

# 11 ESTHER: A FEMININE MODEL FOR JEWISH DIASPORA

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9. Mieke Bal observes that 'there is a verb in Dutch for 'to commit adultery,' which is literally 'to go strange,' to go with a stranger (*vreemd gaan*).'*Lethal Love*, Indiana studies in biblical literature (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1987), 43.

10. We can be certain that the error is not a meaningless one since the image of the house recurs in chapters 5, 7, and 9. For a discussion of the house/female body symbolism in the Samson story see Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love*, 49-58.

11. See J. Kristeva, 'Women's Time' (187-213), and 'A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident' (292-300) in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University, 1986). Ironically, Roland Barthes entitled an early review of Kristeva's work 'L'Etrangere,' the strange or foreign woman, referring to her Bulgarian nationality and the unsettling quality of her work. See Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985), 150.

12. The illusory nature of the transcendental signified is argued by Jacques Derrida in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978), 278-80.

13. Bal, *Lethal Love*, 57.

14. Not all commentators understand 5:7-14 to refer to social or ethnic outsiders. Some argue that adultery is at issue. The language is probably intentionally ambiguous and polyvalent. But the contrast between 'others, strangers, foreigner' in 5:9-10 and 'your neighbor' in 6:29 (where adultery is explicitly at issue) suggests that the connotations of social or ethnic alienness are to the fore in 5:7-14. There is also a sharp contrast in the relation between improper sex and money in 5:9-10 and 6:35, implying different social situations.

15. Reading *wēnihamiā* in v. 11. Cf. LXX. The Greek text also suggests that 'your wealth' in v. 9 may be an error for 'your life,' which would fit the parallelism better.

16. I read v. 30 as an implied question.

17. Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 167.

18. For an excellent discussion of the problem of enunciation and subjectivity in film see chap. 5 of Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University, 1983).

19. Myra Forsberg, 'James Dearden: Life After 'Fatal Attraction,' *New York Times*, 24 July 1988, p. 21.

The book of Esther, found among the Writings (or *kētūbīm*) in the Hebrew Bible, has suffered an ambiguous reputation in the history of Judaism and Christianity. Written sometime during the Persian period,<sup>1</sup> its place in the canon was still a matter of debate in the third century C.E. when Rabbi Samuel ben Judah opined that Esther did not defile the hands, that is to say, was not sacred Scripture.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Josephus, the first century C.E. Jewish historian, clearly regards Esther as canonical, since he paraphrases the book in his *Jewish Antiquities*, and probably counts it in his canonical list.<sup>3</sup>

The book of Esther early on holds an equally ambiguous position among Christians. The Eastern church did not completely accept the book of Esther as canonical until the eighth century C.E., while it was accepted in the west by the fourth century.<sup>4</sup>

The reasons for all the ambiguity regarding the book of Esther, we feel, are the result of misunderstandings concerning its purpose. The primary concern of this essay will be to clarify the purpose of the book through an investigation of the main character, Esther, and her actions and reactions in regard to the power structures of Persian society. But first we will discuss some general introductory matters that will serve to explain the parameters within which the main thesis of this essay was constructed.

The religiosity of the book of Esther has been the source of much debate. As is well known, God is never mentioned in the book of Esther. In addition, the Law and the Covenant are never alluded to; there are no prayers; and Esther, as a Jew, seems to have no scruples about being married to a Gentile or living in a completely heathen environment. These problems were felt at least as early as the second

Ahasuerus has deposed Vashti, his queen, and decides to find a new one. A young Jewish girl named Esther wins his favor and becomes the new queen. Her adopted father Mordecai becomes involved in a quarrel with the king's vizier, Haman. Haman plots to slaughter all the Jews in the empire to revenge himself against Mordecai. His plot is discovered and, by the efforts of Esther, Haman is executed and the enemies of the Jews destroyed. Mordecai becomes the king's vizier and institutes the festival of Purim to celebrate this great victory.

The plot hangs together well, and yet different sources have been discerned within the book of Esther. The most famous source theory is Henri Cazelles's two-source theory.<sup>11</sup> Cazelles hypothesizes that the Masoretic text of the book of Esther is a conflation of two independent texts, basing his theory on the occurrence of pairs throughout the book. The first text is liturgical, centers around the character of Esther, is about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the provinces, and explains the origin of the festival of Purim. The second text is historical and centers on the court intrigues of Mordecai and the persecution of the Jews in Susa.<sup>12</sup> Hans Bardtke, on the other hand, finds three separate tales in the book of Esther.<sup>13</sup> The first story concerns Queen Vashti, the second involves Mordecai, court intrigues, and the avoidance of persecution, and the third involves Esther, the king's favorite, and the avoidance of persecution. Elias Bickerman discovers two separate plots: in the first, Esther becomes queen and the enmity of Haman endangers her; in the second, Mordecai, a royal courtier, is hated by Haman.<sup>14</sup>

