed with her "return to the private sphere and consequent reinscription into androcentric Israel," a movement that serves to "reinforce the norms" that her actions made explicit.[134] For Levine, then, it is precisely the fact that Judith does not remain in the public sphere that underscores the strength of the social constraint on women's activities and the anxiety that deviation from it produces. Ultimately, the only remaining public aspect of Judith's existence at the end of the narrative, according to Levine's analysis, is her reputation. Thus, she concludes that in regard to Judith, "All that remains of the intrusion of Judith's otherness into the public realm is her 'fame' (16.23). That is, her deeds become incorporated into public memory and public discourse, and it is thereby controlled."[135] Levine's description of the public-private divide as it relates to women, then, does allow for brief violation of the norm in times of crisis, but this cannot be sustained because it is threatening to the social order.

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[133] Amy-Jill Levine, "Sacrifice and Salvation: Otherness and Domestication in the Book of Judith" in *The Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna* (ed. Athalya Brenner; The Feminist Companion to the Bible 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 208–23, at 209.

[134] Ibid., 210.

[135] Ibid., 223.

In her analysis of the Rebekah narrative cycle, Naomi Steinberg critiques the Western bias inherent in much of the gender analysis on biblical women. For example, she argues that the notion that women's equality should be defined "in relation to male activity and the access that women have to that activity" is something found in "American society" and should not be used as a standard by which to assess women's roles in the ancient world. In valuing activity in the public sphere, feminists who analyzed the status of biblical women often found them to lacking since they were more often in domestic roles. Stein's analysis, although it critiques the way that categories have been used to devalue women's role in society, is predicated upon the notion that there are separate public and private spheres and that these do have specifically gendered dimensions. She describes the impact of role behavior theory for analyzing women's roles as follows:

> Role behavior for men is localized primarily in the public sphere; where the interests of the public sphere overlap, men are the chief actors. Women's role behavior is confined to the private sphere of society. The story of the fate of Dinah is the exception that proves the rule. Though she goes out into the public sphere, we are never told anything about her in the first person; and her public visit brings tragedy upon her new husband and kin. The message behind this story appears to be that the public domain is not intended for women.[136]

Steinberg offers an important caution against importing contemporary values onto ancient cultures and thus offers a new paradigm for viewing both men's and women's roles, finding that there is a degree of complementarity between the two in the roles that they inhabit in the domestic sphere. The continued reliance, however, on the public/private distinction demonstrates the endurance of the some Western cultural bias that she attempts to eschew.[137]

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[136] Naomi Steinberg, "Gender Roles in the Rebekah Cycle," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 39 (1984) 175–88, at 185–6.

[137] In a more recent essay, Steinberg makes a similar argument in relationship to the women portrayed in Exodus 1–2 who she describes as principally involved in domestic affairs with little access to the public sphere. Here again she offers the critique, based on womanist approaches, that to judge domestic activity as inferior to public life is a problematic assumption that devalues the role women play within a culture. As was the case in her earlier work, the categories of public/private are assumed but the values associated with them are questioned. See

Beatrice Lawrence's analysis of Prov 31:10–31 attempts to demonstrate complexity in the way gender is configured and described in ancient Israel. Her reading suggests that the ideal woman described in the text is sometimes portrayed in language that resembles masculine modifiers. Moreover, the woman who engages in all the activities of the poem is highly respected for her work, indicating that women's labor was valued. The portrayal of the woman of valor, however, is concerned only with her role in the domestic realm, while her husband's role is in the public. Lawrence's study of the ancient Israelites' constructions of gender offers more nuance by suggesting a certain amount of fluidity in language about men and women but even still, her work continues to rely on the notion of public and private realms to which men and women are relegated.[138]

Some scholars have also argued the possibility that a separate space for women within the domestic structure of Israelite houses might have existed. For example, Shlomo Bunimovitz and Avraham Faust suggest that the design of the Four Room house in the Iron Age allowed access to all rooms from one central room, at least opening up the possibility that women could have be segregated while menstruating in accordance with purity laws.[139] They argue,

> The plan of the four-room house seems suitable for such a custom. As will be discussed later, the possible connection between the four-room plan and a specific ethnic behavior such as that related to purity/impurity laws may hint that the plan was adapted or developed to accommodate such a practice, or more likely, that the laws (conducts of behavior) were structured by the house plan.[140]

Naomi Steinberg, "Feminist Criticism," in *Methods for Exodus* (ed. Thomas B. Dozeman; Methods in Biblical Interpretation; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 163–92.

[138] Beatrice Lawrence, "Gender Analysis: Gender and Method in Biblical Studies," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Bible in Honor of David L. Peterson* (ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards; Atlanta, Ga.: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009) 333–48.

[139] Shlomo Bunimovitz and Avraham Faust, "The Four Room House: Embodying Iron Age Israelite Society," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 66 (2003) 22–31, at 29.

[140] Ibid.

A similar idea is also suggested by Hennie Marsman who suggests that the typical Israelite homes might have included "separate women's quarters."[141] In both cases, then, divisions between male and female space is thought of as much more than a conceptual distinction between men and women's roles but is also often understood as having a concrete, physical dimension. Here they look at the how domestic spaces might replicate spatial realities within the home that are experienced on a larger communal scale.

Patrick Mullins examines the portrayal of biblical women vis-à-vis the status of women in the surrounding cultures of the ancient Near East, especially Mesopotamia and Egypt. He draws on a variety of kinds of evidence, including both archaeology and texts, and determines that there is little difference between the roles of women in ancient Israel in comparison with their neighbors. The normal situation throughout the Levant is that women are normally constrained by patriarchy. There are, however, a variety of situations in which exceptions to this rule are found, and thus some women gain access to public roles, often through family roles and sometimes through on the basis the individual's character. Mullins' work does allow for the possibility that the separate spaces for men and women are permeable, but this does not represent the lives of most women in either Israel or the neighboring cultures.[142]

A number of feminist scholars have made connections between women's roles and the part that they play in domestic roles and family life. For example, Claudia Camp describes women's social roles as follows, "In a patrilineal, patrilocal society such as Israel's, we can take as a given that the primary source of a woman's authority will lie in her domestic roles. She may

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[141] Hennie J. Marsman, *Women in Ancient Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 2001) 709.

[142] Patrick Mullins, "The Public, Secular Roles of Women in Biblical Times," *Milltown Studies* 43 (1998) 79–111.

well, however, perform other leadership roles, the acknowledgement of her authority dependent on the credence and authority vested in domesticity in her particular social setting."[143] When women do move beyond normal domestic actions, it is often an extension of the roles that she has already performed within the home or local community.

Like Levine, a number of scholars have linked women's ability to take public power directly to times of crisis. Thus, many have seen the period of the judges—a time that the Bible characterizes as a time of instability[144]—as a time of relative openness to women's authority in more public ways. In describing the pre-monarchic period, Jo Ann Hackett argues that women are prominent characters throughout the book of Judges because "women and marginalized members of societies are more likely to wield public power in times of disruption than in times of peace and stability."[145] Similarly, Tikvah Frymer-Kensky contends, "when there is no centralized power, when political action takes place in the household or village, then women can rise to public prominence." From this perspective, the ability for women to move into public spaces is greatly limited when there is a strong political power in place. Thus, Frymer-Kensky argues, "When a strong central government is established, a pyramid of power extends from the top down through various hierarchies and bureaucracies. At such a time, women in Israel were

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[143] Claudia Camp, "The Female Sage in Ancient Israel and in the Biblical Wisdom Literature" in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 185–203, at 186.

[144] See, for example, Judg 21:25, where the book concludes with the negative assessment of that period, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."

[145] Jo Ann Hackett, "There Was No King in Israel': The Era of the Judges" in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (ed. M. Coogan; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 132–64, at 144; see also, eadem, "In the Days of Jael: Reclaiming the History of Women in Ancient Israel" in *Immaculate and Powerful: The Female in Sacred Image and Social Reality* (ed. C. Atkinson et al.; Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1985) 15–38, at 19.

frozen out of positions of power, and relegated to the private domain."[146] Times of political

instability, then, have often been understood by biblical scholars as creating a kind of vacuum

within which traditional power dynamics can be renegotiated, if only temporarily, a situation that

has important implications for women.[147]

In her early work, Carol Meyers argued that a clear distinction between public and

private spaces can be correlated directly to the advent of the monarchy. For her, pre-monarchic

Israel represents a time of more gender equality. Both men and women had to work more closely

together because of the difficult conditions created by life in highland Israel. The introduction of

the monarchy, however, completely altered that situation. She states:

> The rise of the state meant the gradual end of a society in which the household was the dominant
> social unit. The locus of power moved from the family   household, with its gender parity, to a
> public world of male control. The establishment of a nation-state meant the growing prominence
> of the military and of state and religious bureaucracies controlling economic development. These
> institutions are typically public and male controlled; whenever they become an important part of a
> society's organization, female prestige and power recede.[148]

The dominant assumption of a the majority of biblical scholars, then, has been that women

inhabit domestic spaces but that there are times when their public roles are expanded,

particularly in times of emergency and/or decentralized authority.[149]

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[146] Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002) xvii–xviii.

[147] The idea that women can attain power in times of political instability is also echoed in the Michael O'Connor's article on Judges. See Michael O'Connor, "The Women in the Book of Judges," *Hebrew Annual Review* (1986) 277–93. It seems that for most scholars, including O'Connor, the description of more fluidity in gender roles during this period is a way of explaining the significant number of stories within the book of Judges about women.

[148] Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve*: *Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 190. A similar argument is made in her articles, "Kinship and Kingship: The Early Monarchy," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (ed. Michael Coogan; New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 165–205, at 202–3; and "The Roots of Restriction: Women in Early Israel" *Biblical Archaeologist* 41 (1978) 91–103.

[149] The question of the degree to which kinship and family roles are negatively impacted by increased centralized authority will be attended to in chapter 4.

What becomes apparent from surveying this scholarship is that the language of public and private has had specific implications for how women are assessed by biblical scholars. Most have seen women as confined to the private sphere, a notion that has spatial and functional dimensions: women can inhabit certain spaces while others are off limits but they are also limited to certain roles. Some scholars, including Steinberg, have questioned the devaluing of domestic labor as the product of a Western cultural bias while still retaining the categories. This view holds that women are able to expand familial, domestic roles to enter the public sphere in exceptional cases, especially during periods of decentralized political authority. In most cases, however, there are negative consequences for women who transgress into the public realm (i.e., Dinah), which often negatively impacts male honor. Those who gain entry into the public usually do so only for a limited period (i.e., Judith), and then must again retreat to the more normal constraints that women experienced of living a private, domestic existence.

Problems with the Public/Private Discourse in Biblical Scholarship

Despite the frequent use of public and private as operative categories in biblical scholarship, feminist biblical scholars are not unaware that these terms can be problematic. For example, Meyers acknowledges the work of feminist anthropologists and is very clear that language about a "private-public dichotomy" is not appropriate for describing pre-monarchic Israel.[150] Similarly, Camp seems to view the public and private dichotomy as waxing and waning, in direct correspondence to the degree of centralized authority.[151] Thus, the line of argumentation that both scholars employ is as follows: When state control increases, the role of

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[150] Meyers, *Discovering Eve*, 173.

[151] Camp, "The Female Sage."

the family unit decreases, sharpening a divide between public and private spheres, thus severely limiting the public political roles available to women.[152]

Often the narratives of the Bible themselves often do not lend themselves to a neat separation between public and private. In her 1999 article, Karla Bohmbach contends that the assumed relationship between women and the private sphere is problematic specifically for the Judges 19 narrative. She concludes the article with the suggestion that "the results of this analysis should at least render us more cautious in our use of the public-private construct—especially, perhaps, the gendered meanings we attribute to the construct. Otherwise, the construct may lead us to assume, rather than helping us to illuminate and explain, too much about how gender really works."[153] Her argument about Judges 19 applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the book of Esther, in which many of the characters represent larger social and political realities. The boundaries between what is "public" and what is "private" in the Esther story are not well-defined, nor do public and private represent separate and mutually exclusively categories.

A similar argument is made by Edna Solvang about women during the period of the monarchy. She argues that the dominant portrayal of monarchy as an exclusively male domain is problematic expressly because "*royal women in Judah are portrayed in the narratives as essential actors in and representatives of the Judean monarchy.*"[154] In Part I of her study she

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[152] In more recent work, Meyers seems to question the earlier reliance on these categories altogether, and not only in relationship to premonarchic Israel. For example, in a 2009 article discussing Iron Age archaeology, she describes the situation as follows, "Most Israelites were agrarians; and the household was the basic economic, religious, political, and of course social unit. A premodern agrarian household was not simply a family nor was it just a dwelling. It was both, and it had multiple functions. Workplace and living space were not distinguished as they are in the modern industrialized world." See Carol Meyers, "In the Household and Beyond: The Social World of Israelite Women" *Studia Theologica* 63 (2009) 19–41, at 21.

[153] Karla G. Bohmbach, "Conventions/Contraventions: The Meaning of Public/Private for the Judges 19 Concubine," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 83 (1999) 83–98, at 98.

[154] Elna Solvang, *A Woman's Place is in the House: Royal Women of Judah and Their Involvement in the House of David* (JSOTSupp Series 349; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003) 6 [emphasis original].

presents evidence from the wider ancient Near East that "parallels"[155] her thesis about the way in which Judean women are portrayed in narrative. In Part II, she focuses on texts from Samuel and Kings that depict in narrative the essential role that women play in the functioning of a royal household, focusing on the characters of Michal, Bathsheba, and Athaliah.[156] Maria Häusl comes to a similar conclusion in her work on 1 Kings 1–2, determining that these chapters depict royal women as wielding great political power.[157] Solvang's contention is that the narratives about women as key political figures must be taken seriously. They suggest, at the very least, the possibility for women's historical participation in politics.[158] Solvang's study focuses on Judean royal women but her insights are relevant to studies on the book of Esther as well. Her study indicates both that narrative portrayals of women's role in politics can be suggestive of historic possibilities, and that women's access to political roles was not eliminated during periods of a strong central government.

In addition to the work of Bohmbach and Solvang, Danna Nolan Fewell also implicitly calls into question this type of language in her discussion of various feminist approaches to the Bible by describing patriarchy as something that is vulnerable, stating the "male sovereignty is not an absolute."[159] She uses the book of Esther to demonstrate this point, stating that Vashti's "non-action" threatens to collapse the entire system of male domination. According to her view,

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[155] Ibid.

[156] Ibid.

[157] Maria Häusl, *Abischag und Batscheba. Frauen am Königshof und die Thronfolge Davids im Zeugnis der Texte 1 Kön und 2* (Arbeiten zu Text und Sprache im Alten Testament 41; St. Ottilien, 1993).

[158] According to Solvang, in light of the narrative portrayal of royal women, "any political or theological interpretation of the biblical depiction of the Judean monarchy that fails to consider their contributions and perspective is incomplete" (ibid).

[159] Danna Nolan Fewell, "Feminist Reading of the Bible," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39 (1987) 77–87, at 84.

then, Esther demonstrates that male sovereignty is "dependent and precarious," while other texts suggest that it is "incomplete, inadequate, and undesirable."[160]

The discussion relating to women's lives and private spaces does not often directly address the role of men in very specific ways, except to assume that they have access to the public sphere. Susan Niditch's work does, however, consider other groups beside women who might have been at a social disadvantage. She views all those who find themselves in a powerless position as having to resort to tactics that are less public as a strategy for success. She notes that "The trickster and the wisdom hero/heroine have much in common: the stealthy, home-based power of the women; the emphasis on clever, behind-the-scenes manipulation of those of higher status to secure for oneself benefits."[161] Although she does not use the categories of public and private, Niditch's description of tricksters and wisdom characters together both employing "home-based power" provides an provocative beginning point from which to question whether or not society was structured in a way that categorically constrained all women to private activity, with limited exceptions, and unequivocally provided all men with equal access to public power. Her work is suggestive of a variety of other possible problems that attend the assumption that public and private spaces are gendered as male and female, including the fact that is unlikely that all men, regardless of social status, age or position in the community had equal access to public spaces and roles.

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[160] Ibid.

[161] Susan Niditch, "Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism, and Authority," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Feminist Companion to the Bible 7; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 26–46, at 41.

Public and Private as Theoretical Categories

Despite some problems, the language of public and private has continued to be used among biblical scholars to describe women's lives. We have already seen that the work of several biblical scholars points in the direction of nuancing the discourse, working to undermine several of the assumptions providing the foundation these categories. In addition to their work, there is a great deal of scholarship in a variety of other fields that suggests ways in which the categories of public and private often obscure rather than clarify matters.

Linda Kerber's article outlines the history of this conceptual model in relationship to American history.[162] She remarks that one impetus for the introduction of these categories into historiographic discourse for history about the United States was a new publication of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* following World War II. His description of life in nineteenth century America—in particular, his description of the lives of married women—according to Kerber, "provided the physical image (the circle) and the interpretation (that it was a limiting boundary on choices) that would continue to characterize the metaphor."[163] In looking at the literature from the nineteenth century, ample evidence of the language could be found, and thus the trope was carried over into historian's descriptions. Kerber identified three stages to the progression of this metaphor in American historiography: The first in the 1960's and early 1970's focused on recognizing separate spheres as an important aspect of women's lives; the second in the late 1970's tried to identify positive aspects of this paradigm by focusing on "women's culture."[164] However, scholars did not always use the metaphor in a very precise way.

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[162] Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Roles, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75 (1988) 9–39.

[163] Ibid., 10.

[164] Ibid., 17.

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There were a range of meanings ascribed to the discourse of separate spheres, including, an "ideology *imposed on* women, a culture *created by* women, a set of boundaries *expected to be observed* by women."[165] One of the contributions to the third stage of the metaphor's development was to apply this language to a much broader range of human experiences, seeing the phenomena of separate spheres as a pervasive aspect of human cultures. Thus, scholars began to notice this language in Greek thought and as an aspect of European culture that was brought to the colonies.[166]

Kerber's analysis of the usefulness of these categories draws on the later work of Rosaldo—in which she called into question these same terms she had initially endorsed—echoing Rosaldo's suggestions that to perpetuate the language of public and private complicates rather than clarifies because it is inherently simplistic. Kerber states, "To continue to use the language of separate spheres is to deny the reciprocity between gender and society, and to impose a static model on dynamic relationships."[167] The discourse was based on a metaphor, not a precise assessment of complicated social realities. When the implications of the metaphor are overextended, it ceases to be a useful tool. As Kerber concludes, "As we discuss the notion of separate spheres, we are tiptoeing on the boundary between politics and ideology, between sociology and rhetoric. We have entered the realm of hermeneutics; our task . . . is essentially one of deconstruction."[168] Already in the late 1980's, Kerber's analysis called into question a significant metaphor in historical discourse related to separate, gendered spaces for men and women.

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[165] Ibid.

[166] Ibid., 18–19.

[167] Ibid., 38.

[168] Ibid., 39.

Anthropologists contributed a great deal to the notion of gendered spaces as an organizing concept for feminist inquiry. One important contribution was that of Michelle Rosaldo, who described one source of women's oppression as directly correlated to the way in which women were restricted to domestic work, which served to isolate them and prevent them from entering the social realities of men.[169] Just a few years later, Rosaldo rejected her previous reliance on the mutually exclusive categories of public and private, suggesting that using such binaries tended to ignore the more complex nature of social relationships.[170]

The work of Sherry Ortner built on the framework initially proposed by Rosaldo, suggesting that there was a universal corollary to the concept of separate spheres that accounted for women's lower status across temporal and spatial boundaries. Women were confined to domestic activities, and thus became associated with nature, while men's public presence caused them to be associated with culture. Thus, these two pairs of words: public and private, culture and nature, were often used interchangeably and serve to frame feminist dialogue about women's roles.[171] Thus, these two pairs of words: public and private, culture and nature, were often used interchangeably and serve to frame feminist dialogue about women's roles.[172] The two sets of word pairs, then, became a useful heuristic device for talking about and describing women's lives in feminist anthropological discourse. Despite the early reliance on this language, anthropologists, including Rosaldo, soon became to question the degree to which these terms

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[169] Michelle Rosaldo, "A Theoretical Overview," in *Woman, Culture, and Society* (ed. Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere; Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974) 17–42.

[170] Michelle Rosaldo, "The Use and Abuse of Anthropology," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5 (1980) 389–417.

[171] Sherry Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" in *Woman, Culture, and Society* (ed. Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere; Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1974) 67–87.

[172] Ibid.

were helpful.

One of the major works that pushed beyond the discussions of public/private in historical discourse was the volume edited by Susan Reverby and Dorothy Helly, titled *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History*.[173] This volume brought together the work of historians on a variety of historical periods and geographic regions. In the preface to the volume, Nannerl Keohane articulated a number of the problems with this rhetoric. She argues that, "The most familiar slogan of contemporary feminism 'the personal is political,' subverts the public/private separation by denying that it operates as it is usually supposed to do."[174] She suggests that one of the contributions of historians to this discourse is the awareness that specific historic situations often reveal far more complicated realities than the theories about public/private often suggests.[175] The language that had seemed to hold a great deal of promise and appeal crumbles under closer scrutiny, as the categories cannot be maintained as mutually exclusive once they are located in particular historical circumstances. Public and private relies on language that does not have an obvious meaning, nor are the categories represented by this language mutually exclusive. Moreover, the two categories often overlap and intersect in complex and interesting ways.[176]

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[173] Susan M. Reverby and Dorothy O. Helly, eds., *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History* (Essays from the Seventh Berkshire Conference on the History of Women; Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

[174] Nannerl O. Keohane, "Preface" in *Gendered Domains: Rethinking Public and Private in Women's History* (ed. Dorothy Helly and Susan Reverby; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992) ix–xii, at xi.

[175] Ibid.

[176]Keohane states, that despite the tendency to "take for granted in our scholarly work…a separation of our lives into two distinct categories marked as 'public' and 'private,'" these categories often break down when we examine them more closely. "When we try to prove into what we actually *mean* by these terms, however, we discover complexity. As with many common binary concepts, the apparent clarity of the distinction dissolves under analysis" (ibid., x). For a similar argument, see also Margaret Thornton, "The Public/Private Dichotomy: Gendered and Discriminatory," *Journal of Law and Society* 18 (1991) 448–63, at 448.

Leslie Peirce illustrates precisely how the theory of public and private can break down under closer scrutiny once specific historical circumstances are evaluated more closely. Her article in the volume edited by Helly and Reverby examines royal women of the Ottoman Empire from the mid-sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries. Her analysis calls into question the assumption previously held by most scholars that the segregation between men and women in upper class Muslim culture produced "a gender-based dichotomy between easily discernible public and private spheres."[177] This model presumes that female influence did not extend beyond harem walls, and that the harem was a quintessential expression of domesticity.[178] In looking more closely at the lives of these women, however, she found that women—as well as men— maintained an intricate network of relationships that played a significant role in bringing individuals into positions of power. Thus she concludes,

> Only when the paradigm of rigidly separate public/male and private/female spheres is discarded can we begin to appreciate the ways in which the structure of the Ottoman ruling class enabled women to participate in the political life of the empire. Conversely, by understanding how women were able to acquire and exercise power, we obtain a clearer picture of the structure of Ottoman politics and society.[179]

She stresses that the family is the central unit around which political life was structured, a fact that challenges scholars to evaluate more closely the role that women played in the familial structures to understand better the political structures of the Ottoman Empire. Many of the insights in this article suggest that similar assumptions about women's political role in biblical narratives might be reevaluated in a similar way, given that the political system was modeled on

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[177] Leslie P. Peirce, "Beyond Harem Walls: Ottoman Royal Women and the Exercise of Power," (ed. Dorothy Helly and Susan Reverby; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992) 40–55, at 41.

[178] Ibid., 41.

