

# EMPIRE AND GENDER IN LXX ESTHER

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Number 48



# EMPIRE AND GENDER IN LXX ESTHER

Meredith J. Stone



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## Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	Freedman, David Noel. <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
AGJU	Arbeiten zure Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums
A.J.	Josephus, <i>Antiquitates judaicae</i>
ANET	Pritchard, James B., ed. <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . 3rd ed. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969.
AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentary
APB	<i>Acta Patristica et Byzantina</i>
AT	Alpha Text of Esther
AUSTR	American University Studies, Series 7: Theology and Religion
b.	Babylonian Talmud
BCAW	Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World
BDAG	Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilber Gingrich. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BHAW	Blackwell Histories of the Ancient World
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
B.J.	Josephus, <i>Bellum judaicum</i>
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
<i>BJS</i>	<i>British Journal of Sociology</i>
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
<i>BTB</i>	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBSC	Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges
CSSCA	Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology
<i>Cyr.</i>	Xenophon, <i>Cyropaedia</i>
EJL	Early Judaism and Its Literature
<i>ER</i>	<i>Ecumenical Review</i>
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
<i>Flacc.</i>	Philo, <i>In Flaccum</i>
<i>GELS</i>	Muraoka, Takamitsu. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint</i> . Leuven: Peeters, 2009.
<i>HBT</i>	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HDR	Harvard Dissertations in Religion
<i>Hist.</i>	Herodotus, <i>Historiae</i>
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>INJ</i>	<i>Israel Numismatic Journal</i>
ISBL	Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature
<i>JAAR</i>	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JES</i>	<i>Journal of Ecumenical Studies</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JSJSup	Journal of Ancient Judaism Supplement
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
KAT	Kommentar zum Alten Testament
LBS	Library of Biblical Studies
Let. Aris.	Letter of Aristeas
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies

LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LSTS	Library of Second Temple Studies
LXX	Septuagint
Meg.	Megillah
MNTS	McMaster New Testament Studies
MS(S)	manuscript(s)
MT	Masoretic Text
NCB	New Century Bible Commentary
<i>NIB</i>	Keck, Leander E., ed. <i>New Interpreter's Bible</i> . 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994–2004.
<i>NIDB</i>	Sakenfeld, Katharine Doob, ed. <i>New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006–2009.
NovTSup	Supplements to Novum Testamentum
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
<i>OEBI</i>	McKenzie, Steven L., ed. <i>Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation</i> . 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
OL	Old Latin
OTL	Old Testament Library
<i>PAAJR</i>	<i>Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research</i>
Pss. Sol.	Psalms of Solomon
R.	Rabbi
Rab.	Rabbah
<i>RelSRev</i>	<i>Religious Studies Review</i>
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumrân</i>
<i>Rhet.</i>	Aristotle, <i>Rhetorica</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SCS	Septuagint and Cognate Studies
SDSS	Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SJLA	Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity
SVTG	Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum Auctoritate Academiae Scientiarum Gottingensis editum
SymS	Symposium Series
TCS	Text-Critical Studies
<i>TDNT</i>	Kittel, Gerhard, and Gerhard Friedrich, ed. <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Translated by Geoffrey Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.

TENTS	Texts and Editions for New Testament Study
<i>Text</i>	<i>Textus</i>
T. Levi	Testament of Levi
T. Mos.	Testament of Moses
<i>Tradition</i>	<i>Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought</i>
TSAJ	Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
WW	<i>Word and World</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

## Introduction

Esther is a book set in the center of the Persian Empire. It has a king, two queens, and courtiers for its main characters, and demonstrations of imperial power abound in the plot. But while it cannot be denied that Esther is a book about empire, scholarly discussions of empire and its negotiation in Esther have been minimal. Empire in Esther has only been considered a minor detail to explore but never analyzed as the book's main actor, stage, setting, plot complication, and denouement.

In this study I provide a synchronic reading of the Septuagint version of Esther (hereafter referred to as LXX Esther) utilizing an imperial-critical approach that foregrounds the exertion and negotiation of Persian imperial power with attention to the performance of gender within the interplay of power. This reading of LXX Esther is primarily literary in nature and focuses on the world of the text. In the reading I foreground the imperial context of the Persian Empire as it is portrayed in the narrative of the book and place it in dialogue with social-scientific models and postcolonial concepts that illustrate the structures of empire and the varied forms of its negotiation. In addition, I demonstrate that the performances of gender depicted in the narrative are inextricably intertwined with the structures and negotiation of imperial power, most prevalently the interconnected nature of hegemonic masculinity and Persian imperial power.