The difficulty with these source theories is that the sources do not separate cleanly, but instead overlap a great deal. The most obvious overlap is the fact that each tale (if we use Bardtke's three-source analysis) shares the character of the king. This is easily explained, however, by saying that there are always many tales circulating involving kings, and it would be quite easy to combine two or three of these into one tale. A more serious difficulty is that the tales of Esther and Mordecai share the same villain, Haman. While it is possible to isolate separate conclusions for the adventures of Esther and Mordecai, it is more difficult to separate two strands for the character of Haman. There is no motive for Haman to persecute the Jews in the plot line that involves Esther alone. That motive comes solely from his hatred of Mordecai. In addition, there are several factors in the Esther tale that become pointless without the tale of Mordecai. For example, why does Esther hide her identity as a Jew? For these reasons Larry Wills suggests that it is difficult to isolate

century B.C.E. when the Greek additions to Esther were composed, adding prayers and explicitly stating that Esther loathes being married to a Gentile and has scrupulously followed the dietary laws.<sup>5</sup> The commentaries by the rabbis in the Mishnah and the Talmud also attempt to deal with this problem. According to Rabbi Johanan, Esther obtained vegetables, as did Daniel, and Rab held that she was given kosher food.<sup>6</sup> However, there is no hint in the text that Esther refused Persian food, or that she received any sort of special food. In fact, in verse 10 we are told that she hid her Jewish origins, obviously impossible to do if she had requested special food. We may assume that the dietary laws were not an issue for the author of the book of Esther. It is clear that in the Masoretic text there is no concern for what we may call Jewish piety, as there is, for example, in the book of Daniel. As Carey Moore states, "Esther seems to be Jewish in a sense more ethnic than religious."<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Vischer correctly observes that Esther is concerned with the Jewish question as a political and cultural, rather than religious problem.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of these observations, however, we believe that the element of piety in Esther, though veiled, is present. First of all, Esther, when faced with the consequences of going to the king unsummoned, calls on the Jews in Susa to join her in a fast. Fasting is, in the later Jewish tradition, a religious act.<sup>9</sup> Second, in 4:14 Mordecai tells Esther, "For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish." It has been suggested, in both the interpretive tradition of Esther and in modern scholarship, that the Hebrew word for place, *maqôm*, is a veiled reference to God.<sup>10</sup> While this is not entirely clear, since there is no other place in the biblical literature where *maqôm* has this meaning, it seems clear that the verse as a whole is referring to what we may call Divine Providence. In fact, Mordecai goes on to say "Who knows if for a time like this you attained royal power?" God's control of events seems to be assumed in this verse, and the status of the Jews as God's chosen people is also assumed. However, the God of the book of Esther does not take center stage as a *deus ex machina*, as in the book of Daniel. Rather, this God appears to act through human beings, allowing them to take center stage and act as the instruments of their own salvation. The human element is thus all-important.

The book of Esther purports to be an account of the events that led to the inauguration of the Jewish festival of Purim. The Persian king

a self-contained Esther story, and that the story of Esther came into existence as an expansion of an original Mordecai source.<sup>15</sup>

What all these differing theories finally show, however, is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to divide the book of Esther into separate sources. While it seems clear that two or three different tales lie behind our present book of Esther, the author of the present book was not a mere editor, but truly deserves the title of author, having combined his sources with a skill the result of which is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. For this reason, we will consider the story of Esther and Mordecai as a whole, rather than attempt to distinguish source material from editorial material.

The connection of the tale of Esther and Mordecai to the festival of Purim is highly dubious. The only connection between the tale and the festival is the word *pûr*, or "lot," which Haman casts to determine the date for the slaughter of the Jews (3:7).<sup>16</sup> Some sort of festival is connected with the name of Mordecai in 2 Maccabees 15:36 ("the day of Mordecai") but the name Purim is not mentioned. D. J. A. Clines argues cogently that chapters 9-10 should be separated from chapters 1-8 as the work of a different redactor.<sup>17</sup> For the purposes of this paper, we will follow Clines's conclusion that the story of Esther and Mordecai, in its Masoretic version, originally ended with chapter 8.