[179] Ibid., 55.

family and kinship structures.[180]

In a 2001 article, Carol Lasser reflects on the use of the language of public and private language as it relates to the historians accounts of antebellum culture in the United States.[181] She identifies some of the ways in which the trope of "separate spheres" has proved inadequate, drawing on previous works by Julie Jeffrey and Laura McCall. The language of public and private was used by historians "(1) to explain universal female subordination, and (2) to legitimate the need for a distinctive effort to inquire into women's particular experiences."[182] This mode of discourse has proved inadequate to explain more complex interactions between gender, race, class, and ethnicity.[183] She concludes,

> We come to see more clearly the role of the public sphere as an arena in which issues of gender roles and relations were contested. Looking at gender and public opinion allows you to begin to see "public" and "private" not so much as opposites, but rather as angles of vision. In so doing, we begin to understand gender as an unstable, vital, and fluid relation, not as the enclosed space that has imprisoned our thinking.[184]

Her work affirms a similar picture to that of Peirce, although the historical contexts are very different. In each case, it becomes clear that as specific historical circumstances are viewed more

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[180] This study is especially helpful for thinking about the book of Esther because the description in Esther of a "women's house" (e.g., Esth 2:9, 14) has most often been translated by scholars as "harem," a word that tends to conjure up a variety of associations. See Elna Solvang's article, for a discussion of some of the problematic ways this has been used, based on comparison to the Ottoman exemplar. She states, for example, "Any use of the term *harem* in reference to ancient Assyria and Israel introduces an analogy by which the physical remains and textual legacies of those societies are interpreted and daily life reconstructed based on Islamic models" (Solvang, "Another Look 'Inside': Harems and the Interpretations of Women," in *Orientalism, Assyriology, and the Bible* [ed. Steven W. Holloway; Hebrew Bible Monographs 10; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006] 374–98, at 375). In n. 10 of this chapter, I cited Briant's work as questioning the usefulness of the term harem for Persian life. Whether not the term is applicable in the case of Esther needs to be investigated further. For the purposes of this work, what is relevant is that there is no sustained discussion of precisely what is meant by applying the Arabic word harem to a Persian context and thus, no subsequent consideration of whether or not this does in fact limit women to private spaces. What Peirce's scholarship on harem women of the Ottoman Empire indicates is that in that specific instance, women were not visible in public but their presence was still an important factor in shaping public life.

[181] Lasser, "Beyond Separate Spheres," 115–23.

[182] Ibid., 116.

[183] Ibid.

[184] Ibid., 123.

closely, imagining dichotomous categories of public and private as exclusive and gendered domains is impossible to maintain.

The work of the feminist anthropologist Deborah Rotman calls into question the degree to which the dominant ideology of separate spheres in the nineteenth and early twentieth century translated in everyday life on the basis of historical and archeological evidence from Deerfield, Massachusetts.[185] Her research demonstrates that despite the way in which the "cult of domesticity" endorsed an ideal of separation between public and private spaces for men and women during this period of American history, she contends that evidence from Deerfield paints a different reality, in which "gendered uses of space were fluid and specifically that women were active agents in the village beyond the domestic sphere."[186] Not only did women transgress the imagined boundary confining them to domestic activity, but men also participated in private home life.[187] She says, "Real lived experiences and unique personal and community circumstances often required that concessions be made to the idealized categorization of space as exclusive public/private or male/female." Her work contributes significantly to the discussion of gendered spaces because it suggests that gender ideologies, even when they are upheld as the communal ideal, do not necessarily correlate with actual historical experiences. Men and women might endorse specific notions of gendered spaces, while transgressing those boundaries regularly in the course of everyday life.

The use of language about separate spheres has also been questioned by scholars of American literature. In 1998, the journal *American Literature* dedicated an entire issue to this

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[185] Deborah Rotman, "Separate Spheres? Beyond the Dichotomies of Domesticity," *Current Anthropology* 47 (2006) 666–74.

[186] Ibid., 666.

[187] Ibid.

particular problem. In the preface to that issue, Cathy Davidson described the problems related to the discourse of "separate spheres" in American literary criticism.[188] She described the importance of the discourse of the binary categories of separate spheres during the last quarter of twentieth century in the literary criticism on nineteenth century. One of the most important contributions of her analysis stems from the fact that she seeks to understand "why is the metaphor of separate spheres both immediately compelling and ultimately unconvincing as an explanatory device?"[189]

In response to this question, Davidson suggests that women have replicated the language of separate spheres, found within literature from the nineteenth century because the binary language "allows contemporary literary historians to focus on women writers who have been excluded from the standard histories" and further "it roots its logic of exclusivity in an explanation of nineteenth century binaric gender relations."[190] That is, women, who feel that women's experiences have been overlooked are justified in focusing on a women's productions because it represents a separate, if overlooked, aspect of nineteenth century life. Thus, the logic of separate spheres is self-replicating and proves to be problematic for Davidson because "it is simply too crude an instrument—too rigid and totalizing—for understanding the different, complicated ways that nineteenth century American society or literary production functioned."[191] Her article cites the work of Kerber in identifying the way in which the republication of Tocqueville's work gave birth to a "historiographic metaphor." She suggests that the use of this language is far less descriptive of the nineteenth century realities, instead demonstrating a great

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[188] Cathy N. Davidson, "Preface: No More Separate Spheres!" *American Literature* 70 (1998) 443–63.

[189] Ibid., 444.

[190] Ibid.

[191] Ibid., 445.

deal about the post-World War II culture in which the metaphor took root.[192] Davidson

highlights two central insights in this article: 1) the language of public and private is "self-

perpetuating in a way that is implausible;"[193] and 2) the use of the language demonstrates a

particular historiographic stance on the part of scholars writing about a particular period more

than it reflects the specificities of a particular period of the past.

Several others scholars have brought other objections about these categories to the fore as

well. For example, Carole Pateman describes the way in which the terms public and private are

not only imprecise but also fluid in definition, and thus they tend to change meanings across both

cultures and time periods.[194] Other scholars have argued that the roots of dichotomous language

about public and private are inherited largely from Western liberal political theory and have a

distinct Western bias.[195] This raises the question as the degree to which to the categories of

public and private can be applied to ancient cultures. Furthermore, anthropologists have

criticized this language because the logic behind it tends to be somewhat circular.[196]

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[192] Ibid., 446.

[193] Ibid., 455.

[194] For a look at the ways in which these terms are not fixed across cultures or time, see Carole Pateman, "Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy" in *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and Political Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989) 118–40.

[195] Keohane states that "ancient Greeks" and "liberal political thinkers" are a part of this tradition. Keohane, "Preface," x. See also Susan Moller Okin, "Thinking Like a Woman," in *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference* (ed. Deborah L. Rhode; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 145–159 for a history of political thought about gendered dichotomies related to space. Okin identifies thinkers such as Plato and Hegel as contributors to this Western notion that "women are potentially subversive of public interest and the common good" (Okin, 145). Similarly, Thornton states, "Indeed the association of men and women with public and private respectively is one of the few assertions that can be categorically made about the nature of the dualism. Within the Western liberal tradition, men have been associated with the public sphere, in the character of government, *and* civil society, while women have been indelibly associated with the private sphere, in the character of family" ("The Public/Private Dichotomy: Gendered and Discriminatory," 449).

[196] As Sylvia Yanagisako and Jane Collier argue, "The claim that women become absorbed in constraining and devalued domestic activities because of their role as mothers is tautological given the definition of 'domestic' as 'those minimal institutions and modes of activity that are organized immediately around one or more mothers and

Conclusion

One of the major contributions of this vein of scholarship is to demonstrate that power relationships and gender roles are always contingent on very specific circumstances. Moreover, these are fluid arrangements that are constantly being negotiated and reconfigured. No one paradigm can describes the complex dynamics of any social construction, including gender, across all cultures and historical periods. Rather, any study of gender must reflect both cultural and historical nuance as well as allowing variability even within a given society because status can change based throughout a person's life. Thus, a young, unmarried female, for example might have a very different status than that of an older married woman who has had several children, particularly if those children have acquired some status. An individual woman might experience different relationships to power throughout the course of her life. Even when the cultural rhetoric endorses the language of public-private realms, the lived reality may reflect a far greater degree of nuance.

Scholars have frequently evaluated Esther in relationship to the way that she remains with the domestic sphere or transcends it to enter public life. Yet the contingency of power evident is a particularly striking way in this book. As a single Jewish orphan, the character of Esther at the beginning of the book has very little access to personal or political power. Her marriage to the king and her favored status in the king's palace quickly shift her position. By the end of the story, Esther is able to influence the king easily, without fear of reprisal and has secured not only her own safety but that of her people, who were also previously very vulnerable. In addition, she has also acquired the property formerly belonging to Haman. It is on her account that Mordecai also gain status, and through her that he is given property to manage.

their children." "The Mode of Reproduction in Anthropology," in *Theoretical Perspectives on Sexual Difference* (ed. Deborah L. Rhode; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 131–41, at 133.

Her high status, however, is not fixed, as the fortunes of both Vashti and Haman remind us. Individuals can lose power just as easily as they can gain it within the palace where personal relationships dominate the political landscape.

The work of Davidson offers an important suggestion in thinking about how to better understand feminist biblical scholarship and the reliance on the dichotomous categories relating space and gender. Her arguments indicate that the use of these categories demonstrates a particular historiographic stance within biblical scholarship of the 1970's through 1990's. The use of the terms allowed for and facilitated feminist biblical scholars' focus on women in the canon, a previously overlooked aspect of Israelite culture. Inasmuch as the discourse gave occasion to specifically study women, the logic of the metaphor was continually reinforced. Studies on women fill an enormous void and serve an incredibly important function. The problem with the application of gendered and dichotomous language as a theoretical approach, however, is that is also meant that scholarship about the social realities in Israel and the ancient Near East was often performing the function that is described, relegating the *study* of women to a separate and distinct sphere from the study of men in similar situations.[197]

One of the problems within biblical scholarship that uses these terms is that there is no sustained theoretical work that defines what is meant by the terms public and private. Some scholars seem to indicate a physical reality. In the book of Esther, for example, this might relate to the presumption that Esther's life in the "women's house" meant that she was sequestered in a harem, with little access to the outside world. Others seem to indicate that it is has to do with

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[197] In the previous chapter, for example, I discussed how attributing patriarchal values to the author of Esther in describing her as beautiful while not applying the same language to men who are depicted in nearly identical terms is highly problematic. On the other hand, as we will see in ch. 4 of this work, the way in which studies on kinship's central role in the politics of the ancient near East has not considered the impact this may have had on women (whose authority is thought to derive from family roles) demonstrates a second way in which the language of public and private continues to replicate scholarship that is similarly divided into two separate spheres. The language, then, not only provides a rationale for this work but becomes self-replicating, producing a scholarship that parallels what it is describing.

women's primary activity being related to domestic work and built on women's relationships to the family. This might then refer to Esther's primary role as wife of the king. Yet a number of problems emerge within the language presented by the categories. Where do the boundaries between the public sphere end and the private sphere begin? Is the king's household a public or private space? Is a royal feast between Esther, Haman and the king a public affair or a private one? Is Vashti's refusal to come to the king's feast a domestic matter or a national crisis? Is Esther still relegated to the private sphere even if the women's house described in Esther 2 not a harem in the traditional sense? These questions and many more like it that could be asked demonstrate the difficulty of neatly categorizing life into two separate realms as a means of understanding gender dynamics.

If the use of this binary has served to facilitate scholarship on women, then it has served an important function within the field of biblical scholarship. Yet the reliance on the terms public and private as separate and mutually exclusive gendered categories cannot be sustained because no metaphor can transcend all cultures and historical periods to universally describe women's, or men's, experiences. New language is needed to think about the ways in which men and women occupied a complex set of social roles and expectations, roles that could shift over the course of their lifetime.

Chapter 3: Esther the Politician: Traditions of Counseling Women

"Communication is the essence of diplomacy."

"Diplomatic signaling typically aims at persuasion; that is, communication is designed to influence others by modifying their behavior or beliefs and attitudes. Attempts at mutual persuasion are of the essence. In other words, bargaining and negotiation processes are at the heart of diplomacy."[198]

Introduction

In the first chapter I suggested that the character of Esther has been subject to dichotomous portraits: One hand, some scholars have viewed her as exceptional, defying gendered expectations by acting outside the private sphere—the space to which scholars have often assumed women were relegated. On the other, scholars have portrayed her as typical, fitting into a set of gendered stereotypes. I have suggested that both positions are inherently problematic, in no small part because they are too simple. Chapter two illustrated some general problems with relying on dichotomous categories of public and private. This chapter will look to the particulars of the narrative context of the book of Esther to see whether the view that Esther is an exception— that is, a woman who overturns gender expectations by acting as outside in the public sphere—is warranted. It is my contention that one problem with seeing Esther as an exception to normative portrayals of women is that her characterization draws on a number of earlier biblical texts. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the relationships between Esther and other biblical texts to determine what the implications of those relationships might be on the

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[198] Christer Jönsson, "Diplomatic Signaling in the Amarna Letters," in *Amarna Diplomacy: The Beginnings of International Relations* (ed. Raymond Cohen and Raymond Westbrook; Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000) 191–204, at 191. Here Jönsson is describing international political communication, but a number of the principles of artful persuasion and communication are applicable to domestic political situations as well and thus describe the narrative portrayals of female negotiators and counselors in the Bible.

issue of gender and space as it relates to the ancient monarchies and the role of female counselors within them.

A significant connection between biblical women and wisdom through a rich literary tradition in the biblical texts hints toward the historic possibility that women might have had a significant social role as counselors. This role could have had specifically political dimensions when women's access to royalty through familial ties allowed them to counsel kings and political figures. In addition to an examination of biblical materials, we shall examine the literature and historical records from the ancient Near East to determine how the narrative traditions in Israel correlate to evidence from a variety of cultures across the Levant and whether that combined evidence might provide sufficient reason to argue for the significant role women played in the politics of negotiation.

Throughout the book of Esther, there are a number of allusions to other literature in the Bible, a fact that has already been well-documented by a large body of biblical scholarship. There are several indications within the book of Esther that these are not accidental but serve a very deliberate intention. One possibility for why earlier biblical traditions were incorporated into the story of Esther relates to the Diaspora context within which Esther was created. As Berlin argues, the use of biblical motifs in texts from the Second Temple period, and specifically in the book of Esther, was a conscious strategy intended to establish a link to preexilic Israel. She states, "The burden of Diaspora stories is to provide Jewish continuity in the face of overwhelming dislocation of the Jewish community. A good way to provide this continuity is to link the present with the past, and the new literature of the Diaspora with older, traditional literature."[199] Furthermore, connecting the book of Esther to earlier biblical texts helps to

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[199] Adele Berlin, "The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120 (2001) 3–14, at 7.

legitimate not only the story of Esther, but more importantly, the festival of Purim.[200] In its final

form, the book of Esther provides the rationale and instructions concerning Purim observance.

Women and Royal Counsel in the Bible

Claudia Camp has suggested that there "seems to be some cultural impetus for the

emergence of the female wisdom figure from actual wise women."[201] She cites the narratives

about the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14) and the wise woman of Abel (2 Sam 20) as evidence

for her argument that offering counsel provided "at least one significant, political role available

to women in the years preceding the establishment of the kingship in Israel, a role that continued

to exist into the monarchic era, but of which we have no evidence after the time of David."[202]

Her suggestion is that the narrative depictions of these women, and the later personification of

wisdom, open the possibility that behind the literary representation there was a socio-historical

reality. According to Camp, the role of counseling was an extension of the kind of advice that

women offered in their own homes as mothers.[203]

Camp examines two characters found in 2 Samuel, the wise woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14)

and the wise woman of Abel (2 Sam 20). A number of the observations she makes about these

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[200] Ibid. See also, Jon Levenson, *Esther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 133.

[201] Claudia Camp, "The Female Sage in Ancient Israel and in the Biblical Wisdom Literature," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 185–203, at 185.

[202] Claudia Camp, "The Wise Women of 2 Samuel: A Role Model for Women in Early Israel?" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43 (1981) 14.

[203] Camp states, for example, "The potential scope of the wise mother's authority is, through this analysis, expanded from the realm of the immediate or extended family to a more comprehensive political unit" ("Wise Women of 2 Samuel," 26); see also Camp's argument in "The Female Sage," including her statement that "The use of mother-imagery in both of these stories, though metaphorical, seems to point indirectly back to a certain social reality, namely that the authority vested in designated wise women derived from their primary social role in the education of children and management of the patriarchal household" (ibid., 188).

two women also could be applied to the case of Esther because like Esther, the words of these women are significant in resolving national conflicts. In the first case, the woman of Tekoa is summoned by Joab to persuade the king to allow his son Absalom to return from exile. Although it is Joab who instructs the wise woman about what to say, it is only through her performance of the message that the king relents. Both the wise woman of Tekoa and Esther dress in particular way in order to act out the persuasive drama: Esther dresses in royal robes to approach the king; the woman of Tekoa dons clothes of a mourner (Esth 5:1; and 2 Sam 14:2). The rhetorical strategy that this wise woman employs is to present a parallel situation to the king in which he is able to make an unbiased choice before he realizes the implications that it will have on him. The woman presents a personal problem, that of her own family, as a way of illuminating the political problems of the kingdom. She embodies the wisdom advice found in the words of Prov 25:15, "through patience may a ruler be persuaded." Her speech moves easily between the seemingly private, family affair about which she purportedly seeks the king's help and the very public affairs of the king's own familial problems. The fact that the woman's true intentions are disguised from the king initially creates a dramatic irony: She appears before the king as a woman in need of the king's assistance, while in fact it is she who is offering the king counsel. The wise woman of Tekoa's role in helping the king to view things from a different perspective—one that elicits a very specific action—very much resembles the role that Nathan played following the incident with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12). Like the woman of Tekoa, Nathan is also given a message (in his case, from Yahweh rather than Joab) that he is to deliver to the king. It is the persuasive power of the individual, however, that causes the message to be heard. Both deliver a message in which the king makes a judgment only to discover that he has declared a verdict on himself. In 2 Sam 14:13, the woman finally reveals her true purpose, telling David,

"Why then have you planned such a thing against the people of God? For in giving this decision the king convicts himself, inasmuch as the king does not bring his banished one home again." The bold language she uses could easily have roused the king's anger had she not artfully delivered the message: The woman of Tekoa, like Nathan, is not merely a passive tool in Joab's hands but a skilled rhetorician, carefully practiced in the art of persuasion.

The second woman who Camp examines is found only a few chapters later in 2 Samuel 20. The chapter opens by reporting that Sheba son of Bichri had started a revolt against the Davidic line, causing Joab to pursue him to the town of Abel Beth-maacah where Sheba and the Bichrites had assembled. Joab and his men began to attack the city, using battering rams and a siege ramp. In the midst of this battle scene, the text recounts that a "wise woman" called out to him from the city wall. In a private negotiation between the woman and Joab, she persuaded him not to attack the city but that instead promised to have the head of Sheba thrown down to him. In speaking to Joab, she advocates for safety of the city, saying "I am one of those who are peaceable and faithful in Israel; you seek to destroy a city that is a mother in Israel; why will you swallow up the heritage of the LORD?" (v 19). Her words shift the focus off of the rebellious Sheba who is hiding within the city and toward to the city itself: she appeals to the city's history and reputation as a "mother in Israel," part of "the heritage of the LORD," thus intimating that an attack on the city would be an attack on the LORD. Camp describes this approach as trying to "employ a form of psychological pressure in order to attain her goal of halting Joab's siege."[204] Her successful negotiation with Joab was no small feat, a perspective that is made clear in the larger narrative context. Just previously in the text, Joab had killed Amasa in cold blood using deception to get close to him. Joab approached Amasa as a friend—taking him by the beard as if to kiss him—only to reach for his sword. Thus, Joab "struck him in the belly so that his entrails

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[204] Ibid., 22.

poured out on the ground, and he died" (2 Sam 20:10). The fact that the wise woman prevented Joab—a man notorious for his violent and impetuous behavior—from besieging the city and slaughtering those inside is of no small consequence, affecting an oratorical coup. The placement of these two stories side by side serves to underscore the efficacy of the woman's persuasive power.

Both the woman of Tekoa and Abel employ maternal imagery in order to persuade their respective audiences.[205] The woman of Tekoa poses as a mother who is in distress and about to lose her only son (1 Sam 14:5ff), while the woman of Abel pleads for her city because it is known as "a mother in Israel" (1 Sam 20:19). Camp suggests that the use of this maternal language provides evidence that the source of a woman's authority was likely derived from her roles in the home, especially that of mother; her right to speak in certain public situations was an extension of her role in the family.[206]

Rivkah Harris' analysis of the Akkadian word *emqu* and its derivatives seems to corroborate this picture. *Emqu,* meaning "experienced, skilled, educated wise, wily" is related to the words for a woman managing a household.[207] She states, "Other derivatives of *emqu* also have meanings that fall within the range of skill and experience. It is significant that terms for housekeeper, such as *ēmiqtu* and *emuqtu*, imply that the woman who manages a house is a prudent woman. Harris also notes that in Egypt, there are some fragmentary texts mentioning "a

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[205] Ibid., 24.

[206] Ibid., 24–27.

[207] Rivkah Harris, "The Female 'Sage' in Mesopotamian Literature (With an Appendix on Egypt)," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 3–17, at 5.

wise woman," who may have served a mediating role in local communities.[208] The evidence

from Mesopotamia and Egypt appears to be very much in keeping with the picture presented in

Proverbs 31 where the אשת חיל is described in great detail. The source of her value and strength

lies in the contribution to a successfully run a household (vv 15–22), and her mouth speaks

wisdom (v 26). It is worth noting that it is not only the content of Proverbs 31 that reinforces this

picture, but the form as well. The narrative details before the poem, especially the first verse

structures the contents as if it the advice of a mother given to her son, the king (Prov 31:1–2).

Like Camp, Meyers believes that women's connection to wisdom and the role that they

play in the home as educators are intimately connected. She states, "the socialization and

education of Israelite children took place within the household setting in early Israel and,

probably, for most of the population, through much if not all Israelite history. . . . The

instructional wisdom of woman in pre-monarchic Israel was an integral part of daily life."[209] This

line of argumentation has also been picked up in the more recent work of Carole Fontaine—

Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs and Performance in Biblical Wisdom—who likewise assumes

that the role of "sage women" begins with her role inside the home.[210]

A number of other feminist scholars have drawn on Camp's insights about the connection

between women and the role of counselor. Silvia Schroer argues that the portrayal in Proverbs,

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[208] Ibid., 16.

[209] Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 154.

[210] Fontaine states, "As is often the case in the study of women's lives in the past, we look for women's participation first in the arena to which patriarchal culture routinely assigns them, the 'private domain' of the home. Initially, we seek the association of women with 'wisdom' by surveying the traditional roles of wife and mother." Carole Fontaine, *Smooth Words: Women and Proverbs and Performance in Biblical Wisdom* (JSOTSupp Series 356; ed. D. Clines and P. Davies; New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 19. In this book, Fontaine develops an argument from an earlier article, eadem "The Sage in Family and Tribe" in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. J. G. Gammie and L. G. Perdue; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 155–64 and also cites Camp, "The Female Sage," 185–204.

Ben Sira, and the Wisdom of Solomon cannot merely be attributed to the influences of ancient Near Eastern goddesses, but must also have "a set inner-Israelite basis."[211] She cites Camp's analysis of 2 Samuel 14 and 20 but also includes a number of other women, particularly wives and mothers who counsel their husbands and sons, respectively.[212] In each of the cases she gives, the only example of a man who does not follow a woman's counsel is in the case of Job's wife.[213] Like scholars before her, Schroer views women's role as counselor as an extension of familial roles, especially the roles of wife and mother. She also, however, sees the phenomenon as being very widespread, stating, "the social location of the 'counselling woman' corresponds to the ubiquity of this type of woman; the evidence extends from the classical biblical period to post-exilic times."[214] Schroer also utilizes the language of public and private to characterize the role of counseling women; however her inclusion of such a wide range of women in the biblical tradition of female counselors serves inadvertently to complicate the argument of Camp that this role is most viable during times of political instability.

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[211] Silvia Schroer, "Wise and Counselling Women, in Ancient Israel: Literary and Historical Ideals of the Personified Hokmâ," in *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 67–84, at 70.

[212] Schroer's list includes women throughout a variety of periods and social settings, including: Abigail (1 Samuel 25), Judith (Judith 8), Sarah (Genesis 16), Rebekah (Genesis 27) Manoah's wife (Judges 13), Michal (1 Samuel 19), Bathsheba (1 Kings 1), Jezebel (1 Kings 21), the woman of Shunem (2 Kings 4), Job's wife (Job 2) Zeresh (Esther 6), and Athaliah (2 Chronicles 22) (Ibid, 69–78).