While I focus primarily on a literary reading of the exertion of imperial power and its negotiation in LXX Esther, I also argue that the negotiation with the Persian Empire literarily present in LXX Esther has multiple points of connection with the range of imperial power experienced by Jewish people in the late Second Temple period. Though precise dating of the translation/compilation/writing of LXX Esther is difficult to achieve, I establish two potential reading locations for the earliest readers of LXX Esther in Ptolemaic Alexandria and Hasmonean Judea in the early first century BCE. These locations provide settings for sociohistorical connec-

tions with a literary reading of LXX Esther through the lenses of empire and gender and demonstrate why such a reading is plausible.

I have chosen to focus my reading on LXX Esther because I find that when read synchronically with the Additions in their integrated locations, an added emphasis on Persian imperial presence and its negotiation is found. Additions B and E are copies of imperial edicts that give further voice to imperial power; Additions C and D offer internal reflections from the characters of Mordecai and Esther that reveal the motivations behind their actions of negotiation; and Additions A and F contain apocalyptic themes similar to the apocalyptic literature of the late Second Temple period, which has been demonstrated to reflect imperial negotiation.<sup>1</sup> The same case may be constructed for reading the Greek Alpha text of Esther (hereafter referred to as AT Esther) through the same lenses. However, manuscript evidence for AT Esther, only surviving in four manuscripts, is scant when compared to the more widely known LXX Esther, which survives in thirty-six manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> Because I seek to offer a reading of LXX Esther that would have been plausible for historical contexts shaped by imperial power, I choose to focus on the more widely known and evidenced text. Additionally, while AT Esther has been the subject of significant work, contemporary scholarly attention to LXX Esther has been negligible. Emanuel Tov writes, “It can be said that the Septuagint version of Esther has been the stepchild of LXX research over the past half century.”<sup>3</sup> With a synchronic reading through the lenses of empire and gender, I seek to add a new voice to the minimal conversation surrounding LXX Esther.

In order to conduct this reading of LXX Esther, the first chapter of this study provides a framework for locating LXX Esther and defining

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1. Anthea Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire: Theologies of Resistance in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011); Richard A. Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007); and Horsley, *Revolt of the Scribes: Resistance and Apocalyptic Origins* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

2. Karen H. Jobes, *The Alpha-Text of Esther: Its Character and Relationship to the Masoretic Text*, SBLDS 153 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 1–2.

3. Emanuel Tov, “The LXX Translation of Esther: A Paraphrastic Translation of MT or a Free Translation of a Rewritten Version?” in *Empsychoi Logoi: Religious Innovations in Antiquity, Studies in Honour of Pieter Willem van der Horst*, ed. A. Houtman, Albert de Jong, and Magdalena Wilhelmina Misset-van de Weg, AGJU 73 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 507.



the imperial-critical approach utilized, with considerable attention to the intersections between empire and gender studies. After this opening chapter, chapters 2 through 8 provide the synchronic reading of LXX Esther that is interspersed with connections to early readers in their imperial contexts. Chapter 2 offers interpretation of Addition A's framing of LXX Esther by introducing Mordecai and establishing the subsequent narrative as a contest for hegemonic masculinity between Artaxerxes and God waged by their representatives: Haman for Artaxerxes and Mordecai for God (11:2–12; 12:1–6). Chapter 3 considers the initial depiction of Artaxerxes and his imperial power and describes Vashti's negotiation of defiance to imperial power (1:1–12a). Chapter 4 continues by examining the imperial responses to Vashti's defiance that function to stabilize threatened hegemonic and complicit masculinities, but also create opportunities for multivalent negotiation (1:12b–2:20). Chapter 5 explores Mordecai's shifting methodology of imperial negotiation toward public defiance, and reads the edict of extermination as an imperial response to the threat that Mordecai's defiance created (2:21–3:13; 13:1–7; 3:14). Chapter 6 analyzes the public and private responses to the edict of extermination as subordinate transcripts of negotiation. These transcripts include the public responses of the Susaites, Mordecai, and Persian Jews, the private responses of Mordecai and Esther's conversation, and the prayers of Mordecai and Esther (3:15–4:17; 13:8–14:19). Chapter 7 describes Esther's initial negotiation with Artaxerxes on behalf of her people and as a representative of God. Esther's first negotiation includes flattery, euphemism, deference, and most pervasively, performances of feminine frailty and sexuality, which function as anonymity (15:1–16; 5:3–6:13). Chapter 8 elucidates Esther's additional two acts of negotiation with Artaxerxes, which utilize methodology similar to her first negotiation, and which result in the deliverance of her people and a victory for God, though in mimicry and ambivalence (6:14–8:12; 16:1–24; 8:13–14). The final section of chapter 8, then, provides brief comment on the aftermath of Esther's successful negotiation and the concluding notes of LXX Esther that further reinscribe power and demonstrate ambivalence (8:15–11:1).