Esther 1-8, or what we shall call the story of Esther and Mordecai, is a fast-paced, suspenseful tale. The tale clearly is meant to entertain, but it has a didactic purpose as well. It is meant to teach Jews how to live a productive life in the Diaspora. Jones, in "Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther," argues that the scroll's purpose is "the reconciliation of Jewish audiences to their minority status among gentiles whose attitudes toward Jews varied unpredictably from honor to persecution."<sup>18</sup> Other books in the Hebrew Bible address this problem, both directly and indirectly.<sup>19</sup> In the historical figure of Nehemiah, we have a portrait of a Jew who has risen to prominence in the Persian court while keeping his religious identity intact (Neh. 1-2). The character of Daniel, in chapters 1-6 of the book of Daniel, is a Jew who rises to prominence in a gentile court while maintaining his religious integrity, engenders hostility because of his prominence, and overcomes the danger and regains his prominence through the help of divine providence.<sup>20</sup> Daniel 1-6 has been correctly identified as a series of court tales, a well-known type of wisdom tale in which a wise courtier rises to prominence, is persecuted, suffers a fall, and is finally vindicated.<sup>21</sup> This sort of tale enjoyed great popularity in the post-exilic period.

The book of Esther also has the basic elements of the court tale: the setting in the royal court, the wise heroine/hero representing a "ruled ethnic group," and the persecution of the protagonists and their ultimate vindication.<sup>22</sup> However, the story of Esther and Mordecai is more complicated than the normal court tale, with two protagonists and a conflict much broader in its implications than the persecution of one protagonist.

S. Talmon has attempted to place the book of Esther within the corpus of wisdom literature.<sup>23</sup> He characterizes the book as a "historicized wisdom tale" and sees in the characters of the book the types common to wisdom literature. Ahasuerus is the foolish king, Mordecai is the wise and virtuous courtier, and Haman is the wise but wicked courtier. Esther herself represents the motif of the orphan adopted by a wise man who makes good. The point of the narrative is to portray "applied" wisdom, that is, how a wise man [sic] may lead a successful life in the world. This explains the "disturbing lack of . . . religiosity in the book." Ultimately, Talmon would say that "in the last analysis the Persian setting is of secondary importance."<sup>24</sup>

Here, however, we disagree. The Persian setting is of primary importance, because the book is attempting to teach its audience how to lead a successful life in the Diaspora. The question of how to live successfully in exile had been asked since the time of Jeremiah, who said,

Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (Jer. 29:4-7).

This is a course of action that is espoused in the book of Esther. Esther and Mordecai function in a completely heathen environment: Esther becomes the spouse of a Gentile king; Mordecai "sits in the king's gate," a technical term for a royal courtier; and there is a large Jewish population living permanently in the capital and in the provinces. As Berg has pointed out, this is "a story which does not envision or promote the return of the Jews to Palestine."<sup>25</sup>

Most commentators have focused on Mordecai as the paradigm for Diaspora life. We have already seen that Talmon views Mordecai as the type for the wise and virtuous courtier.<sup>26</sup> Carey Moore states, "Between

power.<sup>32</sup> However, in order for the powerful to maintain their power, the weak must acquiesce to the relationship. Maintaining power by force does not work for long. Women have nearly always been among the weak in any society, and the adjustments that women have made during centuries spent as subordinate partners in a power relationship illuminate the whole range of power situations.<sup>33</sup>

The Jews in the Diaspora also are in the position of the weak, as a subordinate population under the dominant Persian government. They must adjust to their lack of immediate political and economic power and learn to work within the system to gain what power they can. In the book of Esther, their role model for this adjustment is Esther. Not only is she a woman, a member of a perpetually subordinate population, but she is an orphan, a powerless member of Jewish society. Therefore, her position in society is constantly precarious, as was the position of the Jews in the Diaspora. With no native power of her own owing to her sex or position in society, Esther must learn to make her way among the powerful and to cooperate with others in order to make herself secure.

Esther first appears in 2:7, where she is introduced as the cousin of Mordecai. She is described as very beautiful, but no hint of her character is given. In verse 8, Esther is taken, along with all the other unmarried women in the capital, into the king's house.<sup>34</sup> In verse 9, we finally begin to learn something about Esther beyond her physical beauty. We are told that "the maiden (Esther) pleased him (Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the king's harem) and won his favor." It has been pointed out by others that the phrase *wattissá' heseá*, "and she won favor," is active in meaning, as opposed to the more usual phrase *má' heseá*, "to find favor."<sup>35</sup> Esther is not a passive character; she takes steps, within the situation in which she finds herself, to place herself in the best possible position. And her strategy works. Her beauty treatments are hastened, she receives good food, and is given seven maidservants.