[213] In the case of Job's wife, a straightforward reading of the text would seem to indicate that Job did the exact opposite of what his wife advised. Claire Matthews argued for an alternative possible reading of this text, suggesting that Job's wife's advice was not meant to be followed literally, resulting in Job's death; but rather as an ironic comment intended to prompt an appropriate response to the situation. If she is correct, then Job acted precisely as his wife had hoped. See Claire Matthews McGinnis, "Playing the Devil's Advocate in Job: On Job's Wife," in *The Whirlwind: Essays on Job, Hermeneutics, and Theology in Memory of Jane Morse"* (ed. Stephen Cook; New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) 121–141.

[214] Schroer, "Wise and Counselling Women," 78.

Silvia Schroer includes Abigail (1 Samuel 25) as one of the women who stands in the same tradition as the wise women considered by Camp.[215] Although Abigail is not explicitly labeled as wise, the narrative in 1 Samuel about her encounter with David deserves careful consideration. She counsels David, the king-to-be, against committing a great act of bloodshed. Through her clever negotiations between her husband and David—two men bent toward violence—she prevents David from attacking her husband by ensuring that David and his men have provisions despite her husband's lack of hospitality. In response to her actions, her husband goes into a state of shock and dies soon thereafter. Her wisdom is all the more obvious because of its direct contrast with the behavior of her foolish, drunken husband.[216] Lest the obtuse reader miss the point, her husband is given the name Nabal, "foolish."[217] As Levenson notes, the characterization of Nabal is so thoroughly negative as to constitute "a kind of descriptive overkill,"[218] the details of his poor character are highlighted through both the descriptions of the narrator as well as through the mouths of several other characters in the story. The literary strategy of overdrawing the characters serves to highlight the sharp contrast between Abigail and her husband: Abigail is as wise as her husband is foolish. The dissimilarity to her own husband also makes clear her complementarity to David, who is himself described in similar language as Abigail (1 Sam 16:11–12).[219] Due to Abigail's intervention, the situation is resolved peacefully,

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[215] Ibid., 72.

[216] Jon Levenson, "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978) 11–28, at 17; revised version published as "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and History," in *Literary Interpretation of Biblical Narratives* (ed. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis; Nashville: Abingdon, 1982) 220–242.

[217] Levenson suggests that giving Abigail's husband the name Nabal is a choice by the author for literary effect, not an actual historical detail. He states, "The likelihood is that his real name has been changed for purposes of characterization. The story-teller wants us to know what this fellow is from the start" (ibid., 14).

[218] Ibid., 15.

[219] Ibid., 18.

preventing David's reputation from being tarnished. When the matter has been concluded, David's words underscore the characterization of Abigail as the model woman. He said to her, "Blessed are you for your (good) judgment" (v 33). In no uncertain terms, then, the biblical text unequivocally characterizes Abigail as a woman of good character whose advice to David averted violence.

While several scholars have focused on the role of women in providing counsel more generally, others have focused in particular on the role of king's mother in negotiating politics and offering advice to kings. The title *gĕbîrâ'* is used a number of times in the Bible in connection to royal women and appears to have been held by the queen mother. For example, in 1 Kings 15, we are told that King Asa of Judah "also removed his mother Maacah from being *gĕbîrâ'* because she had made an abominable image for Asherah" (1 Kings 15:13). This notice has suggested to some scholars, including Gösta Ahlström that this was a political position, since individuals could be removed from if the king so decided.[220] In addition, the title is often used as a parallel term to that of the king by the final years of the southern kingdom. According to Elna Solvang, "the title *gĕbîrâ'* was one recognized and applied through at least the major portion of the monarchical period in Judah. It was, apparently, a familiar enough title that it required no explanation in the text when the Deuteronmistic History was composed."[221]

Zafrira Ben-Barak made the argument that although there was no fixed role for the queen, certain charismatic individuals were at times able to wield power in the kingdom through the force of their personalities, thus exerting significant influence. This power, however, was gained

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[220] Gösta Ahlström, *Aspects of Syncretism in Israelite Religion* (Horae Soederblomianae 5; trans. E. J. Sharpe; Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1963) 61.

[221] Elna Solvang, *A Woman's Place is in the House* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 349; London: Sheffield Academic, 2003) 74.

only through the confluence of personal traits and access to the throne born out of the intimacy

of familial relationships. For her, queens acting as an important political presence in the court do

not represent the existence of a significant role for women in Israelite political tradition.[222] Thus,

she would see women such as Bathsheba as the exception to the rule; yet her argument suggests

that such power and influence over the monarchy were certainly possible.

Niels-Erik Andreasen, like Ahlström, reads the biblical evidence concerning queen's

mothers and comes to a very different conclusion from that of Ben-Barak. He argues that the

queen mother operated as a significant position within Israelite society that served to limit the

absolute power of the monarch.[223] The queen mother, along with several other positions,

including prophets and counselors, acted to circumscribe the king's sovereign authority.

According to Andreasen, the primary role of the queen mother was "senior counsellor to the king

and people,"[224] especially counsel related to the matter of royal succession.

Susan Ackerman concurs with the conclusions of Andreasen, against Ben-Barak, that the

queen mother did have an official position within the palace and that her primary function was

related to offering royal counsel. Her view, however, differs from that of Andreasen by

suggesting that one reason the queen mother could fulfill this official role of counselor may have

originated from the belief that she represented the goddess Asherah within the monarchy. She

sees the role of the queen mother as being especially strong in the southern kingdom of Judah as

a development born out of the royal theology in which the Davidic line was described in

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[222] Zafrira Ben-Barak, "The Status and Right of the *Gebira*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110 (1991) 23–34, at 33–34.

[223] Niels-Erik A. Andreasen, "The Role of the Queen Mother in Israelite Society," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 45 (1985) 179–84, at 193–194.

[224] Ibid., 191.

language of divine sonship.[225] The arguments presented by both Andreasen and Ackerman suggest that the role of counsel was not limited to the premonarchic period but extended into the monarchy, potentially even as a formalized role. Andreasen would see this role as an extension of familial relationships that served to limit royal authority. Ackerman's argument goes even further, suggesting that the role of queen mother is built both on literal family structures and bolstered by the familial metaphors that were central to the royal ideology in the kingdom of Judah.

Several scholars who have analyzed the role of the queen mother have also drawn on the work of Shosana Bin-Nun regarding the function of the royal title *tawananna* in the Hittite kingdom. Early on, the *tawananna* was a priestess, not a queen. However, she was often a royal women, either the sister or aunt of the king. Later on, the title was applied to the queen who also served as a priestess of Arinna, the sun-goddess. Even as the position evolved from its early stages in pre-Hittite Anatolia and the Old Kingdom to the period of Empire, there was only ever one individual to hold the title. In addition, when a king died, the woman who held the title would continue on in that position. From the evidence collected by Bin-Nun, it appears that the role of *tawananna* during the Empire period did not extend to matters of succession and was not necessarily the mother of the king or heir apparent.[226] Drawing on Bin-Nun's study and other comparative materials, Ktziah Spanier concluded that the role of queen mother was the most important political role in the southern kingdom of Judah that could be held by a woman.[227]

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[225] Susan Ackerman, "The Queen Mother and the Cult in Ancient Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (1993) 385–401.

[226] Shoshana Bin-Nun, *The Tawananna in the Hittite Kingdom* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1975).

[227] Ktzaih Spanier, "The Northern Israelite Queen Mother in The Judean Court: Athaliah and Abi,'" in *Boundaries of the Ancient Near Eastern World: A Tribute to Cyrus Gordon* (ed. M. Lubetski, C. Gottlieb, and S. Keller; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) 136.

The evidence for whether or not the queen mother was in fact a fixed role or worked in a more ad hoc fashion is not conclusive. In either case, however, what is clear is that the potential for women to wield a significant amount of political influence was available. It is likely that individual personalities and relationships within the court would impact the degree of influence an individual woman had, regardless of whether or not there was a defined role.

The work of Elna Solvang on the royal women of Judah offers compelling evidence in favor of women's political participation in the southern monarchy. She does not focus specifically on the issue of royal counsel but rather on the active participation of women in royal politics precisely because the palace was a household. Solvang argues that the narrative portrayals of women in Judah do not suggest that women were marginal in the life of the court politics. Rather, the narratives depict women who are involved in a variety of ways. Through their participation in household roles, they also have access to the king, exerting influence over him or even acting in the place of kings in certain circumstances.[228] Solvang notes an interesting piece in regard to the king's mothers in Judah. Unlike the regnal reports for the northern kingdom of Israel or king lists in other ancient Near Eastern societies, in the southern kingdom of Judah king's mothers are listed for every king except two (Jehoram and Ahaz).[229] Solvang's argument about the royal women of Judah could be extended to apply to the literary portrayal of the character of Esther. Her participation in public affairs draws a picture of a royal woman who acts in ways that are congruous with depictions of earlier biblical women.

One example of a queen mother who negotiates on behalf of her son to ensure his ascension to the throne is Bathsheba. She is not explicitly called a *gĕbîrâ'* but certainly demonstrates a great deal of influence with the king. In the case of Bathsheba, her initial entrance

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[228] Solvang, *A Woman's Place*, 1–14.

[229] Ibid., 79.

into the biblical narrative is marked by very few words. She is taken by the king to the palace,

becomes pregnant by him, loses her husband by David's murderous plotting, becomes David's

wife, all while having uttered only a few words to punctuate the narrative. These early depictions

of her make Bathsheba appear as a passive victim in the story. When Bathsheba again appears in

the narrative, it is David who is old and powerless (I Kings 1). In the interim between her two

appearances, Bathsheba has come to wield some influence and power at court: She and the

prophet Nathan work together to secure Solomon as the future heir to thwart the attempts of

Adonijah to gain the throne. Together Bathsheba and Nathan come up with a plan to persuade

David to choose Solomon over Adonijah as his successor. In the pre-planned encounter, it is

Bathsheba who will initially approach David, with Nathan appearing in the middle of their

conversation to help solidify David's support for their plan.

When the encounter between David and Bathsheba is examined closely, two things stand

out. The first is that Bathsheba does not repeat verbatim the script that was given to her but

improvises, exercising political influence over her husband. Solvang describes her speech to

David thus,

> Bathsheba pushes David to act: 'all Israel' is watching to see whom he will appoint as his
> successor (1 Kgs 1.20). She winds up her rhetorical assault .with the clear intimation that if David
> does not appoint Solomon, then she and *her* son Solomon will be killed as soon as David dies (1
> Kgs. 1.21).[230]

Like both the woman of Tekoa, and the woman of Abel, Bathsheba makes the situation

very personal; the consequences of David's actions have concrete applications for specific

individuals. The second item of note is that she and Nathan succeed in their plan. In every

previous situation, David's failure to make a decision in regard to his own children is a notable

failure, possibly one of the character flaws that most threatened his reign. Here, in regard to the

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[230] Ibid., 146.

succession of Solomon, David acts quickly and without hesitation or indecision. As was the case previously with the woman of Tekoa, it is an orchestrated speech by a woman that persuades the king to override his own indecisiveness and act on behalf of his child. Later, once her son has become king, Bathsheba seems to still hold an influential role. Adonijah requested her to intercede with Solomon on his behalf, indicating that her influence is still significant, if not even stronger than before. Although the Solomon does not grant the request of Adonijah for David's concubine Abishag, it is clear that Adonijah perceives Bathsheba to offer him the best chance at success in persuading the king (1 Kings 2:13–25).

In comparing the portrayal of Bathsheba with Esther, several narrative features stand out. In both cases, the two women appear in the story first as individuals with little power or status. Neither is especially vocal or active in the early portions of the narrative. Through a series of events, including important political marriages, the women come to gain greater access to power, as their own influence with the king grows. Certainly the beauty of the women is one of the first features that each of the respective kings notice. Both are especially important in demonstrating the contingent nature of power relationships, for the passive women who are objects in the early portions of their stories come to wield power in a very public way, influencing the fate of the entire nation through their negotiations with kings.

Other biblical evidence that has suggested to scholars that women may have been involved in a tradition of wise counsel is the personification of wisdom and its relationship to the portrayal of biblical women. One possibility for assessing the character of Esther in light of other biblical traditions is to view her as a narrative embodiment of personified wisdom.[231] In Prov

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[231] See ch. 1 (pp. 13–17) for a discussion of Esther and wisdom in biblical scholars. The first to notice this connection explicitly was Shemaryahu Talmon. Some of his observations have been challenged, Crenshaw suggesting that this text does not fit the genre of wisdom literature; and McGeough suggesting that Esther at times goes against conventional wisdom, acting as a hero. Regardless there are sufficient literary resonances with wisdom

8:15–16, wisdom calls out, "Through me kings reign and rulers decree justice; through me princes rule, and nobles, all who judge with justice." Although it is only through a narrative progression that this role is realized, ultimately the King of Persia rules through Esther's advice. Later, wisdom continues, to speak, "whoever finds me, finds life and elicits favor from the LORD," (v 36). Esther, like Joseph is the recipient of a mysterious grace which in turn profits those who are allied with each of them.[232]

Esther as the embodiment of wisdom is more evident when depicted in relief against the portrait of Potiphar's wife, herself the wife of a powerful man. The relationship between the stories of Joseph and Esther, Israelites who rise to power in foreign courts, has been noted by many authors. If Esther evokes the words of Proverbs 8, Potiphar's wife might well be regarded as her narrative foil, the "אשה זרה" of Proverbs 7. According to Claudia Camp, the "strange woman" is a "multivalent symbol . . . she is strange both in the sense of being an adulteress, whose breaking social boundaries disrupts the stability of the family household, and in the sense of being a foreign national, who introduces the dangers of foreign worship and of ramifications of power and wealth outside the community."[233] Both valences indicated by Camp apply to the wife of Potiphar who is at once a married woman attempting adultery and a non-Israelite. She is loud (Prov 7:11, Gen 39:14) and her seduction is "the path to Sheol," or in Joseph's case to a near death experience in prison (Prov 7:27, Gen 39:20). [234]

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literature that even if it deviates from the genre or Esther does not always follow conventional wisdom teachings in every case to warrant such an analysis of Esther.

[232] Levenson, *Esther*, 60.

[233] Claudia V. Camp, "The Strange Woman of Proverbs: A Study in the Feminization and Divinization of Evil in Biblical Thought," in *Women and Goddess Traditions: In Antiquity and Today* (ed. Karen King; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 312.

[234] As Susan Hollis notes, the motif of Potiphar's wife is attested elsewhere in literature of the Ancient Near East, most notably in the Egyptian "Tale of Two Brothers." Susan Tower Hollis, "The Woman in Ancient Examples

Unlike Proverbs 7–8,[235] the story of Esther is particularly sparse when it comes to

dialogue between characters. It relies more on reports of action than it does on speech,[236] a fact

that serves to highlight the significance of Esther's words to the king. But if, as Potiphar's wife

and Proverbs 7 illustrate, the locus of female seduction is in a woman's voice and "her

bewitching words send the innocent man to his doom,"[237] there is a better attested tradition that a

wise woman's words might prevent death and disaster. As Yee notes, the "foreign woman" and

woman wisdom are "competitors for the same man,"[238] both vocal and each vying to make her

words more persuasive than the other's. Their words are "described in perilously similar

messages to beckon the young man to their respective houses."[239]

As in Proverbs, there are two women who advise men in the book of Esther: Esther and

Zeresh, the wife of Haman. In both cases, the women persuade their husbands to act. Zeresh's

counsel results in violence, however, which, like that of the foreign woman, leads to a man's

downfall. Zeresh advises Haman to construct a gallows for Mordecai, the precise instrument by

which Haman himself is later killed. The narrative drama between Zeresh and Haman recalls the

father's warning to his son in Proverbs, "Do not let your hearts turn aside other ways; do not

stray into her path. . . . Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death"

(Prov 7:25, 27). Esther provides the perfect foil for Zeresh, using her words to persuade the king.

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of the Potiphar's Wife Motif: K2111," in *Women and Goddess Traditions: In Antiquity and Today* (ed. Karen King; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 28–42.

[235] Carol Newsom, "Woman and the Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom: A Study of Proverbs 1–9," in *Women and Goddess Traditions: In Antiquity and Today* (ed. Karen King; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) 142.

[236] Levenson, *Esther*, 1.

[237] Gale A. Yee, " 'I Have Perfumed My Bed With Myrrh': The Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1–9," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 43 (1989) 53.

[238] Ibid.

[239] Ibid.

Her speech, however, does not bring about her husband's demise but rather serves to avert violence.

Esther not only draws on biblical portrayals of women as counselors and the personification of wisdom but demonstrates connections to other literature about wise courtiers in both the Bible and Mesopotamian literature. Niditch and Doran in their article, "The Success Story of the Wise Courtier: A Formal Approach," raise the subject of formal criteria for the genre of wise courtier tales.[240] They argue that a form must not only have common motifs but a specific sequence of the constitutive elements.[241] The literary form of the wise courtier was identified by the Finnish school of folklore scholarship, known as Type 922: "Clever Acts and Words."[242] In this genre, Niditch and Doran would include both Daniel 2 and Genesis 41 as well as the Assyrian story of Ahiqar. Ahiqar was a wise man and a counselor to Sennacherib. He adopted his nephew Nadan, who later betrayed him and accused Ahiqar of disloyalty. Ahiqar's death was ordered, but the executioner favored him and spared his life, hiding him away so that no one will know he has survived. Later, the pharaoh poses question to Sennacherib which he thinks cannot be answered by anyone in Ahiqar's absence. The riddle provoked a crisis, causing Ahiqar to be summoned. He was able to answer the question and was rewarded, placed at the head of the king's household.[243] In each of these stories, the elements which are important for the form are: 1) younger person of lower status is called before a person of higher status to answer a difficult question or solve a problem; 2) person of high status poses the problem no one is

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[240] Susan Niditch and Robert Doran, "The Success Story of the Wise Courtier: A Formal Approach," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1977) 179–93.

[241] Ibid., 179.

[242] Ibid., 180.

[243] Ibid., 182–183.

capable of solving; 3) person of lower status does solve the problem; 4) the person of lower status receives a reward.

The connections to the Esther story are plentiful in relationship to the "wise courtier" folk tale. Like the story of Ahiqar, the element of adoption plays a role. The role of clothing and dress, reward and treachery are all common elements throughout these tales. Furthermore, Esther's speech to the king does solve a particular problem although her story inverts the expectations because in her case the king does not seem aware that there is a problem at all. In another odd reversal of expectations, the king offers up to half his kingdom to Esther even before she has done anything that would merit such a gift. Despite the variances in motif, the story of Esther shares several clear affinities with the stories of Israelites in foreign courts who come to power.

Women's Counsel in the ancient Near East

There is also a great deal of evidence from outside the biblical text that the surrounding cultures also allowed women a variety of access to royalty, granting them at least a measure of political influence. Deborah Sweeney's analysis of speech patterns in Egypt sought to determine if there were gendered pattern by which women would make requests. Her study found that in Ramesside stories, both men and women made requests in a similar fashion. However, in contrasting two stories in which a man and a woman request a ferryman for a ride,[244] it appears that the woman has to employ more strategic language to persuade the ferryman. Thus, she concludes that women might have had some disadvantage in comparison with men, forcing them

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[244] Deborah Sweeney, "Gender and Requests in New Kingdom Literature," in *Sex and Gender in Ancient Egypt: 'Don Your Wig for a Joyful Hour' "* (ed. Carolyn Graves-Brown; Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2008) 191–214.

to work even more to persuade then men in parallel situations.[245] This confirms the picture that we have from the biblical text as well. Women were not alone in advising kings and leaders to act. Both men and women, would offer counsel, often using similar strategies (i.e., Nathan and the woman of Tekoa). However, women did at times employ elaborate strategies to make sure that their requests were fulfilled, such as dressing in a particular way to facilitate the performance (i.e., Esther and the woman of Tekoa).

To illustrate the depiction of women in the Egyptian tales, we can examine one of the stories that Sweeney considers in her article, "The Tale of Two Brothers." Sweeney uses this tale to examine the request of the wife of Bata—the protagonist of the tale—when she attempts to persuade the king to kill her husband. Earlier in the narrative Bata's wife had left him for the king and had arranged for Bata to be killed. Later Bata returns to life and disguises himself as a bull that comes into favor with the king. While the king is feasting, the wife approaches the king and couches her request in veiled language, making him promise to grant the request before he even knows what it is. The king quickly agrees to the request but is soon very distressed when he learns what he must now do. This pattern repeats again when Bata returns to life in the form of Persea trees. In both cases, the wife approaches the king when he is feasting, speaking just after the narrator declares that he was "very happy with her." Both time she entices the king in a private setting to agree to her demands even before he knows what they will be.[246] As Sweeney notes, the wife's demands of the king are a central plot element.[247] At the heart of the drama between Bata and his wife is the recurrence of her trying to have him killed repeatedly, while he

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[245] Ibid., 194.

[246] "The Tale of Two Brothers," translated by Miriam Lichtheim (*COS* 1.40: 85–89).

[247] Sweeney, "Gender and Requests," 195.

continues to return from death in order to indict her. Sweeney remarks on the strategy employed by the wife in approaching the king, "Making the king promise without knowing to what he is committing himself is a form of judo against a powerful person—using their own status against them, because if they refuse the request once they discover its implications, it would harm their credibility."[248]

Rivkah Harris also examines evidence from Mesopotamia for women's wisdom. She discusses the various types of roles in which women might engage in the Mesopotamian context that relate to the category of sage. Among those she identifies are female scribes—these include bureaucrats, poets, and scholars—performing artists, healers, mantics, and counselors. Harris finds that the evidence in Mesopotamia for women offering counsel is more sparse than that cited by Camp for the Israelite context but states that "capable, even remarkable women, are found at all times especially and not surprisingly from the royal and upper classes—but not confined to it."[249] She briefly mentions two examples that might count as evidence for female counselors: Siduri, the innkeeper who counsels Gilgamesh and the women of Mari, especially Kiru who offers advice to her father on political matters. Since Harris does not discuss these examples in detail we shall now turn to a more careful examination of these and other Mesopotamian women who offer advice.

Harris highlighted the role of Siduri in offering advice to Gilgamesh, for it is Siduri who "advises Gilgamesh on how to cope with death."[250] In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the tavern keeper appears for only a very brief scene but it is a pivotal moment in Gilgamesh's journey. Gilgamesh

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[248] Ibid.

[249] Rivkah Harris, "The Female 'Sage' in Mesopotamian Literature," 14.

[250] Ibid.

has recently lost his best friend, Enkidu to illness. He wanders about, distressed and unkempt. In Tablet X, Gilgamesh encounters Siduri, the ale-wife, who advises him about how to find Ur-Shanabi, the boatman. This role is of no small significance to story, for it touches upon a central motif of the story, the quest for immortality and the anxiety Gilgamesh feels about death.

Several other women also display characteristics of a wise women or counselor in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In Tablet 1, Gilgamesh's mother is called by a variety of epithets, including "wise mother," "wise, wild cow Ninsun," and "the wise mother of Gilgamesh, all-knowing."[251] Ninsun, interprets two dreams for her son about his future as a king.[252] The same epithets for Gilgamesh's mother are repeated again, referring to her as both "all-knowing" and "wise" when speaks to Gilgamesh in tablet 2.[253] Here she advises her son, although the text is a broken so it is a little unclear as to what the content of her advice is. Later in Tablet III: Gilgamesh's mother is concerned for her son's safety. Thus, she intercedes with the gods and adopts Enkidu—Gilgamesh' friend and close companion—as her son. One final character of note emerges in Tablet XI of the Gilgamesh story. Ut-naptishtim's wife twice speaks to her husband regarding Gilgamesh, in both cases providing the impetus that moves him to action. In the first case, she advises her husband to send Gilgamesh away, prompting her husband to put a plan into action that will precipitate his leaving; the second time she tells her husband that they should not send Gilgamesh away empty-handed, prompting Ut-naptishtim to inform Gilgamesh about a plant that can help mortals to attain immortality.

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[251] "Gilgamesh," in Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford World's Classics; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 50–135, at 58–9.

[252] Although she does not function primarily in a counseling role, Shamhat also plays the role of dream interpreter for Enkidu. She also serves in a similar capacity to female counselors in biblical traditions in that she helps to prevent male violence, albeit in a much more indirect manner.