# 1

## Preliminary Matters: Locating LXX Esther and Defining the Approach

This opening chapter introduces significant issues related to conducting an imperial-critical reading of LXX Esther. In the first section of this chapter, I locate LXX Esther in terms of textual history, dating, and provenance and then offer constructions of two early audiences for the book. Then, in the second section of this chapter, I define my approach for reading LXX Esther through the lenses of empire and gender. I explore the tenets and methodology of imperial-critical approaches and provide a brief summary of previous interpretation of Esther and empire to demonstrate how this study is situated within scholarship. Finally, I discuss gender studies and explore its intersections with imperial power and succinctly consider prior scholarship's contributions to explorations of gender in Esther.

### LOCATING LXX ESTHER

#### TEXTUAL HISTORY

Esther's textual history is considered briefly here in order to understand the development of LXX Esther. Though my reading of LXX Esther does not depend on any source theory since it focuses on the final form of LXX Esther, in this section I briefly outline the nature of the Esther texts and a sample of theories concerning Esther's complex textual history.

The book of Esther is unique in that there are three extant versions: the Hebrew Masoretic Text of Esther (hereafter referred to as MT Esther) and the two Greek texts—LXX Esther and AT Esther.<sup>1</sup> MT Esther is the

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1. Some scholars include Josephus's version of the Esther story as a third Greek text of Esther, which in addition to the Hebrew MT would make four extant versions.

chosen text for Jewish and Protestant canonical versions of Esther. The most widely known Greek version is LXX Esther, which is the basis for the versions of Esther found in Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox canons and in the group of books known as the Apocrypha. LXX Esther offers a Greek rendering of material found in MT Esther, but most notably it contains six substantial narrative expansions to the MT Esther material known as Additions A–F. In translating and editing the Vulgate, Jerome placed the Additions at the end of his translation of MT Esther. Jerome's placement of the Additions at the end of the book expressed his presumption that the Additions were secondary since no Semitic versions of the Additions could be found. However, the Additions, which elaborate on the Esther narrative at various points, are found interspersed throughout the MT Esther material in the Greek manuscripts available. AT Esther is significantly shorter than LXX Esther even though it also contains its own version of the six additions. Significant differences, though, exist throughout LXX Esther and AT Esther. For example, LXX Esther includes a Greek rendering of approximately 80 percent of the MT material, while AT Esther only contains around 50 percent of the MT material.<sup>2</sup>

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E.g., Charles V. Dorothy, *The Books of Esther: Structure, Genre and Textual Integrity*, JSOTSup 187 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 13–14. However, I follow the majority of scholars who include only MT Esther, LXX Esther, and AT Esther in their textual development considerations. E.g., Kristin De Troyer, *The End of the Alpha Text of Esther: Translation and Narrative Technique in MT 8:1–17, LXX 8:1–17, and AT 7:14–41*, SCS 48 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000); and Karen Jobes, *The Alpha-Text of Esther: Its Character and Relationship to the Masoretic Text*, SBLDS 153 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996). LXX Esther is also referred to as the B-text by many scholars in the twentieth century. There appeared to be discussion in past scholarship concerning whether the LXX text should be designated as the a-text or the b-text. See, e.g., Benno Jacob, “Das Buch Esther bei den LXX,” ZAW 10 (1890): 243; and Charles C. Torrey, “The Older Book of Esther,” in *Studies in the Book of Esther*, ed. Carey A. Moore (New York: Ktav, 1982), 452. Paul de Lagarde seems to have initiated referring to the Septuagint text as the B-text in his 1883 edition, which published the two Greek texts on facing pages. Paul de Lagarde, *Librorum Veteris Testamenti Canoniorum pars prior Graece* (Göttingen: Hoyer, 1883). Also, the Septuagint version of Esther is sometimes labeled δ, which is the Greek siglum for seventy, following Robert Hanhart's edition: *Esther*, SVTG 8.3 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966). AT Esther has also been labeled L or the L-text because of its association with the Lucianic recension of the Septuagint as discussed below.

2. Jobes, *Alpha-Text of Esther*, 148.

Central questions concerning the textual history of Esther include the following: (1) Do the various extant textual witnesses evidence multiple Semitic traditions of the Esther story? (2) If multiple Semitic traditions exist, which textual tradition is the oldest, and thus, what is the direction of any potential dependence between the extant texts? (3) Do the Additions have Semitic originals, or are they Greek constructions?