Verse 10 informs us that Esther does not reveal that she is a Jew, because Mordecai had instructed her not to do so. This has been taken as reaffirming Mordecai's dominance over Esther. Moore states that the emphatic position of the proper name Mordecai in the verse shows Esther's subordination.<sup>36</sup> However, a more sympathetic interpretation would be that she sensibly follows the advice of the more seasoned courtier Mordecai, who, after all, "sits in the king's gate." Again, she is adapting herself to the situation in which she finds herself. R. Gordis suggests that Esther does not reveal her nationality so that there are

Mordecai and Esther the greater hero is Mordecai, who supplied the brains while Esther simply followed his directions.<sup>27</sup> Paton places Esther in a completely negative light:

Esther, for the chance of winning wealth and power, takes her place in the herd of maidens who became concubines of the king. She wins her victories not by skill or by character, but by her beauty. She conceals her origin, is relentless toward a fallen enemy, secures not merely that the Jews escape from danger, but that they fall upon their enemies, slay their wives and children, and plunder their property.<sup>28</sup>

He assigns to her the worst of character and motives, and then does not even allow her the intelligence to further her own plot.<sup>29</sup>

As will be seen, I disagree with all of these characterizations. I believe Esther is the true heroine of the tale, and the traits in her character and her actions that make her successful are those that a Jew must emulate if she or he is to be successful in the precarious world of the Diaspora. Mordecai, while certainly a sympathetic character, is not successful because he refuses to fit into the situation in which he finds himself. Esther unravels the plot of Haman and strengthens her position, while affirming, in the end, her ethnic identity as a Jew.

The method of this essay is ostensibly simple: to make a detailed analysis of the character and the actions of Esther, and to investigate their impact on the story of Esther and Mordecai. However, this method is not as straightforward as it appears at first glance. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza has warned that we must be cautious "in adopting the standard scholarly interpretations of texts, which are often androcentric."<sup>30</sup> We have found that androcentrism abounds in most of the commentaries on the book of Esther, with the author either ignoring the character of Esther or relegating her to a secondary position behind Mordecai. I hope, by giving a more sympathetic reading of the character and role of Esther, to show Esther's real status as the heroine of the book which is, after all, called by her name. I also will be using new studies on the psychology of women that show that women function differently in the world than men, and that therefore their actions must be judged according to their own standards.

As Elizabeth Janeway states in her book *Powers of the Weak*, the variety of lives that women have led at different times and in different sorts of society make up a dictionary of survival techniques.<sup>31</sup> There are two groups in any society, the powerful and the weak, or as Jean Baker Miller terms them, the dominants and the subordinates. A subordinate group has to concentrate on basic survival, not on attaining

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\* Esther vs. Mordecai  
Why Esther is the hero → not Mordecai

Comment with BTW as Nicky

no known legal impediments to her ascension. He bases his surmise on the fact that we know from Herodotus that the Persian kings could only select queens from seven noble Persian families. However, wouldn't the king, in that case, make sure that he knew Esther's background? It must finally be said, however, that no motive for Esther's silence is given in the text. It is, again, simply stated as a fact. The most obvious function of her silence is to serve as a plot device to heighten the tension, since Haman, when he resolves to destroy the Jews, obviously does not know that the queen is a Jew.

Esther 2:15-18 explains how Esther wins the favor of Ahasuerus and becomes the queen. Again, her actions in this situation show her taking advantage of the opportunities around her to improve her position. She wisely follows the advice of Hegai, who knows what the king prefers. At this point, it may be necessary to comment on some of the presuppositions of the story and our own prejudices. To our modern ears, becoming a member of a harem and attempting to win the favor of a man by sexual means sounds degrading, and it would be so in our society. However, if we think in terms of the historical period and the acceptable means of winning power, Esther's actions become less problematic. Her behavior is no more reprehensible than the sycophantic responses of Xerxes' counselors and the behavior of Haman in trying to obtain power; her actions simply contain a sexual element. And it must be emphasized that there is no note of censure in the Hebrew text; in fact, Esther's behavior is applauded in the statement, "Now Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her" (2:15). Once we accept the worldview of the text, Esther immediately becomes a much more sympathetic character. By her actions, Esther shows herself to be cooperative, an important characteristic for a successful court life.

And Esther certainly does succeed. The king is smitten by her and makes her his queen. Her last act before the main events of chapter 4 is to inform the king that Mordecai had uncovered the plot of the eunuchs to murder Ahasuerus (2:22). Again, she is using her influence to enhance the position of her relatives. Nothing immediately comes of her actions, but it is the action of a wise courtier.

Esther's next appearance is in chapter 4, the turning point of the story. At 4:4, Esther is informed that Mordecai is wailing in sackcloth at the palace gate. The actions of the main characters are very important here, for they illustrate more and less constructive ways of dealing with disasters. Janeway points out that basic to survival is the