[253] "Gilgamesh," 61.

The Epic of Gilgamesh offers a narrative description of women and goddesses who give advice and interpret dreams for the king. This includes a wide variety of types of women, from the tavernkeeper to the king's mother. Thus, the literary account that we have depicts both royal and common women offering advice, often at critical moments in the narrative, to the king. The fictional accounts of goddess and women in epic tales do not necessarily tell us about the realities of historical women, including whether or not they serve as counselors to royalty, but the literary representation does allow for the historical possibility.

In the correspondence from the Mari archives, we have a different kind of evidence of women's participation in politics, including their role as negotiators. This correspondence relates, for the most part to people who were associated with the royal palace and speaks very little to the lives of ordinary women. It is interesting, however, because the correspondence does give details about the thoughts, experiences, and actual lives of real women. Even if the women at Mari were the exception and not the rule, they further suggest that women at least were not categorically prohibited from filling this role.

Several of Zimri-Lim's daughters were given in political marriages to vassals of the king to help secure the vassal's loyalty. The dual roles of wife to a vassal and daughter of the king did not, however, imply that women were merely passive objects in male political negotiations. Rather, these women often played an important role in politics, both domestic and international. In some cases, this influence was formalized through granting an office to the daughter. In other cases, the evidence is less clear. Inib-sharri's name, for example, appears on a list of local rulers who have sent gifts to Mari, suggesting that she may have held office as a local ruler of a province that required her to send tribute to the king in Mari.[254] In the case of Zimri-Lim's

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[254] Bernard Batto, *Studies on Women at Mari* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) 42.

daughter Kiru, the evidence is more explicit. In one letter to her father, she recounts a statement from her angry husband that mentions her role as mayor.

At times Zimri-Lim's daughters would offer advice to the king. Kiru wrote to her father with advice, hoping to persuade him to heed it by reminding him that in the past when he disregarded her advice, there were negative consequences.[255] Our evidence does not go so far as to describe how others viewed Kiru's advice, and we thus do not know whether the king received the advice well and listened to her request. Regardless, the fact that she was given a political position and often corresponded with the king indicates some degree of influence.

In addition to the daughters of Zimri-Lim, his wife Sibtu played an important political role.[256] From her letters to her husband, it would seem that that Sibtu's responsibilities were very extensive, often giving her authority over a wide variety of arenas, including workshops and temples. In addition, however, she held a great deal of influence in the kingdom, often standing in for the king when he was not around. Because of her great importance, people would often try to curry her favor so as to use her influence on the king.[257] From Mari then, we have examples of royal women who held office, carried out responsibilities on behalf of the king, offered the king advice, and played the role of mediator between the king and individuals.

At a later point in Mesopotamian history, Queen Zukutu, the wife of Sennacherib, played an important role in political affairs of her time.[258] Like Bathsheba, she negotiated to ensure that

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[255] Ibid., 44.

[256] The queen did not always have the same kind of power as Sibtu was able to wield. We might, for example, compare Sibtu to the wife of Yasmah-Addu who had far less political control. The contrast between the two women is due in part to the differences between the reigns of Zimri-Lim and Yasmah-Addu. See ibid., 21.

[257] Ibid., 14.

[258] Hildegard Lewy, "Nitokris-Naqî'a," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 11 (1952) 264–86.

her son, Esarhaddon, would succeed his father Sennacherib on the throne. Evidence from the time of her son's rule indicates that she remained an important figure in Assyria even after her husband had died and her son had inherited the throne. One artifact that has been found, a deltoid shaped bead that was arguably part of a necklace, had a short inscription on it. Although it was not found *in situ*, the inscription indicates the queen's close relationship to her son as well as the fact that she probably owned property and would make offerings to temples.[259]

The narrative about Esther demonstrates affinities with a wide variety of earlier biblical and ancient Near East figures, both men and women, in historical and literary accounts. Esther's speech to the king re-enforces the identification between Esther and her people, while simultaneously drawing strength for her personal relationship to him as a wife.

In her approach to the king, she makes the setting very personal, a small intimate gathering between herself, the king, and his most trusted advisor, Haman. The repetition in the king's questions ("What is your request, Queens Esther, and it will be given to you; what is your petition, up to half the kingdom and I will do it?" [Esth 7:2]) have the formal characteristics of poetic parallelism. Esther's answer continues the parallelistic structure: "If I have found favor in your eyes, O King, and if it please the king, let my life be given to me; this in my request, and my people, this is my petition" (Esth 2:3). This type of repetition is a literary device that functionally identifies Esther's life and that of her people closely with one another. There is no longer any separation between the one and the other; their fates are intimately wedded, easily interchangeable in the sequence of synonymous parallelism. Her statement of the problem takes on a certain kind of cadence, "For we have been sold, myself and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed and to be annihilated" (v 3a). Esther, then, saves her people because of the careful

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[259] Marc Van De Mieroop, "An Inscribed Bead of Queen Zakûtu," in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo* (ed. Mark E. Cohen, Daniel Snell, and David Weisberg; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1993) 259–261, at 259.

network of relationships she has crafted between the king and herself, and between herself and the people. The king is drawn into concern for the Jews in his kingdom because of the way they are intimately connected to his own wife, Esther. Like many other biblical women, she is so persuasive precisely because she makes the situation personal, providing a psychological motivation for responding to her request.

In order to be more convincing, Esther devises a careful strategy for its delivery, delaying her request on several occasions. As Fox notes,

> "The best explanation for Esther's delaying her request until the second banquet is that she is unfolding a premeditated strategy . . . . Such a scrutiny shows her building up the accusation with great care; piquing the king's suspense, eliciting a near-promise to fulfill her wish, withholding information that could put the king on the defensive (by making him face his own culpability), delaying other information (the identity of the offender) until has given full momentum to the king's anger, softening her speech with deferential courtesies and demurrals that play to his ego, cracking her accusations like a whip, then allowing matters to take their course once she has set Haman careening toward destruction."[260]

Esther is a careful and clever negotiator. Thus, it is not only through the content of her speech, or the way that she carefully crafts her rhetoric, but the entire strategy that she employs serves to further her goal by setting up a situation in which the king almost cannot refuse her; like the woman of Tekoa and Nathan, she has almost guaranteed the response before the king even realizes how it implicates him.

Conclusion

Like the wise women who draw on familial metaphors to mitigate disaster, queen mothers who take a role as counselor to both king and people, personified wisdom who facilitates royal leadership, and wise courtiers who offer advice in foreign courts, Esther, too, takes on an explicitly political role born out of the complex kin structures and familial metaphors upon

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[260] Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991) 201.

which the monarchy relied. The rich way in which Esther's character resonates with a broad spectrum of literature is significant. She draws on women such as the wise women of Tekoa and Abel as well as Abigail who served to counsel men in preventing disaster. She embodies ideals depicted throughout Proverbs, including both images of the personification of wisdom and the woman of Proverbs 31. She is the mirror image of Potiphar's wife, for Esther is a character like Joseph who is able to enact salvation for her people through her cleverness, a truly wise courtier in her own right. Thus, the narrative of Esther offers warrant for viewing her as a woman who continues traditions concerning wise women who offer counsel. Like a number of the examples suggested above, Esther's access to the king is a fact of her marital status. Yet the wide variety of types of ways that women might offer counsel and the extensive collection of stories across a variety of time periods in biblical literature suggests that centralized authority did not preclude altogether the access that women might have to this significant political role.

Counseling royalty was not an exclusively female role; rather, both women and men had opportunities to serve in the role of political adviser, in both cases largely because of their status vis-à-vis larger familial structures. Several scholars have done quite a bit of work to demonstrate the traditions of women's counsel already, although most would see this evidence as limited to the time of pre- and early monarchic period. My argument builds on the work of feminist scholars who have suggested that women play a critical role in the wisdom tradition and in offering wise counsel. While I would agree that this role is likely an extension of familial roles that women play, I argue against the conclusion that the period of the monarchy severely limits this role for women precisely because structuring of the monarchy around familial metaphors and relationships gives royal women direct access to the king. This role likely had its roots in premonachical kin-based socio-political dynamics, but this does not mean that the position ended

with the introduction of a monarchy into Israel. Rather, women continued to advise royalty precisely because the monarchy was, both conceptually and literally, a domestic structure. The narrative traditions about women were so well-established in biblical literature that by the time of Esther's composition, this tradition formed the basis for Esther's portrayal. Israel's stories as recorded in the biblical text were not an aberration from the larger cultural milieu. Rather than representing an isolated phenomenon, there is a lot of evidence from previous narratives that suggests women might have played a significant social role in the capacity of counselor, a role which might extend to royal counsel.

To return the beginning of the chapter, we can restate the question that has motivated this investigation: "Is Esther unique because she defied gendered expectations, acting outside the private realm that would be expected of women?" There are two key parts to the question: Is Esther unique? The evidence demonstrates that Esther has strong affinities with a wide variety of biblical literature and is anything but unique among narrative portrayals of biblical women (or even men for that matter). As for the second part of the question under consideration: Does Esther defy gendered stereotypes by acting outside the "private" realm to which women were ordinarily constrained? To this, the answer is somewhat more complex. It is the task of this study to demonstrate the improbability that ancient monarchies were structured according to dichotomous and gendered categories of public and private. We will turn to the question of how power was exercised and distributed in ancient monarchies in the next chapter. This chapter has attempted to demonstrate that whatever the historic realities were for women, it is clear that the narrative portrayals of ancient monarchies do not conform to this expectation that women have a separate private space that would make engagement in the politics of negotiation an aberration.

Rather, women in narratives regularly offered advice throughout Israel's history, at times to

important royal officials and kings, and thus participating actively in political life.

Chapter 4: Implications of the Patrimonial Household Model

on Women's Participation in Politics

"For the Bronze Age Near East, in general, the PHM [patrimonial household model] has important implications for textual and archaeological interpretation because it calls into question a number of widely held assumptions about social and economic organization. It predicts a lack of distinction in political and economic administration between "public" and "private" sectors, corresponding to the absence of any notion of rationalized bureaucracy, abstract constitutionalism, or the impersonal state."[261]

The effective power of the ruler is diluted by his need to exercise authority through subordinates (and their subordinates), whose "household" domains are smaller in scale but similar in structure to his own. As a result, all kinds of private economic activity and jockeying for political and social advantage can take place beyond the ruler's direct supervision. What looks at first glance like an all-encompassing royal household reveals itself, when viewed from another angle, to be a complex and decentralized hierarchy of households nested within one another and held together by dyadic "vertical" ties between the many different masters and servants who are found at each level of the hierarchy.[262]

Introduction

As we have seen, one of the grounds upon which Esther's character has evaluated, either as exceptional to or as paradigmatic of gender stereotypes, was the assumption that women were ordinarily confined to domestic activity and that any power they did wield was derived from family life. According to this view, in times of political instability, women might expand those family roles to gain additional power; the familial authority women may have experienced, however, was circumscribed during times of increased centralized authority.

In the second chapter we saw that there were theoretical problems with relying on the categories of public and private, particularly as it relates to assessing women's lives. There is

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[261] J. David Schloen, "Patrimonial Society in the Bronze Age Near East," in *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2001) 64.

[262] Ibid., 65.

another compelling reason to question the use of these terms, one rooted in the political realities of the ancient Near East. Scholarship on patrimonialism offers important contributions as to how the political and economic specificities of life in the ANE might impact the discussions of public and private as well as the role of kinship within Near Eastern monarchies.

The work of J. David Schloen on Bronze Age Levantine culture and the work of Lawrence Stager on ancient Israel with regard to patrimonialism influence our study at hand in two important ways. The first is that Schloen's critique of the two-sector model jettisons the previous reliance on a variety of dichotomies in the ancient Near East, including both public-private and rural-urban divides. His work deals with the Bronze Age, and focuses on Ugarit in particular, but the model that he uses has implications for the Persian Period as well. One implication of this work involves the degree to which a strong centralized government impacted kinship and tribal relationships. This line of inquiry has been pursued by Lawrence Stager, who has considered this question in the context of ancient Israel. While neither of these discussions in any way address directly the impact that patrimonialism had on women, the implications are significant and productive for thinking about the way that women's role in political life has been assessed by scholars. More specifically, biblical scholarship using the dichotomous and gendered categories of public and private to describe women's lives have relied on the following two assumptions: 1) the existence of domestic and public spheres in ancient Near Eastern societies; and, 2) the belief that increased centralization in a political system correlates to increased bureaucracy, which sharpens the divide between public and private domains.[263] If Schloen and Stager are correct that traditional dichotomies cannot be upheld in a patrimonial system, even with increased centralized authority, then it opens up the possibility that women's access to political power is not categorically constrained due to gender. Rather, women's status is likely

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[263] Chapter 1 discusses the way in which this has been applied in biblical scholarship.

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far more fluid because it is dependent on specific familial relationships, whether natal or contractual (i.e., through marriage or adoption).

Women and the Domestic Sphere

In chapter 2, we saw how a number of scholars had characterized women's ability to provide counsel to times of relative political instability. This understanding fits into a much larger picture of women's political activity, which most scholars have seen as limited during the time of the monarchy and periods of greater political centralization. Carol Meyers comments on this are representative of this view.[264] In her chapter on "Kinship and Kingship," in which she discusses the advent of the monarchy, Meyers describes the implications for women as follows,

> The continuation of agrarian village life, relatively untouched in any negative ways by the tenth-century monarchy, had implications for gender relations. In the pre-state period senior males and female in the family households stood in relative parity with respect to subsistence specialization, control of family resources, and authority over the younger generation and other household dependents. This parity continued into the tenth century. In the kinship-based configurations that characterized village settlements female enjoyed a status that was related more to the prestige of their households than to their gender. Only to the extent that traditional kinship patterns were disrupted by the new state would female authority have been reduced—especially in urban settings, where emerging hierarchies meant the increasing subordination of women. The relatively authority of women tends to decline with the rise of state institutions, although some women (such as queens) exercise social power through their class position.[265]

Meyers is describing here the way the institution of kingship in ancient Israel would have impacted women. Her comments, however, have implications for the book of Esther because her statement that "the relative authority of women tends to decline with the rise of state institutions" could easily fit the picture of Persian rule.

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[264] Here I have selected Carol Meyers to illustrate the basic assumptions underlying the language of public and private divide but in chapter 2, a number of other scholars who also endorse this view have been cited and discussed as well.

[265] Carol Meyers, "Kinship and Kingship: The Early Monarchy," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World* (ed. Michael D. Coogan; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 165–205, at 202.

What is interesting about Meyers' analysis is that she does allow for the possibility that queens may have had status accorded to them, but overall sees women's public presence declining in direct proportion to the "rise of state institutions."[266] For her, the logic behind the decreased public presence of women under a centralized political government is that women derived their authority from their role in the household, a status that declined to the degree "that traditional kinship patterns were disrupted by the new state." The question, then, that this chapter will consider is whether or not state institutions in the Near East disrupted kinship structures. If this cannot be assumed, then the implications for women must also be reevaluated.

Patrimonialism and the Two-Sector Model

Schloen's *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in the Ugarit and the Ancient Near East*[267] uses the Weberian patrimonial household model to understand the social and economic situation in Bronze Age culture, especially that of ancient Ugarit. His work rejects functionalist and structuralist approaches, and in so doing attempts to dismantle one previous model for explaining ancient Near Eastern society held forth by Igor Diakonoff and developed by Mario Liverani, the two-sector model. Schloen uses indigenous language from within the culture to provide the structuring rationale, claiming that " 'the house of the father' is a basic demographic and economic fact" but it is also the central metaphor for the ancient Levant, and thus also serves as a "powerful political and religious symbol."[268]

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[266] Meyers seems to view queens, then, as an exception to the general rule that applies to women. While it likely true that most women probably did not participate in national political life in a regular way, this same dynamic probably holds true for men as well, who also derived their authority from the family or by extension of those familial roles.

[267] J. David Schloen, "Patrimonial Society in the Bronze Age Near East," in *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2001).

[268] Ibid., 1.

Schloen's scholarship relies heavily on Ricoeur and Weber to provide a theoretical underpinning. Building on the hermeneutical approach of Ricoeur, among others, Schloen argues that "the most fruitful course of sociohistorical research lies between the objectivism of traditional positivist historiography and the radical historicism of poststructuralists."[269] Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach suggests a way of approaching interpretation of texts and artifacts that mediates between either the Marxist and functionalist approach that "regard the ancient political symbol of the 'house of the father' as simply a mask for the 'real' relationships of domination and subordination" on the one hand and the positivist view that sees the symbol as "an expression of social solidarity and the desire for humane political ties of obligation and responsibility, which we would all do well to emulate in the present." Rather, one can acknowledge that symbols do distort but also "that such symbols first integrate and legitimate social order before they can distort it."[270]

What this means, then, is that one must rely heavily on the "native linguistic expression of social relationships" in order to understand the ancient Near East.[271] In other words, the language with which a society describes its institutions and relationships must be taken seriously, both because this gives insight into the conceptual world but also to the social structures undergirding the metaphor. Even if at some level language represents political ideology, neither can it be reduced simply to it. Instead, language mirrors social realities, drawing strength from the fact that the symbolic language has a referent with which those who employ the symbol can identify. In the case of the Schloen's work, the dominant symbol, "the house of the father" has symbolic political meaning only because it parallels concrete social institutions at a micro level

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[269] Ibid., 9.

[270] Ibid., 23.

[271] Ibid.

and thus cannot be dismissed as propaganda but rather as an embedded part of the social structures. The political metaphors that describe relationships in terms of family are intelligible because they mimic the kinship structures that are already present within the culture, facts that are reflected in both archaeological and textual evidence.[272]

In addition to Ricoeur, Schloen draws on the methodological approach of Max Weber who described one of the most common types of "prebureaucratic" control as "patriarchal domination." This system is based not on "abstract norms" but "personal loyalty."[273] "In the case of domestic authority the belief in authority is based on personal relationships that are perceived as natural. This belief is rooted in filial piety, in the close and permanent living together of all dependents of the household."[274] Within the patriarchal forms of domination, a particularly important form is that of "patrimonial domination," a system which begins as a "decentralization of the household."[275] According to Schloen, the symbols that structure a society are not, for Weber, "reducible to economic or political interests, nor are they to be explained merely as functional aids . . . . On the contrary, in an important sense such symbols *are* society, because they are constitutive of social action and thus of the regular patterns of behavior that comprise social action and thus of the regular patterns of behavior that comprise social institutions."[276]

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[272] See, for example, Schloen's discussion of archaeological evidence from Ugarit as it correlates to his model as he describes it in "Chapter 13. House Plans and Neighborhood Organization," 317–47; see also, Lawrence E. Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," *Bulletin for the American Schools of Oriental Research* 260 (1985) 1–35. Stager's discussion of the archaeological evidence for Iron Age Israel alongside textual accounts demonstrates how this works in the case of Israel, painting a picture in which the family compound is the basic unit of the social system.

[273] Weber, "Patriarchalism and Patrimonialism," in *Economy and Society* (ed. Guenther Toth and Claus Wittich; vol. 2; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) 1006–69, at 1006.

[274] Ibid., 1007.

[275] Ibid., 1010.

[276] Schloen, *House of the Father*, 50.

In taking seriously Weber's approach, Schloen rejects previous paradigms that assumed urban governments of ancient societies employed a bureaucratic form of government.[277] In contrast to bureaucracy, Schloen then agrees with Weber that the ancient Near East exhibits the idealized type that Schloen refers to as the "patrimonial household model," (PHM). For Schloen,

> Patriomonialism is the antithesis of rationalized bureaucracy. In a patrimonial regime, the entire social order is viewed as an extension of the ruler's household—and ultimately of the god's household. The social order consists of a hierarchy of subhouseholds linked by personal ties at each level between individuals "masters" and "slaves" or "fathers" and "sons." There is no global distinction between "private" and "public" sectors of society because governmental administration is effected through personal relationships on the household model rather than through an impersonal bureaucracy. Likewise, there is no fundamental structural difference between "urban" and "rural" components of society, because political authority and economic dependency are everywhere patterned according to the household model, so that the entire social order is vertically integrated through dyadic relationships that link the ruling elite in the sociocultural "center" to their subordination in the "periphery."[278]

Kingdoms of the ancient Near East were structured not around government with fixed institutions but instead on kinship, within which the family is both the structural metaphor and the real institution by which life is shaped.

The framework proposed by Schloen, then, precludes descriptions of Levantine culture that rely on dichotomous categories because, in his formulation, individual households and properties are subsumed within the one larger household of the king. Thus, he rejects Igor Diakonoff's use of a Marxist "two-sector model" to analyze the ancient Near East, a description that itself arose as an alternative to a feudal model.[279] In particular he addresses the applications

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[277] Schloen states, "In what follows I do intend to challenge what I believe to be the faulty understanding of ancient Near Eastern society that lies behind the use of the modern term 'bureaucracy' (for example) for social phenomena that, strictly speaking, were not bureaucratic at all" (ibid., 51).

[278] Ibid.

[279] Diakonoff's rejection of a feudal description for the ancient Near East had to do with the fact that "feudal" in Marxist analysis meant a specific stage in the development of a society toward the development of class consciousness. His analysis draws on a variety of primary sources, including legal, administrative and economic documents, evidence which he uses to suggest that the king was not in charge of all land. For more on Diakonoff's understanding of the economy in the ancient Near East prior to the middle of the second millennium B.C.E., see Igor

of Diakonoff's model by Mario Liverani and Michael Heltzer to Ugarit.[280] In Diakonoff's

analysis of the "Asiatic Mode of Production," there were two sectors, one of which was state-

owned land and included both royal and temple property. The land was owned by the king and

thus the profits from it were also his; the workers receiving rations for his work, but did not

control the production or profits from the land. A second "free" sector lived off of community

land, thus controlling the means of production.[281] Contrary to Diakonoff's model, in the

patrimonial system proposed by Schloen, "Everyone is ultimately a member of the ruler's

household—there is no "free" sector of independent proprietors who enjoy a separate conceptual

and legal status from that of the "nonfree" palace dependents."[282] Thus, in ancient Ugarit the

king has a symbolic control of the land, but at the same time, he is constrained by the

subordinates "whose 'household' domains are smaller in scale but similar in structure to his

own."[283]

This system on the surface may appear to be extremely centralized, but in reality, it is

predicated upon a more complicated dynamic that is "open to individual initiative within the

context of changing personal relationships between masters and servants, but it is also highly

structured because it makes use of a simple set of concepts derived from everyday life and

applied to many different situations."[284] Assessing who has authority in such a system is not

quite as simple as looking at various titles that are held, but relies instead on a complex system

M. Diakonoff, "The Structure of Near Eastern Society before the Middle of the 2nd Millennium B.C.," in *Oikumene* 3 (ed. I Hahn, et al.; Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982) 7–100.

[280] Schloen treats this specific discussion in "Chapter 11: The Two-Sector Model: Ugarit and the "Asiatic Mode of Production," in *House of the Father*, 222–254.

[281] Schloen, *House of the Father*, 192–3.

[282] Ibid., 65.

[283] Ibid.

[284] Ibid.

within which a variety of people might leverage their personal relationships to wield power. Thus, for the purposes of this work, the relevance of Schloen's observations relate to the fluidity of power. Schloen spends some time analyzing the familial language as it applies to male authority figures but does not extend his work out to how this work applies to women.

Like Schloen, Lawrence Stager's work also applies Weber's patrimonial system, in this case specifically applying the model to ancient Israel.[285] In analyzing the list of Solomon's officials in 1 Kings 4, which includes priest, scribes, a commander of the army, and "friend of the king," Stager argues that "these are not 'bureaucratic' offices with clearly defined duties and qualified civil servants to carry them out. These are officials whose main duty is to serve the king in a loyal manner. It is a highly personal domain built on personal loyalties."[286] The positions that are described in the book of Kings are occupied by men chosen by the king. Falling out of the king's favor, or replacement of one king by another, could quickly change the dynamics within the kingdom.

Stager's analysis challenges earlier formulations about kingship as a foreign imposition that disrupted kinship structures in a violent way.[287] Stager instead sees kingship as an extension of familial structures. He contends that "The family and household provide the central symbol about which the ancient Israelites created their cosmion, the world in which members of that society expressed their relationships to each other, to their leaders (whether "judge," or later,

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[285] Lawrence E. Stager, "The Patrimonial Kingdom of Solomon," in *Symbiosis, Symbolism and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age Through Roman Palaestina* (ed. William G. Dever and Seymour Gitin; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003) 63–74, at 67.

[286] Ibid., 67.

[287] See, for example, Stager's discussion of G. E. Wright in Stager, "Patrimonial Kingdom of Solomon," 69.

"king"), and to the deity."[288] He describes Israel as a "Patrimonial Kingdom," a system which is symbolically ordered as a "three-tiered cosmos based on a series of nested households."[289]

Another critical component of Stager's understanding is the work of the German political theorist, Eric Voegelin. Voegelin was interested in understanding how people symbolically ordered their universe.[290] According to him, "Every society is burdened with the task of creating an order that will endow the fact of its existence with meaning in terms of ends divine and human."[291] The attempts to order the universe symbolically are "imperfect"[292] but still significant. People who employ them can recognize "the analogical character of the symbols."[293] Stager views the household as the dominant analogy by which Israel represents relationships at three levels: domestic, royal and divine. He concludes, "Human kingship and divine kingship, then, are more-inclusive forms of patrimonial domination. Households are nested within households up the tiers of the cosmion, each tier becoming more overarching as one moves from domestic to royal to divine levels."[294] One of the most compelling aspects of Stager's analysis is that it employs evidence, both biblical and archaeological, which demonstrates the regular recurrence of household and kinship terminology at all three levels he describes.

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[288] Philip King and Lawrence Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) 5.

[289] Stager, "The Patrimonial Kingdom," 70.

[290] Voegelin tries to work this out in *Order and History* , and specifically in relationship to Israel in vol. 1 of that work, *Israel and Revelation*. Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation* (vol. 1 of *Order and History*; Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956).

[291] Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation*, ix.

[292] Ibid.

[293] Ibid, 6.

[294] Stager, "Patrimonial Kingdom," 71.

Frank M. Cross—with whom both Stager and Schloen studied— further confirms this picture in his understanding of the way in which covenant confers kinship on biological non-kin. He argues, "The social organization of West Semitic tribal groups was grounded in kinship. Kinship relations defined the rights and obligations, the duties, status and privileges of tribal members and kinship terminology provided the only language for expressing legal, political and religious institutions."[295] For Cross, the language about family is not merely a convenient way of describing social realities, but reflects a legal discourse, with which are associated rights and responsibilities. He discusses how both adoption and marriage metaphors are used of divine-human relationships to describe the covenantal obligations between the people and Yahweh. Thus, the covenants of the Hebrew Bible are misunderstood unless they are seen as an extension of kinship dynamics and the relationships that stem from them.[296]

The language of kinship and covenant impacts the understanding kingship in important ways because the Davidic king is often spoken of as a son, and Yahweh as the father. Thus, in Psalm 89, Yahweh says, "I have found my servant David; with my holy oil I have anointed him . . . . He shall cry to me, You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my Salvation" (vv. 20, 26). Similarly in 2 Samuel 7, Yahweh tells David of the promise regarding his offspring, "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me" (v. 14). In this passage, David has approached Samuel hoping to build a house (temple) for Yahweh. In response, Yahweh refuses the request, stating that instead it is Yahweh who will build a house (dynasty) for David (v. 11). The play on the language of "house" indicates the centrality of this metaphor for biblical kingship.

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[295] Cross, "Kinship and Covenant," in *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 3–21, at 3.

[296] Ibid., 14–15.

Stager, Schloen, and Cross are all aware that the language of family and household operates at the political level both as a social reality and as a structuring metaphor. Their work calls in to serious question the ability to correlate increased political centralization with a drastic reordering of social structures, particularly the decreased importance of households. Rather than diminishing the significance of household structures, and the authority that proceeds from it, the monarchy extended the familial structures to create a new political "family" situated within the context of a "household." There is no reason, then, to assume that the introduction of strong central political authority obviates the political role women might play as political counselors and negotiators. Furthermore, a pre-bureacratic system calls into question the presence of public and private domains, a move that suggests the categories that have been used to describe women's subordination are simplistic.

Assessing the Patrimonial Household Model

The scope of our current investigation does not seek to prove whether or not the arguments presented above are correct in every aspect, but rather to assess the degree to which their observations about the relationship between kinship and kingship hold true, and subsequently to make suggestions about the impact that this may have had on women.[297] More specifically, the issue germane to our investigation is the following: To what extent does

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[297] There are reviews of Schloen's work that take up various specific issues in more detail. Several aspects of Schloen's work, for example, are examined by Daniel Fleming in his review of *The House of the Father.* Specifically, Fleming examines the degree to which the degree to which Schloen's evidence for Middle Bronze Age Mari and Late Bronze Age Emar, Fleming's own areas of expertise, fit the patrimonial household model. Overall, he finds Schloen's thesis to be provocative, stating that his analysis "may be more powerful than he himself has allowed it to be" (80), although Fleming also finds that there are certain kinds of evidence that are not accounted for in this schema, suggesting, for example, that the discussion of Mari should also consider "Both the major pastoralist component to the economy and the interplay of supraurban tribal social organization" (77). See Daniel E. Fleming, "Schloen's Patrimonial Pyramid: Explaining Bronze Age Society" *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 328 (2002) 73–80.

kingship in the ancient Near East allow for the preservation of familial relationships in a way that disallows simple formulations regarding how power is distributed within the royal household?

In looking at a variety of documents from both Ugarit and Israel, there is substantial reason to confirm the general picture provided by both Schloen and Stager. Schloen argues that one of the main reasons that Weber's patrimonial model works for the ancient Near East is because this reflects "the very durable native terminology used for all manner of political and social relationships throughout the Near East in the pre-Hellenistic period." He states, "Household language —the use of terms such as "house," "father," "son," "brother," "master," and "servant" in an extended political sense—carries more significance than is usually thought . . . personal relationships patterned on the household model served to integrate society and to legitimate the exercise of power."[298] Administrative documents from Ugarit indicate that both family relationships, and the political metaphors that extended from family life, were prevalent in the politics of Ugarit. The role of the queen mother is emphasized through a variety of letters. In a letter from the king to the queen mother, he speaks to her with reverence, "At my mother's feet [I fall]. With my mother <may> it be well! [May the gods] guard you, may they keep [you] well." Her status as important political figure is also underscored by the subject matter of the letter, which indicates that the queen mother is responsible for sending bodyguards to the king in his absence and in charge of addressing the city council regarding a princess of Amurru.[299] Other similar letters indicate that the queen mother was often kept abreast of political affairs, including,

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[298] Schloen, *House of the Father*, 255.

[299] "The King to the Queen-Mother in the Matter of the Amurrite Princess (RS 34.124) (3.45D)," translated by Dennis Pardee (*COS* 3.4:90–91).

for example, the king's meeting with the Hittite king.[300] There is a great deal of evidence then, that familial relationships structured politics, allowing the role of mother to the king to wield a significant degree of political power.

In another letter sent by the queen, the addressee is referred to as "brother," although the relationships between the two cannot be known precisely.[301] A number of texts addressed to the king of Ugarit refer to him as "master." Thus, for example a man named ʿUzzīnu, possibly the governor of Ugarit, writes to the king, "To the king, my master, say: Message of ʿUzzīnu, your servant. At the feet of my master two times seven times (from) afar I fall."[302]

The language of family also extends to international political relationships, in which the terms "son" or "father" are often used as a form of address. Status is conveyed through the term used, equals might refer to one another as "brothers" while an inferior political party would address a superior as "father" or "master." A letter from an individual by the name of PGN addressed to the king of Ugarit, reads, "Message of PGN, your father: To the king of Ugarit, [my son]. . . . Here with me, it is well. There wi[th] my son, whatever is [w]ell, return word (of that) [to me]."[303] The writer of the letter is unknown, possibly a king of Alashia. Here he uses the father-son language here as an extended political metaphor to address the king of Ugarit. The king of Tyre, when addressing the king of Ugarit, instead uses the language of brother, "To the

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[300] "The King of Ugarit to the Queen-Mother in the Matter of His Meeting with The Hittite Sovereigns (RS 11.972) (3.45E)," translated by Dennis Pardee (*COS* 3.5.92), and "The King of Ugarit to the Queen-Mother in the Matter of His Meeting with the Hittite Sovereign," translated by Dennis Pardee (*COS* 3.6.92–3).

[301] "The Queen to Yarmîhaddu (RS 96.2039) (3.45S)," translated by Dennis Pardee (*COS* 3.19.103).

[302] " ʿUzzīnu to the King (RS 94.2391) (3.45V)," translated by Dennis Pardee (*COS* 3.22:105).

[303] "PGN to the King of Ugarit (RS 18.147) (3.45K)," translated by Dennis Pardee (*COS* 3.11:97).

king of Ugarit, my brother, say: Message of the king of Tyre, your brother."[304] Significant

documentation from the administrative archives at Ugarit demonstrate that both real and

metaphorical family relationships determined political affairs, for both domestic and

international relationships.

Kinship terms were used to express not only political relationships but also of divine-

human interactions at Ugarit. Thus, in the story of Kirta, a heroic tale about a king, there are

repeated references to the fact that the king's father was El, and that Kirta was his son. In Tablet

I of the Kirta epic, the king has just lost his whole family. He dreams that the god El "father of

Men" came to him while he was weeping over his loss. The terms El often uses for Kirta to

address Kirta are "Lad of El," El's servant," and "El's son." In this story, Kirta asks for sons, a

request which El promises to facilitate. El says to him, "Why are you weeping, Kirta? Why does

the Gracious One, the Lad of El, shed tears? Does he want to rule like the Bull, his father, or to

have power like the Father of Men?"[305] The relationship depicted between the god El and the

king Kirta is one of a caring father, concerned for his son. Like the political discourse, then,

religious language also employed familial terms to express relationships.

In Israel as well, familial and household language dominates political discourse. As we

have already seen, the Davidic dynasty is viewed as a divinely established "house," and the

Davidic kings as "sons" to the divine patriarch. In an exchange between King Hiram of Tyre and

Solomon, Hiram addresses Solomon as "my brother" (1 Kings 9:13). The relationship seems to

be one of two kings on equal footing; Hiram had supplied Solomon with materials for the

building of the temple in exchange for which Solomon gave him twenty cities in the Galilee (v.

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[304] "The King of Tyre to the King of Ugarit in the Matter of Storm-Damaged Ships (RS 18.031) (3.45H)," translated by Dennis Pardee (*COS* 3.8:93).

[305] "Kirta," in Michael Coogan, ed. & trans., *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster Press, 1978) 58–74, at 59.

11). Other examples within the biblical text confirm this picture. For example, Deborah, a prophetess and judge in Israel is referred to as a "mother in Israel," a description that is used in the context of her rise to the position of leadership (Judges 5:7b).

In the patrimonial household model, familial terms dominate political discourse, but it is also significant that tribal relationships remain intact even with the introduction of a king. Thus, Stager argues that the monarchy is not a foreign institution that disrupted the older relationships but rather a continuation or extension of the same kin-based organization. In previous models, scholars often relied on evolutionary models, based on the assumption that societies progress through developmental stages in a particular order.[306] One piece of evidence that G. E. Wright used in favor of this evolutionary model was his view that Solomon's provinces undercut traditional tribal groups. Against this view, Stager contends, "That such a rational "bureaucratic" system never existed in ancient Israel and that the premonarchic clan and tribal allocations remained intact are partially demonstrated by the Samaria ostraca, receipts dated to the 8th century B.C.E. found in the Northern capital."[307] The Samaria ostraca are also offered as evidence by Schloen, both of whom use these records of taxes to demonstrate that collection of good such as oil and wine were carried out through the existing tribal and clan structures. The Samaria ostraca offer a significant challenge to the idea that the monarchy undercut traditional kinship structures in ancient Israel. Instead of evolving from a tribal organization into a bureaucracy, the political centralization that came with kingship was conceptualized as the one national household within which the other families of Israel continued to exist.

The work of Schloen and Stager, along with Cross' work on kinship, all clearly indicate that the role of the family and kin structures was in no way diminished during times of political

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[306] Stager, "Patrimonial Kingdom of Solomon," 69.

[307] Ibid.

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centralization. What appears to be missing from these analyses, however, is the role that women may have played within this patrimonial system. Certainly the construction is predicated on the concept of the "house of the father" as operating metaphor and central paradigm. Yet the evidence from Ugarit is unequivocal about the role that at least one royal woman, the queen mother, played in negotiations and political life. In the case of Israel, the situation is more complex because we have narrative accounts of women, not administrative documents. Regardless, as Elna Solvang has demonstrated, whatever can be said for historical women, the narrative representation of royal women in the bible indicates that they participated in political affairs.[308] Bathsheba, for example, played a critical role along with Nathan in making sure that David chose her Solomon to succeed him on the throne.

Implications of Patrimonialism on the Persian Period

In thinking about what implications Schloen, Stager, and Cross have for the Persian Period, we must proceed with great caution. On the one hand, it would certainly be problematic to apply loosely dynamics that were used to describe particular aspects of Bronze Age Ugarit and ancient Israel to fit any time and place in the ancient world. Schloen does suggest, however, PHM is not a rigid system but is flexible and can manifest itself differently as long as certain conditions have been met. Thus the model, and the ordering symbols that accompanied it, were exceptionally durable and flexible, continuing to be used "throughout the Near East in the pre-Hellenistic period."[309]

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[308] Elna Solvang, *A Woman's Place is in the House: Royal Women of Judah and Their Involvement in the House of David* (Old Testament Studies; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).

[309] Schloen, *House of the Father*, 255.

Even with the durability of the language, the Persian context did certainly bring with it a variety of changes. Stager and Schloen both stress that the analysis of a particular society must focus on the specifics of the culture, and cannot merely rely on application of general anthropological principles, a model built on Cross' understanding of typological change.[310] Thus, Stager states, "Archaeology's search is not for the repetition of endless cycles of culture. There are recurrent patterns to be sure, but we can test where we are in the flow of history rather easily."[311] We cannot simply apply data from Ugarit to a later period and presume that the same dynamics will apply. The relevant data that are useful for our analysis of Esther are the ways in which the a priori assumption that centralized government brought with it a bifurcation between public and private life in a way that negatively correlated to women's involvement is an assumption that has now become suspect. Beyond this, we might suggest several reasons why the relationship between kinship and political authority may be relevant for our study on the book of Esther.

The Persian Empire deliberately employed and tried to emphasize continuities with earlier empires, unlike the Babylonians who deliberately attempted to show a break in tradition with the Assyrians. Fulton makes this point clearly in her article, stating, "under the Persians, the resurgence of Assyrian titles combined with early Elamite titles show the desire of the royalty to connect themselves to the earlier Mesopotamian rulers, in particular the Assyrians."[312] In order to establish legitimacy, Persian kings drew on Mesopotamian themes.[313] Thus, in the Cyrus

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[310] Frank M. Cross, "Alphabets and Pots: Reflections on Typological Method in the Dating of Artifacts," in *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 233–246.

[311] Stager, "Toward the Future," 746.

[312] Deidre N. Fulton, "Priests and Kings," 227.

[313] Ibid.

cylinder, for example, Cyrus employs traditional language, describing himself as "king of the world, great king, might king, king of Babylons, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters (of the world)."[314] In addition to stressing continuities with earlier empires, Persian kings also emphasized their legitimacy by describing their own family line. Cyrus gives his genealogy in the Cyrus Cylinder by describing himself as "son of Cambyses, great king, king of Anshan, grandson of Cyrus, great king, king of Anshan, great-grandson of Teispes, great king, king of Anshan, eternal seed of kinship."[315]

There are specific aspects of Persian society beyond just a general attempt to replicate ancient Near Eastern traditions that indicate the role of familial relationships in political life. According the report of Herodotus, Persian society was a tribal society. He describes the culture using Greek terminology for kinship, but his descriptions can be correlated to native Persian vocabulary. Briant describes the Persian tribal structure as follows:

> The basic level of organization is the patrilineal family (old Persian *māna*); a group of families constitute a clan (Old Persian *viΘ*); the clans are grouped in to a tribe (*zantu*). The tribe is simultaneously a genaological reality and a spatial reality: Maraphii and Pasargadae are both ethnonyms and toponyms. Each tribe and clan had a territory of its own, the former being led by a tribal chieftan (*zantupati*). This was the situation that was to obtain until the very end of the Achaemenid period."[316]

Thus, tribal relationships were a significant factor shaping Persian life throughout the Achaemenid period. Like in the cases that we have seen before, the consolidation of power does not obliterate tribal loyalties but rather incorporates them into the structure.

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[314] "The Cyrus Cylinder," in *The Persian Empire* (trans. & ed. Maria Brosius) 11.

[315] Ibid.

[316] Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (trans. Peter T. Daniels; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002) 18.

For the king, it was important to emphasize the continuity with the previous ruling family but these terms could be extended beyond natural family when necessary. Brosius describes the way in which Cyrus brought Astyages, the Median king, and his daughter Amytis to live at his palace after having defeated them. According to Ctesias, Astyages was viewed as a father and Amysits as a mother. Brosius describes it thus,

> Although an awareness of biological descent of royal offspring existed and the significance of the natural mother was recognized, we observe a remarkable extension of parental terms in Greek and Near Eastern sources. In the context of the 'right to rule' it was references to the heir's parents that expressed the heritage of political power and legitimacy of the succeeding king's right to rule. . . . It appears that it was politically expedient to express the relationship between ruler/son and predecessor/parents in a positive way, and if a direct family line was missing, terms expressing a familial relationship took on an extended meaning.[317]

It appears, then, that in the Persian royal court, family language continued to dominate political discourse. One way that this continued to be expressed was in establishing the king's legitimate right to rule through employing kinship terms that emphasized continuity between one ruler and the next.

The royal family established its legitimacy through connecting itself to previous ruler. In addition, the Persian aristocratic families operated in a parallel fashion to that of the royal family, including the fact that each household had a steward,[318] heads of households practiced polygamy,[319] and exercised authority in a similar fashion to the Persian king.[320] Briant describes the aristocratic households thus, "The aristocratic houses were directed and organized in a way absolutely identical to the rules that governed protocol in the royal house. . . .In sum, Persian

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[317] Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 21–22.

[318] Ibid., 335.

[319] Ibid., 336.

[320] Ibid.

society functioned according to a hierarchy that was at once highly diversified and extremely constrained."[321] Important Persian heads of household drew on tribal structures as a means of attaining political, social, and economic power within the empire. Their status within kin groups seems to have, at least to a certain extent, served as a delimiting factor in royal authority.[322]

The picture that emerges for the Persian empire is certainly a distinct case from that of Ugarit and Israel. The data indicates, however, that the role of tribal relationships and family dynamics was important not only in the royal household but in those of the aristocrats as well. Although there is less evidence about how this correlates to non-aristocratic families, there is little reason to suppose in that family structures were disrupted in a way that would limit women exclusively to a domestic sphere.

Furthermore, the evidence we have seen from our study of the tradition of counseling women in chapter 3 confirms this picture. Kinship continued, even during the monarchy and periods of greater centralization of power, to provide women access to kings. The access to the throne, born out of familial structures, allowed women to serve as counselors and advisors, and, at times, very influential. Although the story of Esther is not about the period of the monarchy, it does embody a number of earlier biblical narrative traditions, within which the dichotomous categories of public and private cannot be substantiated.

The language in the book of Esther also emphasizes the importance of family relationships. The genealogy given for Mordecai is very much like that used of King Saul, "Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite" (Esth 2:5; compare to 1 Sam 9:1; 2 Sam 16:5–18). This connection is especially interesting in light of description of Haman as the "son of Hammedatha the Agagite"

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[321] Ibid., 335–6.

[322] Ibid., 336.

(Esth 3:1) because of the conflict between King Saul and Agag, the Amalekite king (1 Sam 15:8). Here, two lineages are invoked in the narrative in a way that suggests an enduring conflict between two family lines. In the past, Saul had defeated Agag but failed to destroy the Amalekites entirely as God had commanded, leading to his downfall. The text does not indicate that Mordecai was a direct descendant of Saul, but rather is used "to highlight the significance of Mordecai and Esther's deeds in the larger history of redemption."[323] But the importance of family lines, one a descendant of the tribe of Benjamin, the other a descendant of Agag, continues the age-old conflict as "Mordecai rises on the very point on which Saul fell."[324]

In the Septuagint version of Esther, there is an additional interesting detail in the language used of the Haman's role. Addition B contains the letter with the edict concerning the annihilation of the Jews. It states, "Therefore we have decreed that those indicated to you in the letters written by Haman, who is in charge of the affairs and is our second father, shall all— wives and children included—be utterly destroyed by the sword of their enemies" (13:6). The description of Haman as a second father indicates that familial metaphors may have continued as a part of political discourse, or at least survived as a metaphor within narrative texts for political roles.

Conclusion

In *Life in Biblical Israel*, Stager and King describe the nature of social relationships in ancient Israel as determined by specific context. They write, "As all of the social terms are

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[323] Levenson, *Esther*, 57.

[324] Ibid.

contextual, these traditional definitions are inadequate. The terms are not rigid but fluid."[325]

Previously, they had described one example of the way a term might be fluid, depending on the

circumstances. Thus, the "term *'ebed* can refer to anyone from a slave to a high government

official."[326] This description about the fluidity of terms is especially important and parallels the

evidence about women's status and role. What King and Stager describe is the need for more

concrete information in order to make a judgment about status. Nearly nothing is known about

someone who is described with the *'ebed* without more specific details. In similar fashion, one

cannot presume categorically anything about a particular woman's status without finding out

what other social factors may contribute to her status. Carol Meyers described the general status

of women under the monarchy as restricted, but admitted that queens did have more power.

Likewise, very little can be known about any woman's status without knowing exactly such

details as whether or not she was married, to whom she was married, who her family was, what

tribe she was a part of, where she lived, if she had children, and a great number of other factors.

From what we have seen then, a negative correlation between centralized government

and women's authority is a very limited way in which to assess the potential for women's access

to political power. Most discussions regarding women's authority have focused on the way in

which any status is largely derived from activities and roles within the home, and thus they are

largely confined to the domestic sphere. Yet the evidence above suggests that this both men and

women gained authority through the familial relationships, during times of centralized authority

and times of relative political instability. Kinship, broadly construed, was the dominant manner

by which individuals acquired, maintained, or lost access to power and it was the central

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[325] Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 39.

[326] Ibid., 5.

metaphor that governed political discourse. Thus, because the royal palace was in fact conceptualized and run like a household, there is no reason to assume that kingship would negatively impact women's status within individual families or at the level of the royal family. My argument does not deny patriarchy but calls for a more sophisticated language with which to evaluate the variety of ways that biblical women are portrayed within narratives. This means that the view of Esther need not be a simple reification of patriarchical values or a defiant protest of gender inequity. When these two extremes are jettisoned, a much more nuanced and careful conversation about women's role within the society can be considered.

Here then, is a precise example of how dichotomous language about women and men in the ancient Near East has translated into dichotomous thinking within scholarship on the same. At the end of chapter two, I raised the possibility that the language of separate spheres is self-replicating, reproducing itself in scholarly discourse. Here within the language of patrimonialism, what is yet absent from these evaluations is a sustained discussion of how the role of family relationships and language on both religious and political discourse impacts women's access to power.[327] This is an area that will need more thorough examination on a wide variety of fronts, particular in relationship to the "native linguistic expressions" that are used. There are not as many obvious expressions within the literature of Israel but there certainly are some possibilities, among which might be "mother in Israel," the metaphor of wisdom as a woman; Israel as a wife; the mother of the king; among others. The work of Christl Maier, for example, analyzes the familial terms mother and daughter in relationship to Zion and considers

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[327] Scholars have certainly focused on questions of gender in relationship to a wide variety of regions of the ANE, including Ugarit and Israel. This particular patrimonial model, and the role of kinship and familial metaphors in relationship to women's lives, however, represents an area that could yield interesting insights.

the implications this has on understandings of the space and the sacred.[328] Thus, there are a variety of possibilities for contemplating the ways in which female familial roles might be explored in relationship to political dynamics and metaphors. In addition, the scope of the study could be broadened, and might include, for example, the familial language used by *naditu* women during the Old Babylonian Period in describing their relationship to the goddess. In the scope of the current work, we shall turn to the specific context of the book of Esther as a test case for how consideration of kinship might impact Persian royal women, including both as represented narratively in the book of Esther and in the context of Greek and Persian sources.