avoidance of shock, for shock precipitates panic.<sup>37</sup> We see the victim of shock in Mordecai, who goes into a panic, putting on mourning and wailing through the city streets (4:1). These actions are, of course, acceptable means of expressing grief in the ancient Near East, but they do not help to avert the crisis. Mordecai's one idea seems to be to bring the crisis to the attention of Esther. Esther's first reaction to the news of Mordecai's appearance is nurturing; she sends him clothes.<sup>38</sup> Mordecai then sends word to Esther of the disaster that has befallen the Jews and charges her to go to the king. Although we are investigating the character of Esther, it would be helpful at this point to look at the character of Mordecai and to determine how calamity has come upon the Jews. The text states that Mordecai earned the enmity of Haman by refusing to bow down to him (3:2, 5). What the text does not tell us is why Mordecai refuses obeisance to Haman. Commentators, beginning with the rabbis, have sought to supply the reason: Midrash Rabbah says that 1) Haman pinned an idol to his breast, and 2) Mordecai would not bow down to anything except God.<sup>39</sup> We have examples, however, of Jews doing obeisance to rulers all the time with no censure attached to the action (e.g., in the Joseph story Joseph's brothers bow down to him as the ruler of Egypt). Paton sees in Mordecai's action a "spirit of independence."<sup>40</sup> However, the fact remains that the text itself gives us no reason for the refusal. In verse 4, the other servants wait to see who would prove stronger, Haman or Mordecai, for Mordecai "had told them that he was a Jew." But this is not the reason for the refusal to bow down. One can make the assumption that Mordecai had a good reason for refusing to bow down, but this remains an assumption.<sup>41</sup> On the face of it, however, Mordecai's refusal appears foolish. He seems to have nothing to gain by it and a great deal to lose. Surely this is not the action of a wise courtier! Mordecai is refusing to accept and work with his subordinate position. As Miller points out, it is practically impossible to initiate open conflict when you are totally dependent on the other person or group for the basic material and psychological means of existence.<sup>42</sup> Yet this is precisely what Mordecai attempts to do. Then, having precipitated this crisis, he must rely on Esther to undo the damage. Her reaction, as described below, is much more the action of the wise courtier. As Talmon states: "she ascends from the role of Mordecai's protégée and becomes her mentor's guardian."<sup>43</sup>

Esther now speaks directly for the first time in the narrative:

confrontation without first taking all the steps possible to safeguard herself. This is not cowardice, but a realistic assessment of the situation. The best chance she has of obtaining her goals is by appealing to the king's emotions, rather than by cool logic. In our (androcentric) society, emotion has not been seen as an aid to understanding and action, but rather as an impediment to understanding. Because of this, it is one of the few weapons the dominants allow the subordinates to use.<sup>48</sup> We have already seen, however, that Ahasuerus reacts emotionally rather than rationally. He banishes Vashti in a rage, then later regrets it; makes Esther queen because he loves her; and allows Haman to manipulate him unthinkingly. So Esther's best way to appeal to this king is clearly through his emotions.

After her fast, Esther appears unsummoned before the king. She has put on her royal robes in order to appear as attractive and queenly as possible.<sup>49</sup> Her strategy works, for she "earns favor" in his eyes.<sup>50</sup> Ahasuerus offers to grant any request of hers up to half of his kingdom. This might seem like the right time to ask the king to save the Jews. However, that would not neutralize Haman, as Esther appears to realize. So, rather than making her request and leaving the results to the discretion of this mercurial king who is very easily influenced, she sets out to lull Haman into a false sense of complacency and to place the king in a position where a strong emotional response from him is guaranteed. She invites the king and Haman to a private dinner party. This places the king in her territory, the women's quarters, where she can more easily control the situation. It also puts Haman off his guard. It is difficult to believe that a person who invites you to a dinner party is your enemy. The strategy again is successful: the king is further inclined to do Esther's will, and "Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart" (5:9).

Many commentators have raised the question of why Esther gives a second banquet. The proponents of the two-source theory (e.g., Cazelles) see this as part of the evidence for two sources. The first banquet is part of the Mordecai source and the second is part of the Esther source.<sup>51</sup> The problem with this division, which Cazelles acknowledges, is that Esther gives both banquets. If we take the text as we have it, the second banquet may be viewed as a device to heighten the tension of the plot,<sup>52</sup> or as mere foolishness on the part of Esther.<sup>53</sup> However, as Clines points out, by using the first banquet as a purely social occasion she has lulled Haman into such a false sense of security that he tries pleading for his life from her after she reveals who

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, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden sceptre that he [sic] may live. And I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days (4:11).

Esther's reaction is not a sign of cowardice, but a statement of fact. If she appears before the king, the chances are good that she will die. In addition, what influence does she have with the king if he has not wished to see her for thirty days? As Moore notes, even after being queen for five years, Esther still occupies a weak and precarious position.<sup>44</sup> This is normal for women; circumstances have accustomed women to expect a considerable amount of unpredictability to come their way.<sup>45</sup> In spite of Esther's objections, however, Mordecai sends back another message:

Think not that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place (RSV "quarter"), but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to royal power (RSV "the kingdom") for such a time as this (4:13-14)?