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[328] Christl Maier, *Daughter Zion, Mother Zion: Gender, Space, and the Sacred in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

Chapter 5: Esther and Representations of Persian Royal Women

We cannot underestimate the implications of the actions of royal and noble wives could take. Their actions can be observed in the Fortification texts. Royal women enjoyed a position which allowed them free disposition of the produce of their estates reflected in their ability to give their own orders to officials, to use their own seals and to employ their own bureaucratic staff to execute their affairs. These women also had their own centres of manufacture and their workforce. Babylonian evidence suggested that similar economic activities were untaken by noble women.[329]

With the information provided by our primary source, the Persepolis Fortifications texts, it has become evident that royal women acted within a clearly defined spectrum of activities, being involved in the administration of economic affairs, and engaging the same officials as the king. Their ability to travel, the travel rations, the variety of places they controlled requires us to recognized the organization and structure that lies behind such a division of wealth. . . . On the basis of this evidence it is unthinkable that the women at the Achaemenid court were only an undifferentiated mass leading a life behind palace walls without any function or purpose.[330]

Introduction

In this chapter, we shall examine the book of Esther and its historical context to determine whether the use of the categories of public and private for royal women of the Persian period—both as represented in the biblical narrative and in Greek and Persian sources —is warranted. Specifically, does the picture that we have of the Persian period allow for the use of gendered and dichotomous language regarding public and private spheres? In order to do this, there are several requisite steps. First, we shall turn to the book of Esther and determine the manner in which Esther might be used as a source for historical inquiry. Second, we shall look at the narrative descriptions in Esther in relationship to three categories central to our primary question: 1) the relationship between gender and space; 2) the royal counsel; and 3) the status of

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[329] Maria Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia (559–331 BC)* (Oxford Classical Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 199–200.

[330] Ibid., 200.

royal women. Third, we shall examine sources, both Greek and Persian, about royal women to

evaluate how this picture correlates to what is portrayed in Esther.

Esther as a Source for History

On the surface, the book of Esther reads as if it is a straightforward, chronological record

of events that happened to a community of Jews in Susa during the period of Persian rule,

opening the story with the words, "This happened in the days of Ahasuerus, the same Ahasuerus

who ruled over one hundred twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia," an introduction that

seems to place the narrative in very clear historical time period in the past (Esth 1:1). There are a

variety of stylistic features that recall other historiographic texts in the Bible[331] and a number of

details that demonstrate some knowledge of Persian life,[332] including the incorporation of several

Persian words.[333] Yet there are significant problems with reading the book as history, not the

least of which is the fact that a woman named Esther is nowhere mentioned in the Persian

sources nor are any of the events described in the book.[334]

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[331] For commentary on this, see for example, Lewis Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Book of Esther* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908) 64; and Carey Moore, *Esther: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (Anchor Bible; New York: Doubleday, 1971) 3.

[332] See Paton, *Book of Esther*, 64–65, who cites details in the narrative that fit the overall portrait of the Persian Empire, including customs about banqueting and the use of couriers to deliver messages. He concludes, however, that all that these details prove is that "the author had some knowledge of Persia and the Persian life which he used to give local colour" (65).

[333] Henry S. Gehman, "Notes on the Persian Words in the Book of Esther," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 43 (1924) 321–28.

[334] For detailed discussions about the historical problems with Esther, see the following: Paton, *Esther*, 64–77; Moore, *Esther,* xxxiv–xlvi; Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991) 131–139; Jon Levenson, *Esther* (The Old Testament Library; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 23–27; and Adele Berlin, *Esther* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001) xv–xviii.

In addition to problems associated with historical discrepancies, there are many different elements within the story that cannot be corroborated one way or the other but appear to be very improbable. These are likely included as dramatic plot elements, not historical facts, designed to shape the narrative in specific ways. For example, the king's feast that was said to last one hundred and eighty days (Esth 1:1–3). This is followed by a second feast lasting seven more days, a description that seems to be an incredible exaggeration since this means that it lasted for half a year. This detail might likely be intended to paint an impressive image of the Persian Empire, facilitating the plot because it demonstrates that the future adversary of the Jews was imposing.[335] At the same time that it portrays the Persian king as having significant resources, it also at the same time gives the impression that he is decadent, given to great extravagance.[336] This corresponds to the Greek perspective on Persian kings. Briant notes that "fourth-century authors and Alexander's historians were guided by the desire to evoke a sense of wonder in their readers by dwelling on what they considered most characteristic of the Great King's court—its opulence, which they took both as a manifestation of its power and proof of its weakness."[337] The representation of the king in Esther, then, seems to play on the stereotypes of Greek historiographers and exaggerate them for comical effect.

Despite the problems with viewing Esther as historical, Adele Berlin commented about scholarship on Esther, "Very few twentieth-century biblical scholars believed in the historicity of

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[335] See Levenson's comment, "The description of the banquets in this first paragraph is, thus, less historical then hyperbolic. The point is to stress the overwhelming wealth, power, and status of the king of Persia, for these are what the Jews, soon to be condemned to genocide, will have to overcome. Their victory, in short, will go against all odds" (*Esther*, 45).

[336] This portrait is confirmed with other details, such as the king's drunkenness (Esth 1:10) and the sheet number of textual details used to describe the feast, including "couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and colored stones" and the drinks "served in golden goblets" (Esth 1:6–8).

[337] Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander, A History of the Persian Empire* (trans. by Daniels; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002) 255.

the book of Esther, but they certainly expended a lot of effort justifying their position."[338] Paton

concluded that although Esther was not historical, it is a book that "wishes to be taken as

history."[339] For Paton the story needs to have the appearance of having recorded factual events so

that the festival of Purim will have a solid basis. A number of scholars followed Paton's basic

assessment, that Esther does not represent a historical event, but was intended to be read as

such.[340]   .

Judging the historicity of the book, cannot, however, be simply a matter of weighing

certain details that seem to fit the historical period against those they are problematic. Berlin

notes the problem with this perspective:

> But it is not simply a matter of weighing one side's proofs against the other side's, for, when we
> look carefully at the points for and against historicity, it turns out that the historically authentic
> material is the background and setting, while the main characters and the important elements in
> the plot are much farther removed from reality. If this were a modern work, we would call it a
> historical novel, or historical fiction."[341]

Most scholars have come to the conclusion that to whatever extent Esther imitates the style of

history, or even describes a specific historical setting, the plot elements described do not

correspond to actual events that occurred.

Following the work of critical scholars who would advocate reading Esther as a

historically accurate book, some who have taken this argument even further, questioning whether

it was ever intended to be read as history at all. Although Paton argued that it was the historical

nature that lent credibility to the celebration of Purim, a number of other perspectives have

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[338] Adele Berlin, "The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120 (2001) 3.

[339] Paton, *Book of Esther*, 64.

[340] For an example of this position see Moore, *Esther*. He explains this position with the following, "Moreover, the author, who begins his work in the manner typical of biblical histories . . . encourages his readers to confirm the details of this account for themselves by referring them to a well-known historical record. . . .Only a writer acting in good faith would dare extend such an invitation to his reader" (XXXV).

[341] Berlin, *Esther*, xvii.

disputed this claim. Lawrence Wills argues instead that Esther, along with other books from around the same time period, was likely viewed as fictitious. He describes these works as follows, "In the mind of the author and the audience, a fictitious account is not about any situation that really existed or any event that really occurred (even if the characters represent real historical personages)."[342] In other words, a fictitious story is one that "has no referent."[343] The move from viewing Esther as a work that was intended to be read as history to a literary creation raises the question of genre.

Several different viewpoints have been advanced by scholars about how to categorize the book of Esther if it is not to be read as history. One possibility for reading Esther is historical fiction, "a historical novella set within the Persian empire."[344] Esther references a historical figure, Xerxes, but no details about this king in the narrative fit with what we know of the historical figure. Others, including Humphreys, have recognized several thematic issues in common between Esther and other stories about successful courtiers, including the stories of Esther and Daniel. He saw in Esther two types of courtier tales: contest and conflict.[345] Like Humphreys, Wills also views Esther as fitting into a standard tale of court conflict, although he sees this motif as insufficient to explain the complexities of the Esther narrative.[346] Niditch and Doran challenged the view that Esther is a story of courtly conflict, despite the shared set of motifs between the two stories. They suggest that a given literary form must not only display

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[342] Lawrence Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Myth and Poetics; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995) 1–2.

[343] Wills, *Jewish Novel,* 1.

[344] Levenson, *Esther,* 25.

[345] W. Lee Humphreys, "A Lifestyle for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973) 220.

[346] Wills, *Jewish Novel,* 93.

common features, but these elements must also be arranged in a specific order within the stories in question. In adopting folklore types from Finish scholarship, they argue that the stores about Ahiqar, Joseph, and Daniel might be considered together as folktale Type 922, "Clever Acts and Words."[347] In these tales, a younger person of lower status is called before a person of high status to solve a problem that no one else can. The person of lower status is able to solve the problem and is rewarded for having done so."[348] According to the criteria they have established, Esther cannot be considered as belonging to the same genre as the story of Daniel or Joseph from a form critical perspective.

Chapter 1 discussed the work of Talmon, who was one of the first scholars to make connections between the book of Esther and the wisdom tradition, an idea that has been picked up by a number of scholars, including Bruce. Chapter 3 developed this picture further by attempting to connect Esther to traditions of women who offer wise counsel, often to prevent violence. Although Talmon's initial thesis categorizing Esther within the genre of wisdom literature has been questioned, a wide variety of scholars have seen different ways that Esther embodies certain wisdom motifs and language.

Elias Bickerman categorized Esther, along with Jonah, Daniel and Koheleth as one of four strange books of the Bible. He saw in the tale of Esther not one but two plots, reflecting two different original stories told about Mordecai and Esther that had been artfully combined to explain the festival of Purim.[349] For Lawrence Wills, the problem of Esther's strangeness is solved if it is read in context of the literature from the same period, including stories such as the

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[347] Susan Niditch and Robert Doran, "The Success Story of the Wise Courtier: A Formal Approach," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1977) 180.

[348] Ibid.

[349] Elias Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967) 202.

book of Daniel, *Judith*, *Tobit* and *Joseph and Aseneth*. He states that Bickerman appears to

suggest that the four books are strange "because they do not fit comfortably in the biblical

categories of history, prophecy, wisdom, and so on." Wills concludes, however, that neither

Esther nor Daniel seems as odd if it is read as a Jewish novel, a new genre of writing that

developed during the last few centuries B.C.E and the first century C.E.[350] These stories were

"entertaining narrative marked by fanciful and idealized setting, adventurous tone, happy

endings, and important women characters."[351]

Like Wills, Berlin stresses that Esther is best read as literature, not as historiography. She

does recognize that there are elements in Esther that bear common features to historiographic

texts in the Bible, including the book of Kings. However, this style does not indicate that it was

intended to be viewed as history, merely that it was intentionally replicating biblical traditions.

The concern is not to present historically reliable facts, in her view, but rather to connect the

story to earlier stories, "The burden of Diaspora stories is to provide Jewish continuity in the face

of the overwhelming dislocation of the Jewish community. A good way to provide this

continuity is to link the present with the past, and the new literature of the Diaspora with older,

traditional literature."[352] The goal, then, of adopting the style of a history is to intentionally

establish Esther's connection to other biblical narratives.[353]

There is possibly another reason, according to Berlin, for imitating the style of biblical,

and possibly also Greek, historiography. The use of this style lends a certain tone that in the

narrative context of Esther produces a comical effect. Berlin describes the effect, "The archival

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[350] Wills, *Jewish Novel*, 1.

[351] Ibid.

[352] Berlin, *Esther and Ancient Storytelling*, 7.

[353] The relationship between Esther and earlier biblical texts was discussed in the previous chapter.

style, like the verbal style, makes the story sound big and fancy, official and impertinent at the same time-and this is exactly the effect that is required for such a book. All these stylistic features reinforce the sense that the story is a farce. They lend an air of comic burlesque to the description of the Persian court and to all that happens in it." [354] Berlin's emphasis on the comical aspects in the narrative builds on a significant body of work that highlights the humor that is found in Esther.[355] One of the most obviously funny scenes occurs in chapter 6, when Haman is given the task of honoring Mordecai, after having misunderstood the king's question to him. The story's comic elements, however, should not overshadow the serious issues that are raised within the story. The story is concerned with political realities, including the manner in which Jews might succeed in a Gentile context. Levenson notes that "For all its hilarious exaggeration and its gross lack of historical verisimilitude, in its perception of political life, Esther exhibits a sober realism."[356] The realism within the texts reflects a cautious evaluation of what it means to live under foreign rule, offering a model of success for how to work within the system.

From this body of scholarship on Esther, two relevant issues can be gleaned: 1) The narrative elements within the story are not historical, and possibly were never intended to be read as such; and 2) Esther draws on a wide variety of literary genres and conventions, including wisdom traditions, stories of court conflict, and comedy, among others. The problems of reading Esther as a historical text do not preclude the possibility that Esther might be informative about

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[354] Berlin, *Esther*, xxviii.

[355] For discussions of this, see, for example, Bruce W. Jones, "Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther," *Semitics* 6 (1978); Yehuda Radday and Athalya Brenner, eds., *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield, England: Almond, 1990); Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Robert Alter, "Biblical Imperatives and Literary Play," in "*Not in Heaven": Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative* (ed. J. Rosenblatt and J. Sitterson; Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1991) 13–27; and Jon Levenson, *Esther.*

[356] Levenson, *Esther*, 14.

life in Persia, including questions of gender. Already scholars have noticed that the author of Esther is at least familiar with Persian life. Others have also demonstrated connections between Esther and literary tropes that the Greeks employed with regard to Persia. This suggests that the story might be a valuable resource for historical inquiry, provided that it is used with the proper caution. The familiarity with some details about Persian life and as well as the fact that the story employs a wide variety of Greek stereotypes about Persia suggests that Esther may have been written during the Persian period. The element within the story of humor aimed at Persia works especially well in a context of the continued presence of the Persian Empire.

In his 1973 article, "Memorandum on the Approach to Historiographic Texts" Mario Liverani argued for a shift in the way that historians approach texts "not as a 'source of information', but as information in itself."[357] This "Copernican revolution," as he later referred to it, "takes away the subject-matter of the text from the gravitational centre, and puts the political aims of the author in its place."[358] In this way, a text might consciously or unconsciously reveal the world view of its authors and the historical realities with which they struggle.

The tactic Liverani has suggested leads us away from a methodological approach that gleans and compiles facts found in the narrative, trying to tie them to historical figures and events. Instead, Esther might serve to inform about the historical world that produced it by implicitly describing about the material world behind the text. The portrayal of a fictitious world may inadvertently hint at social, political, and material realities that are so ingrained in the worldview of the author that they are not even questioned. We can, with caution, gain insights about the everyday lives of individuals in a particular culture, even if the work itself is intended

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[357] Mario Liverani, "Memorandum on the Approach to Historiographic Texts," *Orientalia* 42 (1973) 179.

[358] Mario Liverani, "Model and Actualization: The Kings of Akkad in the Historical Tradition," *Akkad, The First World Empire: Structure, Ideology, Traditions* (ed. Mario Liverani; Padova: Sargon, 1993) 47.

to be understood as a fabricated narrative. Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg makes this precise claim about the usefulness of Greek historiographic texts on Persian women, stating "Literature can disclose information about the society that created it. Not about chronologies and events, but about values."[359] Similarly, although Esther is not intended to be a historical account, it may reveal things that are of historical interest.

The way the narrative world of Esther is created hints at a set concerns, interests, and experiences that motivate this portrayal. We can examine the text to determine what is emphasized in the narrative and why, but also what is omitted, and to what ends. To rephrase these two questions as they relate to Esther we might state the problem thus: 1) What does the portrayal of Esther as an effective royal counselor indicate about the possibilities for women's role in politics? and; 2) What is at stake in portraying Esther in this way? With this in mind, we shall turn next to the book of Esther to see what the narratives portray about the issues of gender and space, royal counsel, and the queen's power.

Representations of Space and Gender in Esther

The book of Esther offers little insight into the lives of non-royal women, only giving hints about their activities. There is, however, a very detailed description of the physical landscape of the palace grounds, including many details about the location of various actors throughout the story, offering a perspective on palace life for men and women as represented in the narrative. Males and females do, in some instances occupy separate physical spaces. In chapter one, the description of the feast thrown by the king is followed just a few verses later by a note that the queen gave a banquet for the women in the palace (Esth 1:9), thus presumably at

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[359] Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg, "Exit Atossa: Images of Women in Greek Historiography on Persia" (ed. A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt; Detroit, Mich.: Wayne State University, 1983) 20—33, at 30.

least some of the royal women of the palace were not in attendance at the king's feast but were gathered with other women. We are told directly that Vashti was not there because the king had to send for her, a request that she refused. Despite the queen's absence from her husband's party, it was certainly possible that a queen would have (or should have) attended.[360] Both parties took place in the king's palace (Esth 1:5, 9) and the text indicates that the party thrown by the king was for "all the people present in the citadel of Susa, both great and small," and thus would presumably have included women.

According to the descriptions of the palace grounds, the women occupied a house specifically designated for them. The Hebrew phrase בית הנשים translates literally to "women's house" (Esth 2:3, 9, 11, 14), and the only occurrences of the phrase in the Hebrew Bible are found in the second chapter of Esther. According to the story, there may have been two such houses: one that women lived in while preparing to go before the king, under the care of one of the king's eunuchs, Hegai (Esth 2:3), and another where women would remain as a concubine of the king after having been presented before him (Esth 2:14) under the custody of another eunuch, Shaasgaz. The women's house had a courtyard where men were permitted. While Esther was in the house under Hegai's care, Mordecai walked around the courtyard of the house to find out information about her (Esth 2:11). Later on, we are told that Mordecai reported an assassination plot against the king to Esther so that she could warn him. It is not until later in the story when Mordecai put on sackcloth that we are told that an intermediary was necessary for

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[360] Greek sources report that wives of Persian kings would be present during dinner but were sent away if there was a lot of drinking. Plutarch, for example, describes the situation thus, "When the Persian kings take their dinner, the lawful wives (*hai gnēsai gnaikes*) of the Persian kings sit beside them at dinner, and eat with them. But when the kings wish to be merry and get drunk, they send their wives away, and send for their music-girls and concubines (*mousourgoi kai pallakides*). In so far they are right in what they do, because they do not concede any share in their licentiousness and debauchery to their wedded wives (*gametai*)" (Plutarch, *Mor.* 140b as cited in Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 277). Some scholars have seen this as the context within which Vashti refused to come to the party, her refusal indicating that the request itself was a sign of disrespect. The biblical text, however, is not explicit on this point.

communication between Esther and Mordecai. In this case, the reason given is that no one dressed in sackcloth is allowed to enter the king's gate (Esth 4:2) rather than any gender-related division. Mordecai instead walked around in the open square in front of the king's gate, which was where Hatach, Esther's messenger, found him (Esth 4:6).

Although Esther resided in a separate house from the king, the women's house, she had at least some access to the king, although the descriptions of this are a little complicated. On the one hand, we are told that there was a prohibition in Persia against any "man or woman" going before the king without having been summoned (Esth 4:11). Through the inclusion of this dramatic element, the reader cannot overlook Esther's actions as a simple, ordinary act but one that entails great personal danger. The prohibition against approaching the king uninvited explicitly states that access to the king was not organized along gender lines, but applied to everyone. Esther reminded Mordecai that "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death" (Esth 4:11a). Interestingly, however, earlier in the narrative when Esther had information to give to the king of an urgent nature—in that case to preserve his own safety—she was able to communicate the message in time to save the king. The text is vague about how the information was communicated but simply states, "But the matter came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai" (Esth 2:22). Had we not been given an explicit description of the prohibition against approaching the king later on, the most obvious assumption would be that Esther simply had delivered it.

When Mordecai persuaded Esther to approach the king, he did so with the presumption that she had a far greater degree of access than most other citizens. Although there was a

prohibition against anyone approaching the king, Mordecai believed, correctly as it turned out, that Esther's chance of being granting mercy by the king was greater than anyone else's. Mordecai said to her, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Esth 4:14). The implication in his question was that she has a unique opportunity that is born out of her special relationship to the king. While her decision to approach the king is one that does involve personal risk, it is not outside the realm of the possible. It is interesting that in the first chapter Vashti's punishment for refusing the king's request is that she is banished from his presence. His sages advised him to "let a royal order go out so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she" (Esth 1:19). The punishment of Vashti, although ironic, also indicates that a certain amount of privilege was associated with the role of queen, precisely because it gave one the opportunity to be in the king's presence.

The physical descriptions of space in the book of Esther are at times organized along gender lines, including a separate feast for the royal women and a particular house in which they lived. It does not, however, appear that women were secluded. Instead the portrait is more complicated: Esther dines with king and Haman and has discussions with Mordecai; Zeresh and Haman's friends together meet with Haman; and Vashti was asked to attend the king's feast. Thus, separate housing for the royal women does not seem to limit their activities only to private and domestic affairs. Rather both women and men with close ties to the king had opportunities to be in his presence. The palace was a household structured by personal and family relationships, thus eroding a neat distinction between the public and private aspects of royal life.

In Addition B of the Greek version of Esther, there is an additional detail supplied indicating that the Haman's law regarding the impacts both Jewish men and women, as well as

children. The letter of the king regarding the edict to exterminate the Jews, then, is not only against Jewish males. This minor detail is likely intended to convey the brutality of Haman's plan. Yet scholars have noticed connections between this story and that of Exodus and thus, the detail may also reinforce the idea that this is not merely about population control or to prevent a revolt as in Exodus 1 but about total annihilation.[361] Regardless, neither gender is singled out; both will suffer the same fate.

Counsel in the Book of Esther

In the previous chapter we already examined the possibility that the character of Esther may deliberately continue traditions about women who advise royalty, especially to prevent violence and bloodshed. In addition to Esther herself, the story portrays a variety of characters offering and receiving advice. Some of these roles seem to be fixed roles, like that of the king's counselors in chapter 1, while others are ad hoc, but often involve those close friends or family. In the beginning of the story, the king gathers his advisors together to help him to decide what to do about Vashti's disobedience (Esth 1:13). The king is portrayed as one who was genuinely baffled by his wife's refusal to listen and he does not know how to proceed in the situation without advice. He consulted "sages" who serve here as the legal experts in interpreting matters of state law. In the MT, there were seven official who came to counsel the king on this occasion (Esth 1:14). In the Greek, there are instead three governors who offer advice to the king, but in both stories, the king receives advice from men occupying official positions at the court.

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[361] In Exodus, the king pharaoh who arises in Egypt worries about the Israelites becoming too numerous, suggesting, "Come let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land" (Exod 1:11).

Later, the king consulted with Haman after having discovered in his archives that Mordecai saved his life and was never rewarded (Esth 6:6). Haman was one of the king's officials and happened to be in the right place at the right time to play the role of advisor when the situation warranted it, a role that he would have presumably played whenever needed. He had approached the king with his own agenda, having devised a plan to kill Mordecai, just as the king was trying to decide how to honor the very same man. Mistakenly imagining that he himself is to be honored, Haman advised the king on how best to handle the situation, an unfortunate case in which his own advice furthered his feelings of humiliation and shame.

In both cases, there is a great deal of irony involved in the situation. In the first case, the king required sages to help him understand state law when the situation was merely a minor domestic problem with his wife. In the second, Haman approached the king with the intention of plotting Mordecai's fate, when instead he himself was the means by which Mordecai was exalted in a kingly fashion. Both incidents in which a character seeks out advice function to show that character as foolish.

Haman himself also gathers together a group to advise him on how to handle his problems with Mordecai. Those he gathers include both his friends and his wife, Zeresh. They offer advice on how to deal with Mordecai. Once again, Haman's advice seeking demonstrates his own foolishness. He recounts his status, wealth, large family, and his own special relationship both with the king and Esther, but concludes that it all means nothing if Mordecai refuses to bow before him (Esth 5:13), a statement that is ridiculous at best. In this case, Haman's confidants are his wife, Zeresh, and his friends. From the portrayal of the relationship between Haman and Zeresh, the text allows for the possibility that men would consult with their wives for advice on personal or political matters. As we see with the case of Zeresh's advice to Haman, the counsel

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she gives relates to a personal problem but does have consequences on a larger scale. If Esther embodies biblical traditions about women who work to mitigate violence, here Zeresh is Esther's narrative foil, advising her husband to bring about Mordecai's violent death.

Chapter 1 of Esther offers the strongest argument in favor of royal advisors being primarily male for it is only men who are summoned to the king to give advice on a national policy. The story is much more complex, however, when it comes to specific circumstances. Both Esther and Zeresh play a role in advising their husbands regarding political action. This suggests that family relationships as well as political positions gave individuals the opportunity to counsel the king. Because the chance to address the king on political matters was in large part to personal relationships, this status could change at any time. Thus, Haman who at one time served to advise the king as one of his closest officials, is later hanged at the king's command.[362]

The Status of Royal Women in Esther

There are several indications in the story of Esther had significant amount of power in her capacity as queen, particularly in influencing the king. We have already seen that Mordecai twice approached Esther when he had information that he wanted her to convey to the king. Clearly he saw her position as one that gave her access to the throne, even if there were some limits to when and in what manner she might approach him.

Not only Mordecai, but Haman also approached Esther in order use her influence to save him from the king's anger. Haman, one of the king's closest and most trusted officials, clearly viewed Esther, the king's wife, as his best hope for salvation. In an ironic twist, it is precisely when Haman approached the queen to plead for his life that the king returns and takes this as a

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[362] The Joseph story also includes a number of incidents in which the rise and fall in status of a plays a significant role, including not only Joseph but the cupbearer and the baker.

further insult, thus sealing his fate. It is not only the special circumstance in which he has angered the king during which Haman indicated that queen's favor was something to be desired. Earlier in the story, he boasted to his wife and friends that he alone had been selected by the queen to dine with her and the king, taking this gesture as a sign of favor (Esth 5:12). The implication was that Haman's status was advanced if Esther favored him; thus presumably her power and influence with the king was such that her favor on someone could confer a degree of status to that individual.

Thus, we see that different characters turn to Esther because of her access to and influence on the king. There is perhaps even yet another indication of her rank. When the king chooses Esther, he places a crown on her head. The Hebrew verb that is used to describe her status is מלך, a word that means to rule in Hebrew. This is often translated as "he made her queen instead of Vashti," but could possibly be translated a little more forcefully as "caused her to rule" (Esth 2:17). Although certainly Esther does not share equal power with the king, the language used allows for the possibility that Esther's title conferred with it certain powers and privileges associated with her rank, not merely a royal title.

Later in the narrative Esther also becomes a property-holder when she is given Mordecai's estate (Esth 8:1, 7). Although there are two brief references in the text regarding these land holdings, it is likely that this was a property of significant size[363] and her ownership would entitle not only to land but to the goods produced by it. The transfer of Haman's property, formerly one of the king's highest officials, to Esther symbolizes a change in status: Esther's power and influence increases in direct proportion to Haman's loss of it. Just following the description of Haman's death by hanging, the story goes on, "On that day King Ahasuerus gave

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[363] Previously in the narrative Haman had described to Zeresh and his friends "the splendor of his riches," likely an allusion to his household and property.

to queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews; and Mordecai came before the king, for Esther told what he was to her" (Esth 8:3) established clearly a causal relationship between the events. It is Esther who places Mordecai in charge of the household.

Thus, the narrative descriptions of Esther's status paint a more nuanced picture of the role of royal women. Esther initially has very little influence, herself an orphan from humble beginnings, but she continues to gain status and authority throughout the course of the narrative. It is by association with her that Mordecai also gains a great deal of status. Thus, it is difficult to conclude that the narrative upholds a gendered dichotomy in terms of men's and women's roles in which women operate mostly within the realm of the private sphere.

Persian Royal Women in Greek and Persian Sources

The problem of our sources for history of the Persian Period is one that presents interesting challenges. Pierre Briant notes, "One of the remarkable peculiarities of Achaemenid history is that, unlike most conquering peoples, the Persian left no writer testament of their own history, in the *narrative* sense of the word."[364] The Persians did leave written records, including administrative archives and royal inscriptions, but nothing in the way of historiography. For this reason, historians have often relied on Greek accounts of Persia. Use of Greek sources to reconstruct Persia's history is not without challenges, however, because of the ongoing wars and hostility between Persia and Greece, finally ending with Alexander's conquest of Persia in the fourth century. Briant points out the irony that this situation has produced, "one must reconstruct

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[364] Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 5.

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the narrative thread of Achaemenid history from the writings of their subjects and their enemies."[365]

The reliance on Greek sources for Persian history has also had a significant impact on the way in which royal women of the Achaemenid period have been portrayed by scholars. As Maria Brosius demonstrates with respect Persian royal women, the stories Greeks told not only were based on the perceived contrasts between Greek and Persian women, but also were intended to demonstrate the weakness of the Persian king.[366] She describes the portrait Greek historians painted of Persian royal women

> Stories about Persian royal women were often structured to fit a historiographic and narrative pattern, and women were given a specific function within the story. It is very striking that in majority of stories these women appear cruel, violent, and revengeful. They instigate intrigues and are the cause of upheavals and revolts. Royal women such as Atossa, Amestris, and Parysatis are described by Greek historians as powerful queens   who exercised considerable influence over the king.[367]

Likewise, the work of Heleen Sancisi-Weerdenburg reflects similar findings. In her examination of Greek historiographic sources on Persian women, she focuses on the queens and princesses during Xerxes' rule. She argues that "most of the facts about their lives and actions in the Greek sources are not facts at all and that consequently generalizations based on the influence and the role of the women around the king lack any real historical foundation." Like Brosius, she recognizes that one function of the Greek sources in relationship to royal women is not to provide factual accounts about the women but rather the "product partly of a condescending Western attitude towards the Orient, usually regarded as effeminate."[368]

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[365] Ibid, 7.

[366] Maria Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia (559-331 BC)* (Oxford Classical Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

[367] Ibid., 1.

[368] Sancisi-Weerdenburg, "Exit Atossa," 20.

Thus, for example, the Greek sources present a sharp contrast between their view of

Persian kings and the indigenous Persian sources regarding their own royal ideology, a contrast

within which the perception of royal Persian women are central to the Greek perspective. In the

second inscription on Darius' tomb he describes himself as a king who is both just and a good

warrior, bestowed by the Persian god, Ahura Mazda, with "wisdom and courage." The

autobiographical statement describes how both qualities work together:

> This is indeed my courage as far as my body possesses the strength; as a commander I amgood
> commander; immediately the right decision is taken according to my understanding when I meet
> a rebel, and when I meet (someone who is) not a rebel, at this moment, due to my understanding
> and judgment, I know that I am above panic when I see a rebel as well as when I see (someone
> who is) not a rebel.[369]

The inscription continues to describe Darius as both a "good horseman," "a good bowman, both

on foot and on horseback," and a good spearman, both on foot and on horseback."[370] The

inscription, then, describes a king who is an exceptional leader both because he is strong

physically and intellectually, one who does not fear his enemies, but also is able to make wise

judgments.

In contrast to the view of kingship expressed on Darius' tomb inscription, the Greek

perspective of Persian kings indicated that most were weak, with a few notable exceptions. One

reason given for this perspective was the role that women play in raising Persian noble children.

In Plato's *Laws,* the following discussion is held regarding the cause the perceived weaknesses

of Cyrus' sons:

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[369] "Second Inscription from Naqš-e Rustam" in *The Persian Empire from Cyrus II to Artaxerxes I* (trans.
& ed. Maria Brosius; LACTOR 16; London: The London Association of Classical Teachers, 2000) 65.

[370] Ibid., 65–66.

The Athenian:	Very well, I divine that Cyrus, who otherwise no doubt was a very good general and patriotic, was quite unconcerned with the principles of education and paid no attention to household management.
Clinias:	How are we to take a remark like that?
The Athenian:	It is likely that from boyhood onwards he spent his life on campaign and made over his sons to be reared by women. They raised them from infancy, telling them how fortunate and blessed they already were, because they lacked no component of the conditions that made them happy; and because e they forbad anybody to oppose them in anything, on the grounds that they were so happy, and compelled everyone to praise everything that they said or did, they turned them into what they became.
Clinias:	A fine education indeed, to judge from your description!
The Athenian:	Rather say an effeminate education, provided by royal women who had recently become rich, and who brought up the sons in the absence of their menfolk, who were kept busy by wars and endless dangers.[371]

This same text goes on to describe how Darius does not fit this picture of a decadent, weak king, because "Darius was not a royal son, nor was he brought up in luxury." Darius represented a type of anomaly, however, because following his reign, his son Xerxes was also "brought up again on the indulgent royal model of education of the royal house. . . . Thus Xerxes, the product of the same upbringing, repeated the bad deeds of Cambyses."[372] The picture presented is interesting because the role that women play in the court as central figures in educating and raising royal children serves to further undermine the strength of the monarch from the Greek perspective.

Another problem from the perspective of Greek sources contributing to the weakness of the many Persian kings was related to the great number of concubines and wives of the king.[373] It was thought that women such as Atossa had a great deal of influence over the king, a stereotype

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[371] Plato, *Laws* 694c–695c as cited in Brosius, *Persian Empire,* 66–67.

[372] Ibid., 67.

[373] Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 44.

that continued into modern historiography as well. Sancisi-Weerdenburg describes the influence that Greek writers had on certain modern historians, "In this interpretation they could follow closely *some* of their Greek predecessors for whom Persian, barbarian, oriental was equal to feminine. Greek culture was male, oriental culture was female. Greeks were brave, orientals were drowned in luxury, they slept on soft beds, ate dainty spices, and wore jewelry . . . . Whereas Greece was governed by men, all the slave-like subjects of the kings of Persia were ruled either by effeminate kings, or, indirectly, by women."[374]

Due to the limitations and bias of Greek sources in viewing Persian women, Brosius tries to draw a more nuanced picture of Persian women by using Persian sources, including the Fortification texts from Persepolis. She notes that the Greek portrayals of Persian royal women often depict them as cruel, and able to persuade the king to act as they wished.[375] For example, Herodotus reports that Atossa, one of the wives of Darius I, was responsible for inciting the king to go to war against the Greeks. His account, however, is likely a historical invention, naming the queen's wish as the cause for Darius' campaign while ignoring the international political situation from the discussion.[376] Sancisi-Weerdenburg suggests that Greek sources viewed certain events and then interpreted them without a lot of the inside information necessary to make judgments. In many cases, there were complex relationships that contributed to royal women to the way in which royal women might experience a sense of conflicting loyalties.

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[374] Sancisi-Weerdenburg, "Exit Atossa," 27.

[375] Brosius notes, "The wives of Achaemenid kings figure prominently in Greek sources as cruel women filled with desires for revenge. While the information on legal, economic and culture status and activities is scarce, stories of female court intrigue seem to form the main background for writers on later Persian history" (*Women in Ancient Persia*, 105).

[376] Ibid., 107.

When the Greek portrait of Persian royal women is compared with Persian sources, the picture is somewhat different. It is not clear that the king regularly depended on women to make decisions and in some cases they may have had some difficulty gaining access to the king. The woman at the royal court who most likely wielded the greatest amount of power was the mother of the king, who would at times be present at court. There is evidence, however, that the mother of the king, and other women of the court did at times advocate on behalf of their families. At times their role might include passing judgments about punishments but not because they were cruel and vindictive, as indicated in Greek sources. Rather, Brosius argues,

> There were cases in which royal and noble women had a chance to alter the king's sentence once expressed, and it is essential to understand their involvement in the execution of a punishment was not motivated by a desire for revenge and cruelty, but by a dominating wish to act in the best possible way to do justice for a family member.[377]

In other instances, women of the royal court might intercede with king on behalf of a family member. Thus, she concludes that the power and influence ascribed to Persian women in Greek sources was often greatly exaggerated, in part because Persian women did not fit within Greek gendered expectations but also because it served to emasculate the Persian king. But even if the Greek sources have exaggerated the power of Persian royal women, this does not mean that could not act when needed. She concludes, "The most senior women in royal and noble families acted within given rules; their motives for acting always lay in their concern for the family . . . This survey of the sources does not support the conclusion that women had an ever-increasing influence at the Persian court nor does it recognize any signs which support claims that the court became more decadent."[378]

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[377] Brosius, *Women in Ancient Persia*, 121.

[378] Ibid., 122.

The work of Brosius and Sancisi-Weerdenburg is striking when read against with the story of Esther in mind. The story of Vashti's refusal to answer the king's summons seems to embody a number of the Greek stereotypes. As in Greek tales about Persians, the story does not function only to highlight the willfulness of Persian royal women; it also underscores the impotence and extravagance of the Persian throne. It is in the midst of feasting, ("on the seventh day") when the king was drunk on wine (Esth 1:10), that he commanded his seven eunuchs to bring Vashti before him to show off her beauty. Vashti refuses, throwing the king into a rage, causing him to turn immediately to the seven advisors for counsel on how to proceed. The fear that they explicitly name is that all women in the Persian Empire will begin to look with contempt on their husbands (vv. 17–18). As Berlin notes about the similarities between Greek historiography and the book of Esther, the similarities are shared literary conventions. Berlin argues then, that this does not demonstrate anything about the historical lives of women but rather that "Esther and the Greek works share a set of literary motifs and stereotypes relating to Persian court life."[379]

Many translations on the book of Esther have translated the Hebrew phrase, "women's house," to "harem" in English. There is some evidence that royal women, including concubines, likely would have had private quarters. Herodotus also makes references to men's apartments (*andreōn*) that were separate from those of royal women.[380] We must only use the term harem with caution, however, because evidence regarding the activities of most royal women indicates that they were not confined to their houses. Rather, a number of women traveled throughout the empire. There are a number of documents from the Fortification texts recording the rations

[379] Berlin, *Esther*, xxviii.

[380] Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 285.

provided for various royal women on their travels. One document from this collection states, "Radušnamuya received as rations 176 quarts of wine supplied by Ušaya. For a period of 4 days. She carried a sealed document of the king. Year 23, month 12."[381] In addition to being able to travel, royal women were also given an education that likely included a physical education component.[382] Briant concludes then, that "it is tempting to conclude that aristocratic girls were not prepared for a reclusive life at all, even though they had special apartments in the royal palace or their husband's house. Although the term *harem* must be retained for convenience, the usual meaning cannot be applied to any women other than royal concubines."[383]

The evidence that we do have regarding Persian royal women does indicate that they were economic players, holding property that produced goods over which they had control. In several Persian letters there is a description of the large amount of rations given to a *dukšiš,* "princess."[384] In the nineteenth year of Darius' reign, we have two letters that give orders from Darius to provide the woman Artysotone, daughter of Cyrus II and the wife of Darius I, with provisions of "2000 quarts of wine"[385] and "100 sheep"[386] from Darius' own estate. Brosius suggests that the large quantity may indicate that they were to be used for a feast. In any case, the large amount of provisions demonstrates the queen was well provided for and had control over significant resources.

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[381] PF 684 as cited in Brosius, *Persian Empire,* 84.

[382] Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander,* 285.

[383] Ibid.

[384] Brosius described the term *dukšiš*, as "a general term of reference for female members of the royal family, including the king's wives, sisters, and daughters." (Brosius, *Persian Empire,* 82).

[385] "Documents with a female royal title," as cited in Brosius, *Persian Empire,* 82 (document 159).

[386] Ibid., (document 160).

Several primary documents from the Persian period also indicate that royal women not only could hold property but also were free to do as they wished with the goods from that estate. For example, in a letter from Artystone, she states, "100 quarts of wine are to be issued to the man called Ankama from my estate at Mirandu."[387] The letters sent by royal women were stamped with the woman's personal seal. Greek historiographers often commented on royal women's status as landholders because the situation was very different for most Greek women. Socrates, for example, describes what he has heard about Persia as follows:

> For I myself was once told by a trustworthy person who had been up to their court, that he has traversed a very large and fine tract of land, nearly a day's journey, which the inhabitants called the girdle of the king's wife, and another which was similarly called her veil; and many fine and fertile regions reserved for the adornment of the consort; and each of these regions was named after some part of her apparel."[388]

In this passage, Socrates discusses the land own by Amestris, wife of Xerxes, with Alcibiades. According to Brosius, "From a Greek perspective, the fact that Persian noble women could own land was extraordinary, and references are made frequently in Greek texts to this phenomenon. It reflected an exceptional status enjoyed by Persian women in comparison to Greek women, who could not own land."[389]

Thus, the documents from Persia indicating that women could hold property and travel, as well the fact that they received an education do not support the idea of a gendered dichotomy in which women were relegated to a private sphere, and confined to domestic activities. This corresponds to the picture that was present in the book of Esther as well: Men and women were sometimes in separate physical living spaces but this did not preclude women from having a public presence.

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[387] "Estates of Royal Women," in *Persian Empire,* 83 (PF 733).

[388] Plato, Alicibiades 1 123bc in *Persian Empire,* 84.

[389] Brosius, *Persian Empire,* 84.

In examining the book of Esther, it is apparent that she is perceived by other characters in the narrative as having a great deal of influence born out of her marriage to the king. Likewise, Brosius describes the relative status of women at the court as reflective of their closeness to the king.[390] The notion that Persian royalty had a degree of status based on their marriage relationships can be found in Persian sources relating to both men and women who gain status through marriage. For example, in several Greek legends about the rise of Cyrus II, there is mention of political marriages. In both Herodotus and Xenophon, Cyrus II was the son of the Persian Cambyses and the Median king Astyages' daughter, Mandane. Justin describes how Cyrus was supposed to be killed but instead Harpagus decided instead to give him over to the herdsman of the king's cattle to be exposed. His wife insisted that he retrieve the child, having just had a child herself. The boy was found being nursed by a wolf, a story that is also found in Herodotus. Nicolaus of Damascus also tells a story of Cyrus' humble beginnings (calling him a Mardian, the lowest of the tribes of Persia). In his story, Cyrus makes himself a slave to the royal servant in charge of caring for the royal estate. His good work was rewarded, for which reason he was taken inside to work and thus became the cupbearer of the king. According to Ctesias, Cyrus was not related to Astyages, the Median king but rather married his daughter, Amytis.[391]

The stories about Cyrus's rise to power include both miraculous birth narratives and serve demonstrate the way in which a person of low status might rise to power through a politically advantageous marriage—although the legends vary as to whether it was Cyrus' father or Cyrus himself who married a Median princess and daughter of Astyages. The idea of foreigner such as Esther rising to the status of queen seems like a fantastical element of the narrative;

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[390] Ibid., 13.

[391] Brosius, *The Persian Empire*, 6–8.

much like the Greek legends about Cyrus, Esther also is represented as a person of low status, herself an orphan, who through marriage to king rose to a position of great prominence.

Political marriages were an important part of Persian life. Marriages serve to solidify power and might serve to promote someone's status. Sancisi-Weerdenburg describes it thus, "The centralised kingship was by no means safe and secure. Marriages were used by kings, as well as tribal chiefs, to strengthen their relative positions."[392] Yet, there was a degree of instability that could also be introduced in such cases, "Pressure on women from both sides in this uneasy situation must have been very strong, and the outcome of the this conflict of loyalties never entirely predictable." Because the king's wives and concubines were often themselves noblewomen and thus they would at times feel the conflicting loyalties between two families, that of their husband and the family into which they were born.

Conclusion

The book of Esther has a unique perspective on the Persian Empire from a historiographic perspective. As we have noticed above, the story of Esther demonstrates knowledge of Persian life and customs. The story does replicate some common literary tropes from both biblical and Greek literature, both of which affect the story of Esther. There are numerous elements in the story that hint that Greek stereotypes about Persia abound in this work. Esther 1 describes, in a comical fashion, the incredible luxury and decadence of the king's court. In the same chapter, we encounter Vashti, a queen who refused to obey her husband's command. Both images placed alongside one another, a decadent king and a willful queen are just two examples among many that work together work together to portray an emasculated Persian king in keeping with the Greek perspective. The multitude of feasts, most notably those that occupy

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[392] Sancisi-Weerdenburg, "Exit Atossa," 31.

the better half of a year in chapter 1, also contribute to a general portrait of the Persian Empire as decadent, a portrait that is consonant with Greek depictions of Persia. As Briant notes, "It is clear that it was the king's bed and the king's table that most attracted Greeks."[393]

The motifs in common with Greek historiography may well amount to what several scholars have seen as a parody on Persian masculinity. Fox, for example, says "The satire is not, however, directed at male dominance in and of itself, but at male dominance as manifested in the Persian court, and, by extension, throughout the gentile realm."[394] Yet the portrayal of Esther's character is more nuanced than the royal women stereotypes of Greek legend. Esther's initial reluctance to go before the king to persuade him to save her people serves an important function in her portrayal. It serves to highlight the similarities between Esther and other biblical heroes, mostly especially the figure of Moses. She, like Moses, must answer a call and advocate for her people against a threatening foreign power.[395] This connection was seen already by Gerleman in his commentary on Esther.[396] Others have picked up on various aspects of this theme. Clines, for example, states, "The Esther tale has in this primary respect an affinity with the Exodus story, in which the royal connections between the hero, Moses, are not dramatized as a conflict between the pharaoh and a princeling but between a Gentile king and a Moses as representative of the Jewish people."[397]

The connection between the book of Esther and the Exodus is further emphasized in the Greek Additions to Esther. In Esther's prayer, she describes the situation of the Jewish people,

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[393] Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander,* 255.

[394] Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 209.

[395] Levenson, *Esther*, 80.

[396] Gillis Gerleman, *Studien zu Esther. Stoff. Struktur. Stil. Sinn* (Biblische Studien 48; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1966).

[397] Clines, *Esther Scroll,* 144.

"And now they are not satisfied that we are in bitter slavery," (14:8) a description that evokes the slavery in Egypt. The important and deliberate literary continuities between Esther and a wide variety of biblical literature underscore a very different concern than merely satirizing Persians as emasculated and decadent, instead depicting Esther as one who must liberate her people from an even more severe threat than mere slavery. The notion that the danger facing the Jews in Susa is greater than what had previously been experienced in Egypt is also implied in Esther's speech to the king. She says, "For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace" (Esth 7:4). The implication is that mere slavery is not a great enough threat with which to have bothered the king, only complete destruction is. There is a certain amount of persuasive rhetoric within Esther's speech, which was intended to move the king to action. Yet there is also an implication that the stakes are exceptionally high, necessitating action.

The narrative resonance with the Exodus motif underscores that Esther is not the willful or vengeful Persian women who are so often described in Greek historiographic texts. She is instead a woman who acts only when impelled to do so when the welfare of her own family and people is at stake. The narrative concerning Esther suggests strongly the inadequacy of the use of dichotomous terms of public and private for describing gender. The fact that these terms are simplistic and do not well describe the situation of Esther does not, however, imply complete gender equality. Rather, it suggests more complexity in the ways in which men and women might, and often did, act and interact. Power was a fluid, complex dynamic that people accessed through a variety of complex relationships and could shift during the course of one's lifetime as status and relationships changed. In the narrative world of Esther, this happens when a foreigner and an orphan girl finds favor at court and marries the king. Esther's reliance on earlier

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traditions, both biblical and Near Eastern, suggest that these terms not only fail to work for

Esther but for the ancient Near Eastern context more broadly construed.[398]

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[398] The extent to which this language works in a variety of other contexts throughout the ancient Near East needs to be taken up in a more explicit way in another work but the evidence presented here strongly suggests problems with this discourse.

Conclusion

"Therefore these days are called Purim, from the word Pur. Thus because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, the Jews established and accepted as a custom for themselves and their descendants and all who joined them, that without fail they would continue to observe these two days every year, as it was written at the time appointed. These days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every family, province, and city; and these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

Queen Esther daughter of Abihail, along with the Jew Mordecai, gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. Letters were sent wishing peace and security to all Jews, to the one hundred twenty-seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus and giving orders that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as the Jew Mordecai and Queen Esther had enjoined on the Jews, just as they had laid down for themselves and for their descendants regulations concerning their fast and their lamentations. The command of Queen Esther fixed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing" (Esth 9:26–32).