Mordecai's speech, as mentioned above, contains a veiled reference to God, but it also emphasizes the importance of human action in accomplishing God's purpose. It also serves to remind Esther that she possesses power in her own right.<sup>46</sup> Mordecai's reply rallies Esther. She realizes that she must act for the good of the community, and she springs into action. Carol Gilligan has stated that men's social orientation is positional while women's is personal. That is, men define themselves in terms of their position in society, while women define themselves by their relationship to others.<sup>47</sup> This seems to hold true for Esther. When she first objects to going to the king, her reason is her status in relation to the king. However, when Mordecai reminds her of her relationship to her family and the Jewish community as a whole, she is willing to take risks and act for their benefit.

Esther now becomes the initiator of events. She orders a fast, which, as we have already mentioned, is of religious significance, and prepares to go to the king. The final verse of chapter 4 sums up the dramatic force of Esther's actions: "Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him [emphasis mine]." The powerless has become the powerful.

In her decision to confront the king, Esther continues on the same wise course she has taken up until now. She does not risk direct

she really is. In addition, at the first banquet Esther requests the king to affirm publicly that he means to grant her request by attending the second banquet. "If I have found favor in the sight of the king and if it please the king, let the king and Haman come to the dinner which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said" (5:8 [emphasis mine]). By coming to the second banquet, Ahasuerus is agreeing in advance to Esther's still unheard petition.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, at the second banquet, Esther makes her request. It should be noted that although we have the benefit of chapter 6 and know of Haman's humiliation before Mordecai, there is no indication in the text that Esther knows anything about it. She views Haman as "as powerful and as dangerous as before."<sup>55</sup> So when she makes her request, she must convince the king of the rightness of her position and the wrongness of Haman's. First she appeals to Ahasuerus' emotions by the raw urgency of her plea: "Let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request" (7:3). Then she disarms Haman by answering his argument that "it is not to the king's profit" to tolerate the Jews (3:8). She argues that the destruction of the Jews would mean a great loss to the king. This argument stems from a woman's sense of the interrelatedness of people's lives.<sup>56</sup> Later in the scene, when Haman pleads for his life, some commentators have taken her to task for not attempting to save him. For example, Paton says, "It must be admitted that her character would have been more attractive if she had shown pity toward a fallen foe."<sup>57</sup> However, Esther must act on her primary loyalty to her community. Haman, after all, does not repent; he simply begs for his life. Haman left alive would still constitute a threat to the Jewish community. Haman must die if the Jews are to be safe, and Esther acknowledges this by her silence.

Chapter 8 brings us the conclusion of the tale of Esther and Mordecai. Esther receives from Ahasuerus the property of Haman, and recommends Mordecai to the king. Mordecai is then made the vizier in place of Haman. Esther now controls wealth, court appointments, and access to the king.

However, the main problem of the story still remains. Haman has issued an edict in the king's name for the destruction of the Jews, and it cannot be annulled, for "an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked" (8:8). Something must be done to avert the consequences of the edict.<sup>58</sup> Esther again

petitions the king; she makes a strong appeal to his emotions. She falls at his feet and weeps. The king holds out his sceptre to her again, and she begins her petition. As Clines has pointed out, her speech in 8:5-6 is a masterpiece of courtier's rhetoric.<sup>59</sup> She prefaces it with four conditional clauses: "If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes. . . ." The first two are familiar from earlier speeches of Esther (5:4, 5:8, and 7:3); the third and fourth are newly composed for the occasion. In these third and fourth clauses she shifts the responsibility for overturning Haman's decree onto the king ("if the thing seems right before the king") and again appeals directly to her relationship with him ("and I be pleasing in his eyes"). Although on the surface her speech is merely that of a polite courtier, underneath she is giving the reasons why her request should be granted. In the body of the speech she uses an appeal to the king's emotions rather than cool logic to drive her point home and to get what she needs. She is careful not to put the king on the defensive by referring to a royal decree; instead she refers to "the letters devised by Haman the Agagite." Then in verse 6, she plays what Clines refers to as her "trump card": her favored position with the king (how can I endure . . . ?).<sup>60</sup> And the king grants her *carte blanche*: "And you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring" (8:8).

Esther now disappears from our original story, leaving the final business to Mordecai. Her conduct throughout the story has been a masterpiece of feminine skill. From beginning to end, she does not make a misstep. While in the harem, she earns the favor of Hegai, and follows his advice and the advice of Mordecai, both experienced in the ways of the court. She wins the king's heart, becomes queen, and then, when danger threatens, skillfully negotiates her tricky course. She is a model for the successful conduct of life in the often uncertain world of the Diaspora. The fact that she is a woman emphasizes the plight of the Jew in the Diaspora: the once-powerful Jewish nation has become a subordinate minority within a foreign empire, just as Esther, as a woman, is subject to the dominant male. However, by accepting the reality of a subordinate position and learning to gain power by working within the structure rather than against it, the Jew can build a successful and fulfilling life in the Diaspora, as Esther does in the court of Ahasuerus.