The primary question that this dissertation has sought to answer is, "How might we characterize the narrative depiction of Esther's political involvement in the affairs of the Persian state?" Most scholars have tried to answer that question in the following way: Does Esther represent an aberration from gender norms or an embodiment of male patriarchal values? The project undertaken here has been to challenge the way in which the entire question has been framed because underlying it is a set of problematic assumptions. The results of the question framed thus can only lead to more interpretive difficulties, either denying the commonalities between Esther and other biblical women, or ignoring the dynamics at play when the very same descriptions are used of men. In addition, the reliance on these two categories has provided a kind of self-perpetuating logic so that scholarship about men and women and their respective roles tends to replicate two separate and divided spheres within academic discourse.

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Chapter 1 identified two divergent tendencies, to view Esther as either typical or exceptional, both of which are problematic. Within the body of scholarship on Esther, there were also a number of insights that suggest a more nuanced approach to evaluating her character. Chapter 2 identified the underlying problems of the dichotomous assessments of her in that they rely on an assumption of gendered and separate spheres for men and women, a construct that suffers from a number of theoretical issues, including the fact that these categories do not have an obvious or fixed meaning, can change over time, and are anachronistic to ancient societies. Chapter 3 suggested that Esther is portrayed as a political player, a role that has strong biblical precedents, especially in the role of counselors who prevent violence. This portrayal connects Esther to a wide variety of biblical literature, suggesting that she is not the "exceptional" figure that some have claimed but deeply embedded within a tradition. Chapter 4 demonstrates the role that familial and kinship relationships and metaphors play in structuring political life, a fact that opens up the possibility for women to participate in the political arena, depending on their own family dynamics. For both women and men, the family relationships that they had impacted their roles and responsibilities, as well as the potential for access to political power. Chapter 5 compares portrayals of Esther in the narrative to Greek historiography on Persia and indigenous Persian sources, none of which indicate any reason to assume that women were categorically confined to a private sphere. While the story of Esther does employ a number of stereotypical representations of Persians also found in Greek source, the connections to biblical traditions as well suggest that the narrative is not merely a satire on Persia.

Esther's portrayal as a woman who is involved in the politics of negotiation is not unique among biblical accounts of women, nor is it extraordinary for women of the ancient Near East, including Persia, to act in such a capacity. Esther clearly fits into a larger tradition and also

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seems to fit with a picture of other Persian royal women who at times exercise influence over the Persian king. At the same time, there are textual clues that we are not to simply accept Esther's actions as routine or ordinary actions but rather as heroic acts brought on by a set of extreme circumstances. She goes before the king, according to the text, only at great personal danger both because the king did not summon her and because of her status as a Jew, because the very life of her people is at stake. This is a deliberate and careful portrayal, likely intended to differentiate Esther from other portrayals by Greek authors of manipulative Persian women. Esther, for all of her persuasive powers and influence with the king, is not the violent or vengeful woman of Greek historiographic texts.

Esther may evoke images of Persian women, and have a great deal in common with the portrayal of Persia through the lens of Greek historiography, especially as told through Greek legend, which speaks of women who are powerful and persuasive forces. Yet the story is very explicit that Esther is not acting out of spite or vindictive motives. Rather, this is a woman impelled to act according to [divine] initiative. It is only because the situation is so severe, and the threat so extreme, that she interferes in matters of state to risk her own life. But even if pleading with the king for her people is not an ordinary, everyday event, even for the queen, it is possible because of the very particular conditions that have given her special access to the king and the divine providence that has helped her find favor in his eyes. What is interesting about the portrayal of Esther's role in pleading with the king on her people's behalf is that this picture is very similar to that which is indicated in the Persian sources about royal women who act only under duress to save their families.

The idea that I have suggested in this work is that employing categories of public and private to describe women's lives, and in particular the book of Esther, is misleading and

problematic because the language is misleading and anachronistic. In the case of Esther, it has produced two exactly opposite evaluations of her in scholarship, depending on which aspects scholars focus on in relationship to her. Several objections might be raised to this thesis.

There are several reasons why the language of public and private might have seemed to provide a useful resource. That is to say, it is not without textual warrant that scholars have thought this language might be easily applicable to biblical women and offer tools for helping to explain their lives. As early as the Yahwist story in the garden, the text indicates that there are distinctions made between men and women. For their disobedience, the man and woman receive separate consequences; the woman will have pain giving birth and the man have to labor hard to make the land produce (Gen 3:16–19). The punishment received by the woman here relates to reproduction, and thus one might argue, the domestic sphere; while the punishment for the man relates to his role in production, which might suggest the public arena.

In addition to the distinctions between men and women within the creation stories, a great number of biblical texts seem to have been written by and for men, some of which are explicit that men are the intended audience. For example, the book of Proverbs is written as advice to a son (i.e., Prov 1:8, among others). Many of the laws in the Bible are addressed directly to men. In the version of the Decalogue found in Exodus 20, one of the prohibitions is against coveting another man's wife, a hint that the law is addressing a male only audience (v. 17). The fact that If texts and laws were not written by or addressed to women could appear to provide evidence that women were not often found either in public spaces or public roles.

While the laws in the Bible seem to address men, there are also a number of laws within various legal codes providing separate laws for men and women. The law of the Hebrew slave in the Covenant Code, for example, allows for a different provision for male slaves than for female

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slaves (Exod 21:1–11). Male slaves are to be manumitted in the seventh year; female slaves, on the other hand, "shall not go out as the male slaves do" (v. 7). This text read together with those above provide a body of evidence that suggests that men and women were viewed differently in the eyes of the law, and that men had a greater role in public life. In addition, there are some indications that there were public spaces from which women were prohibited. Thomas Staubli's examines archaeological and textual evidence from the ancient Near East and determines that although there are no specifically male spaces within domestic residences, there were a number of public spaces that were the exclusive domain of men, including the army, the palace gate, and the temple, among others.[399] This was true not only of Israel but through much of the Near East. He suggests that the seclusion of royal women at locations such as Mari and Tel Amarna offer further evidence to corroborate this. One might suggest, then, on the basis of such evidence that there were indeed separate domains for men and women.

The fact that women were not often found in certain spaces, however, does not mean that there were categorically restricted from all public arenas either in terms of physical space or terms of the roles that they filled. In fact, there is a great deal of evidence to the contrary. For example, women are frequently depicted in both visual and textual representations as having a significant public presence as mourners. Silvia Schroer argues that women's public roles were especially connected to events at the beginning and end of life, including both birth and death, especially the mourning processes.[400] Mourning was not a role exclusive to women, but was a public activity in which they were engaged. Jeremiah 9, for example, describes a practice of

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[399] Thomas Staubli, "Geschlechtertrennung und Männersphären im Alten Israel: Archäologische und exegetische Beobachtungen zu einem vernachlässigten Thema," *Bibel und Kirche* 63 (2008) 166–174.

[400] Silvia Schroer, "Trauerriten und Totenklage im Alten Israel: Frauenmacht und Machtkonflikte," in *Tod und Jenseits* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 299–321. Her argument still seems to view women's public role as relatively exceptional in that it was associated with certain beginning and end of life events, but she does recognize a significant public female presence in certain kinds of activities.

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bringing in professionally trained women to mourn, "Consider, and call for the mourning women to come; send for these skilled women to come; let them quickly raise a dirge over us, so that our eyes may run with tears" (vv 17–18). Later, the women are addressed and encouraged to pass on their professional knowledge to their daughters (v. 20).

Carol Meyers highlights evidence pertaining to women's involvement in musical performance. Visual evidence in the form of female terracotta figurines playing hand drums as well as textual evidence from biblical narrative indicates that women played a central role in this practice. The practice, as Meyers describes, has a public aspect,

> Implicit in the biblical passages mentioning women drummers, dancers, and singers are two salient features of the performance act. First, the Israelites expected that, following a military victory, the returning forces would be met by women who had the musical skills to regale them in a specific way. Second, the ensuing performance was held in public before the leaders of Israel— Moses, Jepthah, Saul—and probably some of the returning warriors ready for joyous celebration.[401]

Here again, as with mourning, women are involved in a public way to mark important community events, not merely as spectators but as central actors. In 1 Sam 18:6, the greeting by women of the King Saul and David as they return from battle indicates that women were not only involved in celebrating local events within their own village, but also involved on a national level. Thus, we are told "As they were coming home, when David return from killing the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments." The image of women celebration military victory is a repeated motif throughout biblical narratives; including Miriam who "took a tambourine" and "all the women went out with her with tambourines and dancing" following the victory at the sea (Exod 15); and Jepthah's daughter met him "with timbrels and with dancing" upon his return from fighting the Ammonites (Judges 11).

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[401] Carol Meyers, "Of Drums and Damsels: Women's Performance in Ancient Israel," *Biblical Archaeologist* 54 (1991) 16–27, at 23.

It is likely, then, that there were certain roles that were more normally inhabited by men and others by women, but these were not necessarily organized along a public/private divide. Both men and women inhabited both spaces because the boundaries between them were not fluid. Moreover, even within these roles, there is a degree of flexibility to how each of these is conceived. Men are much more highly represented in the army; yet Jael and Deborah (Judges 4–5), Judith, and the unnamed woman who killed Ambimelech (Judges 9) all indicate that women's participation in military events was not an impossibility. Take, for example, the woman in Judges 9 who dropped a milestone on Abimelech's head. Abimelech views her act as bringing disgrace upon him, asking a young man to kill him so that he would not die at the hand of a woman. This suggests that it would have been unusual, even disgraceful to be killed by a woman in battle. Yet it is also clear that women were victims of the violence of war alongside of men. Just previously in the narrative, Abimelech and his men had killed "a thousand men and women" in a fire in the Tower of Shechem (Judg 9:49). Thus, regardless of her act, women were already involved in the violence; her actions were unusual but not unprecedented. Moreover, her actions, like that of Jael and Deborah, receive divine sanction. At the end of Judges 9, we are told, "Thus God repaid Abimelech for the crime he had committed against his brothers" (Judg 9:56; see also Judg 4:9–10).

Likewise, in Israelite religion, while women were prohibited from being a part of the priesthood, they were able to participate in communal religious life in a variety of ways. As Carol Meyers notes, women were no more disadvantaged in religious practice than lay males, adding that "Cultic events at the variety of shrines described or alluded to in the Hebrew Bible, including the Jerusalem temple complex, were generally gender inclusive."[402] She notes

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[402] Carol Meyers, *Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture of Israelite Women* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005) 9.

examples of the ways women could and did participate, including the regulations in Deuteronomy concerning offerings. Immediately after the notice about bringing offerings and sacrifices to "the place that the LORD your God will choose," the text goes, "And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you together with your sons and your daughters, your male and your female slaves, and the Levites who reside in your towns" (Deut 12:12). Here the text intimates that women, both daughters and female slaves, are included among those who will participate.

Other narratives indicate the presence of women involved in religious acts at public shrines as well, including the narrative of Hannah at Shiloh (1 Samuel 1). The narrative in 1 Samuel indicates that a woman praying and weeping at the shrine at Shiloh was likely not a normal event. In fact, the priest Eli accuses her of being drunk because her behavior seems so unusual to him (1 Sam 1:13–14). Yet her behavior at the shrine was also not prohibited or judged negatively. Once Eli realizes that is not intoxicated, her responds, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him" (1 Sam 1:17), which is precisely what happens. The fact that Eli provides a blessing and that God grants her request indicates that her actions were in no way inappropriate.

A second objection to this thesis could be raised based upon the portrayals of both negative and positive models of women in biblical texts. Scholars have seen in a variety of texts that women are upheld as models when they conform to the expectation that they are to remain in the private sphere and censured for entering into the public. In surveying this literature a little more closely, however, the texts demonstrate a great deal more ambiguity than has previously been assumed.

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One text that has been used to highlight the way that women who confined themselves to domestic activity are idealized is Proverbs 31:10–31. The poem provides advice from a mother to her son, the king. One part of the counsel she provides to her son Lemuel regards finding a model wife, something that the text indicates it very rare. Thus, she describes the "woman of valor," a woman whose activities contribute in significant ways to the productivity and success of the home. On the one hand, the depiction indicates that the wife described here "provides food for her household," as well making sure it is well protected in inclement weather (v 23); her husband, on the other hand is "known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land" (v 23). This has suggested to some scholars that women should ideally remain with the private, domestic realm while men inhabited the public spaces, such as the city gate.[403]

The poem is very clear to emphasize how the ideal wife will contribute productively to the successful running of a household. Yet there is little evidence to suggest that those activities enclose her within an impermeable boundary of private, domestic space. Rather, a number of her roles seem to include tasks outside the home. She buys a field (v. 16); plants a vineyard (v. 16) ; assesses merchandise for profitability (v. 18); and "brings her food from far away," (v. 14) along with a number of other jobs. She works hard physically within the household but also seems to be involved in a great number of business transactions. In addition, she demonstrates involvement in the community, by providing for the poor and needy (v 20). But she is not merely someone who works hard physically or is business-savvy. She also demonstrates great intellectual skills, for "she opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue" (v. 26). This reference could indicate merely a role of teaching her children within the home but in the larger context of women's counsel that was considered in chapter 3, it is also possible that she may have had a more public audience when dispensing wisdom.

[403] See, for example, Beatrice Lawrence, "Gender Analysis: Gender and Method in Biblical Studies."

For all of her labor and technical expertise, she is praised both by her children and her husband (v. 28). The poem also invites the possibility that she ought to receive public recognition as well, closing with the words, "let her works praise her in the city gates" (v. 31). The text does suggest that men and women would often function in different roles within their communities. Yet ideally men were probably also contributing to the well-being of the home, even if they did so in slightly different capacities. The poem describes a world in which there is a less clear boundary between public and private than people have often seen. If the woman does not normally inhabit the public gate herself, her reputation is known there; if she provides for the home, she does through her labors as a successful businesswoman, producing goods, purchasing land, and managing workers, work that would inevitably require a public presence within her community.[404]

One text that provides a negative view of women is Proverbs 7's description of the "foreign" or "strange" woman, the *ʾiššâ zārā*. On a surface reading of Proverbs 7, the poem provides what might be seen as strong evidence that women who transgress the boundary of private spaces are judged harshly. This woman is described as "loud and wayward, her feet do not stay at home" (v. 11). She is found in the streets, in the public square, and "at every corner" (v. 12). This woman who wanders about and can be found out in the streets should, according to the text, be avoided at all costs for her "house is the way to Sheol" (v. 27); following after her is

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[404] For a more detailed analysis of the specific activities that may be described in the poem, see, Christine Roy Yoder, "The Woman of Substance (ʾšt-ḥyl): A Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 31: 10–31" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003) 427–447. She describes the image of the woman described in the text as follows, "Consideration of Prov 31:10-31 in light of the socioeconomic evidence presented here suggests that the portrait of the Woman of Substance may well reflect real women in the Persian period. She is a bride valued highly for her wealth and socioeconomic potential. Her dowry and earnings are 'loot' that her husband may use for his own gain. She manufactures and trades in textiles. She buys and sells in the marketplaces and brings food 'from afar' to her household. She manages workers. She acquires real estate and develops it for income. In short, her socioeconomic activities mirror those of Persian-period women, particularly those of affluence or position. The sage thus taught about her in a manner typical of the wisdom tradition—by pointing to the world, indeed to the women, of his context" (446). The activities described here all point to the idea that the ideal woman would have engaged in public activities to provide well for her family.

a certain path to one's destruction, she has had many victims (v. 26). Does this text, then, indicate that any and all women who are found in public spaces, such as the public square, are seen as evil temptresses associated only with deception and death?

Proverbs 7 read alone might provide seem to substantiate the claim that women who transgress the public realm are subject to harsh criticism. This poem, however, cannot be read in isolation because in the chapter immediately following, there is a description of that woman's complete opposite, wisdom personified. In Proverbs 8, wisdom also has a very visible public presence, and, like her counterpart is also very vocal. Wisdom is found in a variety of very public places, "on the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads," (v. 2) and she calls out, raising her voice aloud in public. This woman is neither quiet nor hidden but makes her presence known; but unlike her narrative foil, her words bring happiness and favor from the LORD for those who heed her advice. She not only calls out to passersby but also influenced kings and royalty (vv. 15–16).

The personification of wisdom as a woman has led a lot of scholars to speculate about whether or not this image reflects real women, goddess traditions, or if in fact the use of female imagery here merely reflects a grammatical fact since wisdom is a grammatically feminine noun. Regardless of the source of the image, the comparison of these two figures side by side, the strange woman and her narrative foil, woman wisdom, provide an interesting contrast. The very close similarities between the two indicate that it not the public presence of the strange woman that is a cause for a concern or the fact that she exercises a powerful influence with her words, but the fact that her she uses her persuasive powers to seduce men toward evil rather than lead them toward righteousness. It is the content of their speech, then, that constitutes the significant distinction between these figures, not their actions. While both texts are highly poetic

descriptions, and thus may reflect ideal types rather than actual historical women, the language here, as with Proverbs 31, does not support the idea that women were viewed negatively merely for having a visible or vocal public presence.

The comparison between two women is also found in Proverbs 9. Gale Yee describes how similar both of the women are to one another by examining the speech of wisdom in vv. 2–6 with the speech of the foolish woman in vv. 16–17 in which there is a great in common between the two, including the fact that they have the same audience. She says,

> The two speeches are structurally parallel. Both beckon the simple to turn aside into their houses. Both invite those without sense to partake of their solid and liquid refreshment. Moreover, like the sinners in 1.11 and the ʾ*ššâ zārā* in 7.18, Wisdom invites the simple and without sense to 'Come (*lĕkû*)! Again we see both parties enticing the same audience, fashioning their speeches similarly.[405]

What becomes clear is that the negative portrayals of women found in Proverbs 1–9 do not offer unambiguous evidence that women are censured for having a public and vocal presence. Their presence can either be construed in a positive or a negative manner, depending on what kind of women they are. Again, what is at stake in the text is the type of council they provide, not the fact that they demonstrate a powerful presence.

The story of Esther also presents a number of interesting contrasts between portrayals of women. Some have seen between Vashti and Esther an example of the negative consequences of defying male authority versus the positive results of obeying it. In the first place, this poses a difficulty because although Esther does listen to Mordecai, she also defies a royal command. Moreover, although Vashti is punished, the consequence of her actions is somewhat ironic. For her refusal to go before the king when he asked, she is never against allowed to go before the king. There is also another dimension to the contrasts offered Esther between female characters because it is not only Vashti who provides a narrative foil for Esther but Zeresh as well. Zeresh

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[405] Gale Yee, "I Have Perfumed My Bed," 64–5.

counsels her husband to erect a scaffold for Mordecai, which ultimately becomes the means of his own death. In contrast, Esther persuades her husband to prevent violence against her people, through which she and her family rise to a greater status than before, receiving Haman's land. Thus, if one simply views the book of Esther as a warning to women that disobeying men brings negative consequences ignores the far greater amount of nuance and artistry within the story.

The argument pursued here, then, does not deny gender difference or disparity. Rather, the movement I have suggested is away from an assumption that the categories of public and private are applicable to life in the ancient Near East. Scholarship on the book of Esther demonstrates some of the specific ways in which the discourse of public and private has complicated our understanding and has also obscured historical realities at work behind the text. While most would agree that Esther is not a historical account, many have still used her story as indicative of the ways that women were ordinarily limited to a specific sphere of activity, regardless of whether scholars found her to transcend or embody those ideals. When the matter is probed a little more closely, however, the assumption that women's lives were typically constrained to domestic activity begins to break down. What we find is that the narrative of Esther does not uphold this view nor does evidence regarding the Persian period within which the story of Ester is set.

Finally, we must consider what many scholars have seen as the *raison d'etre* of the Esther narrative: the legitimization of the Purim festival. Most would see the book of Esther as an etiology for the festival, providing a story to justify the practice. The narrative account of Esther stresses the importance of ongoing observance of a festival in remembrance of the Jews' escape from Haman's destructive plot. According to the text, the days should be marked by the

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as "days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor" (Esth 9:22).

Rabbinic tradition also mentions that in addition to the acts described within the book of Esther, Purim observance should include reading the *Megillah* for meeting one's Purim obligation (b. Meg. 3b). As Fox notes, the book of Esther does not specifically mandate reading of the story but he suggests that there is some logic for including this obligation within the book. He argues,

> The public reading of the Scroll is not ordained in the book itself, yet the reading is rooted in the book's ideology. The only festival practice the author envisaged was festivities which replicate the Jews' rejoicing of year 12. Jews of subsequent generations, rather than commemorating something that happened to their ancestors, celebrate their ancestors' *experience.* The holiday has a reflexive, inner-directed quality; the people remembers its own experience, and that is accessible only through story, the vehicle of memory.[406]

Thus, rabbinic interpretation likely recognized clues implicit in the story of Esther that are reflected in the mandate to read the full text each year at Purim.

The story of Esther also emphasizes the importance of written records in order to provide a public account of various events. On numerous occasions, royal edicts are sent out "to every province in its own script" (i.e., Esth 1:22); written documents were distributed and passed around (Esth 4:8); and royal annals are consulted (Esth 6:1), to name just a few examples. Some scholars have maintained that all this concern with the written records was intended to make the work appear historical. Moore, for example, suggests that the author "encourages his readers to confirm the details of his account for themselves y referring them to an accessible and well-known historical record."[407] In contrast, Berlin views this as a kind of "burlesque" of historical writing, comparable to the conclusion of Anderson's "The Princess and the Pea," which similarly

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[406] Fox, *Character and Ideology,* 152.

[407] Moore, *Esther*, XXXV.

suggests that evidence for the story exists in a museum.[408] But perhaps the book of Esther's concern with records is more than merely an imitation of historical writing, serving instead to underscore the centrality of memory and the ongoing commemoration of events. Even if everyone was aware that there were in fact no public annals to consult to confirm the story, the literary motif throughout the text centering around written and accessible records provides an interpretive clue for the story's central aim: the ongoing observance of the festival. Near the end of the story, this point is underscored, "These days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every family, province, and city; and these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants" (Esth 8:28).

If the story of Esther was written to provide an etiology and rationale for the observance of Purim, as most would believe, than it becomes much more difficult to sustain the view that Esther is celebrated for her role within the private sphere. Unlike Ruth or Judith, Esther's story has been read annually for several millennia, most often in a public setting. It is difficult to justify the reliance on categories of public and private as adequate for describing this narrative when the very purpose of the narrative begins to blur the boundaries between the two. Even if were possible to endorse the view that Esther was primarily located with the domestic realm, her story, and the festival associated with it has transformed her actions into a very public affair.

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[408] Berlin, "The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling," 7.

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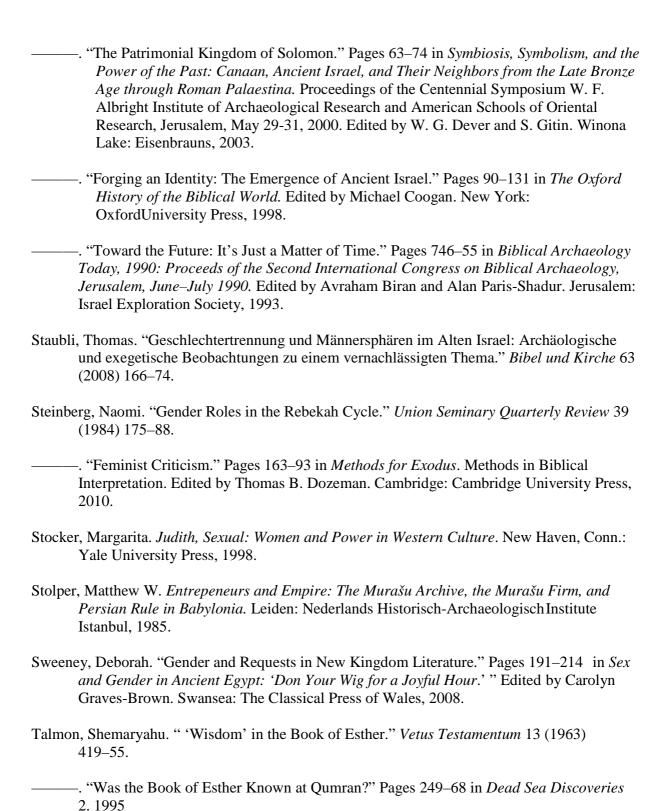
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