*Esther's speech is a masterpiece of courtier's rhetoric*

*Esther's speech is a masterpiece of courtier's rhetoric*

## NOTES

1. Most commentators on Esther are agreed that the core of the book was written at some time during the period of Persian dominance in the ancient Near East (i.e., 539–332 B.C.E.). The reasons most often cited for this dating are the Persian setting and local coloring, the absence of all Greek coloring, and the sympathetic attitude toward the gentile king. In the Persian period, Jews were often willing servants of the Persian kings (Nehemiah is a good example of this phenomenon). As for the setting, we would argue that the lack of interest in Judah or its cultic institutions, along with the familiarity with the Persian royal court and gentile lifestyle, favors a setting in the Eastern Diaspora. See further Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, ICC (New York: Scribner, 1908); Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971); and Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure*, SBL Dissertation Series 44 (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1979). All quotations from the book of Esther in this paper will be according to *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: Revised Standard Version*, unless otherwise noted.
- King Ahasuerus has been identified as Xerxes, the fourth Achaemenian monarch (486–465 B.C.E.). The portrait of the king in Esther coincides with what we know about Xerxes from extra-biblical sources: his empire extended from India to Ethiopia, he had a winter palace at Susa, he gave lavish drinking parties, made extravagant promises and gifts, and had a nasty and irrational temper (Moore, *Esther*, xli).
2. Megilla 7a, tr. by Maurice Simon, in *The Babylonian Talmud*, ed. Isidore Epstein (New York: Soncino, 1938), 35–36.
3. In *Against Apion*, I, 38–41, Josephus states that there are twenty-two books in the Hebrew canon, which he unfortunately does not enumerate. However, it appears that Josephus counted Judges and Ruth as one book, as well as Jeremiah and Lamentations. Thus Esther could be included in his list of twenty-two.
4. Moore, *Esther*, xxviii.
5. The additions to Esther may be found in the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*. For commentary, see *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*, in *Compendia Rerum Judaicarum ad Novum Testamentum*: Section 2, ed. Michael E. Stone (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) and G. W. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).
6. Paton, *Commentary*, 174.
7. Moore, *Esther*, xxii.
8. Wilhelm Vischer, *Esther*, TEH 48 (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1937), 15.
9. See Matt. 6:16–18.
10. Cf. the A text of the Greek Esther, Josephus' *Antiquities*, and the 1 and 2 Targums to Esther. For further commentary, see, for example, Moore, *Esther*, 50.
11. Henri Cazelles, "Note sur la composition du rouleau d'Esther" in *Lex*

*Tua Veritas*, eds. Heinrich Gross and Franz Mussner (Trier: Paulinus, 1961) 17–30.

12. D. J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, JSOTSup 30 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 123, revises Cazelles's source analysis, dividing the sources slightly differently.

13. Hans Bardtke, *Das Buch Esther*, KAT 17/5 (Gütersloh: Gütersloher 1963).

14. Elias Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken 1967), 172.

15. Lawrence Wills, "The Jew in the Court of Foreign Kings: Ancien Jewish Court Legends" (dissertation, Harvard University, 1987), 260–61.

16. Julius Lewy has shown that the word *pur* stems from the Babylonian word *pūri*, which means "lot" or "fate," (RHA 5 [1939]: 117–24). It is interesting to note that the Greek text and Josephus contain the word *phourra* (A text *phoudaia*), which evidently springs from the Aramaic word *pūrrāya* (C. C. Torrey, "The Older Book of Esther," HTR 37 [1944]: 6).

17. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 39 ff. He argues on the basis of both linguistic and literary data. Wills draws heavily on Clines in his analysis of the source of Esther, and also does away with the Purim connection. C. C. Torrey ("Older Book," 14) notes that Esther A ends at exactly the end of the folk tale of Esther and Mordecai, arguing for an originally shorter story. The story ends quite satisfactorily at chap. 8, with the danger to the Jews averted and Esther and Mordecai firmly in power. The inclusion of the actions of the Jews after Mordecai issues his decree and the institution of Purim is extraneous to the original tale. For an opposing viewpoint, see Berg, who argues for the inclusion of Purim in the original narrative on the basis of stylistic traits (1977): 171. I would add that the author's message is also that by following the book's program one would gain honor regularly (not unpredictably).

18. B. W. Jones, "Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther," CBQ 39 (1977): 171. I would add that the author's message is also that by following the book's program one would gain honor regularly (not unpredictably).

19. As R. Gordis points out, "anti-semitic encounters with a dominant non-Jewish majority were recurring phenomena in the history of Diaspora Jewry" ("Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther—A New Solution to an Ancient Crux," JBL 100 [1981]: 381).

20. It is clear that Daniel 1–6 are merely selections from a much larger cycle of Daniel tales, as witnessed by the "Prayer of Nabonidus" and the unpublished "4Qpseuodan" found at Qumran.

21. For an excellent discussion of this type of tale, see Susan Niditch and Robert Doran, "The Success Story of the Wise Courtier," JBL 96 (1977): 179–93, and Wills, "Court Legends," 205 ff.

22. Wills, "Court Legends," 205.

23. S. Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," VT 13 (1963): 419–55.

24. Talmon, "Wisdom," 441.

25. Berg, *Esther*, 68.

26. Talmon ("Wisdom," 451) does list prototypes for Esther: Delilah, Naomi, Ruth, Michal, Jael, Rachel, Bathsheba, the wise women of Tekoa and

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Abel beth Maacah, Tamar, and Potiphar's wife, and notes that women are prolific in the practical employment of wisdom maxims. The list is eclectic: there are both positive and negative characters in it, and the actions and goals of the women listed tend to be quite different. This eclecticism, or more negatively, the lumping together of women without differentiation, may stem from Talmon's attempt to identify the character of Esther as a type.

27. Moore, *Esther*, lii.
28. Paton, *Commentary*, 96.
29. He also is not sensitive to the situation of the Jews living under Persian dominance. Esther, in fact, has no choice about going into Ahasuerus' harem; she is not trying to gain "wealth and power," but preserving her life! I owe this observation to Peggy Day.
30. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Interpreting Patriarchal Traditions," in *The Liberating Word*, ed. Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 61.
31. Elizabeth Janeway, *Powers of the Weak* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 210.
32. Jean Baker Miller, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (Boston: Beacon, 1976), 10.
33. Janeway, *Powers*, 4.
34. The verb *tillaqah* is a Niphal, with a passive meaning, so again the text gives no hint of Esther's reaction or character. Paton's assertion that she "takes her place in the herd of maidens" (p. 96), an active role, is certainly not borne out by the text. Nor does the author wish to cast any negative light on Esther's entering the harem of Ahasuerus. It is simply a fact.
35. For example, Moore, *Esther*, 27.
36. Moore, *Esther*, 22.
37. Janeway, *Powers*, 210.
38. Janeway, *Powers*, 272, lists nurturing as a quintessential feminine trait.
39. H. Freedman & Maurice Simon, eds. *The Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 4, (London: Soncino, 1977), 82, 107.
40. Paton, *Commentary*, 62.
41. Many commentators have noted that Mordecai is a descendant of Kish, the father of Saul, and that Haman is an Agagite, a descendant of the bitter enemy of Saul, Agag. Therefore Mordecai's behavior is the result of this ancient feud. While possible, this is not explicitly stated in the text. For further comment, see Moore, *Esther*, 42.
42. Miller, *Psychology*, 127.
43. Talmon, "Wisdom," 449.
44. Moore, *Esther*, 18.
45. Janeway, *Powers*, 210.
46. Berg, *Esther*, 60.
47. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1982), 16.
48. Miller, *Psychology*, 38.

49. Moore (*Esther*, 55) notes that this is not only a matter of feminine strategy but also of court etiquette. In 4:2 Mordecai must stay outside the palace complex, for "no one might enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth."

50. Again, the verb used is *násé'áh*, with its active connotation.

51. Cazelles, "Esther," 27.

52. Paton (*Commentary*, 236) states that the author needs time for the disgrace of Haman.

53. W. Lee Humphreys calls it a "dangerous overconfidence." See Humphreys, "The Story of Esther and Mordecai: An Early Jewish Novella," in *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable*, ed. G. W. Coats, JSOT Sup 35 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985).

54. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 144.

55. Moore, *Esther*, 73.

56. Janeway (*Powers*, 272) calls the "greater recognition of the essential cooperative nature of human existence" a feminine trait. The fact that the king originally allows Haman to arrange the destruction of the Jews can also be explained as part of the dominant-subordinate relationship. Janeway (4) notes "a general tendency of governors to ignore the humanity and even the presence, of groups whose lives fall within the category of the weak." Thus, Ahasuerus does not even inquire after the identity of the group that Haman is seeking to destroy!

57. Paton, *Commentary*, 264.

58. Clines, (*Esther Scroll*, 15-21) gives a good discussion of the theme of the irreversibility of Persian law. The law of the Medes and the Persians is taken very seriously by the book of Esther; the law is never disobeyed by a Jew except by dire necessity (the exception to this is Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman). Esther in particular is the exemplar of this; the disobedience of Esther is the direct result of her membership in the larger Jewish community (Berg, *Esther*, 77). Loyalty to the Jewish community is valued above allegiance to the civil government; however, in normal circumstances no conflict should result. It is, according to the book, perfectly possible to be a loyal Jew and a loyal subject of the Persian king.

59. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 101.

60. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 102.

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## GENDER AND DIFFERENCE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

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