Until the mid-twentieth century, it was generally agreed that AT Esther was a Lucianic recension of LXX Esther's translation of and additions to MT Esther.<sup>3</sup> This general understanding would assume the existence of one Hebrew *Vorlage* or tradition underlying the "canonical material" of the three extant Esther texts.<sup>4</sup> But scholars such as Charles Torrey and Carey A. Moore shifted that understanding by asserting the existence of multiple Semitic traditions. Torrey (1944) posited that LXX Esther and AT Esther evidence two separate Aramaic *Vorlagen*, both of which were distinct from the Hebrew version found in MT Esther. Because Torrey found 2:1–8:21 of AT Esther to demonstrate greater unity than the first seven chapters of MT Esther, he argued that AT Esther was the older book of Esther.<sup>5</sup> Moore (1967) also argued against the premise of AT Esther's

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3. Notable exceptions include Benno Jacob and Elias Bickerman. Because of the free nature of LXX Esther's rendering of the canonical material, Jacob questioned LXX Esther's ability to provide a critical witness to MT Esther ("Buch Esther," 270). Elias Bickerman thought that AT Esther was a recension of LXX Esther; he did not make Lucianic association with AT Esther. Elias Bickerman, "Notes on the Greek Book of Esther," *PAAJR* 20 (1951): 106–33. See also, e.g., Otto F. Fritzsche, *Zusätze zu den Buch Esther*, Kurzgefasstes exegetisches Handbuch zu dem Apokryphen des ATs, I (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1851); Lagarde, *Librorum Veteris Testamenti Canoniconum* (1883); and Hanhart, *Esther*.

4. The phrase *canonical material* is pejorative in its reference to the MT Esther material as canonical since the Additions are a part of the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox canonical versions of Esther. However, in deference to the majority of scholars, I will refer to Additions A–F, also known as chs. 11–16 because of Jerome's placement of the material at the end of the book, as additions or expansions, and I will refer to chs. 1–10 as the canonical material, MT Esther material, or base narrative material.

5. Torrey, "Older Book of Esther," 456: "It appears, therefore, that we have to deal with a *twofold Semitic tradition* of the Esther narrative: the brief Hebrew version which lies before us in our canonical book, and a considerably longer Aramaic narrative now existing in Greek in two distinct forms, both quite unknown to modern scholars as of Aramaic origin and as in part representing two distinct translations" (emphasis original).

revision of LXX Esther and concluded that the differences between AT Esther and LXX Esther were not characteristic of the Lucianic recension of the Septuagint in its translation of other books. Thus, Moore argued that the additions, omissions, and variations in AT Esther were evidence of a different Hebrew *Vorlage* from either that of MT Esther or the one presupposed by LXX Esther.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1980s and 1990s the work of David Clines and Michael Fox continued the discussion of the textual history of Esther, and, specifically, AT Esther's separate development from LXX Esther. Clines's (1984) reconstruction of a multistage process to the development of Esther affirmed the existence of a distinct Hebrew *Vorlage* (proto-AT) for AT Esther that was formed from similar sources as proto-MT Esther. Neither proto-AT Esther nor proto-MT Esther contained the concept of the irrevocability of the Persian law or a Purim etiology, both of which were added in MT Esther but not AT Esther. Additionally, Clines asserted that both the prototexts contained religious language that the redactor of MT Esther removed. Thus, Clines argues that AT Esther evidences the older Esther tradition. The final stages in Clines's reconstruction describe how LXX Esther sought to assimilate MT Esther to a "scriptural norm" through its free translation and by inserting the Additions, which were later included by the redactor of AT Esther as well.<sup>7</sup>

With similar, though slightly different, conclusions, Fox (1991) claimed a proto-Esther source was used by both the author/redactor of MT Esther and the author/redactor of the proto-AT Esther. The author/redactor of MT Esther followed proto-Esther closely in chapters 1–7, then more expansively in chapter 8, and finally constructed a new ending in chapters 9–10 in order to support a liturgical purpose of providing an etiology for Purim. Unlike Clines, Fox argued that MT Esther does not remove religious language from its source, but rather that proto-AT Esther added religious language to a source that previously contained no reference to the God of the Jews. Further, Fox asserts that the translator/redactor of LXX Esther worked primarily with MT Esther to provide a loose translation and then added Additions A–F, whereas the redactor of AT Esther

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6. Carey A. Moore, "A Greek Witness to a Different Hebrew Text of Esther," *ZAW* 79 (1967): 351–58. Also see Moore, "The Greek Text of Esther" (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1965).

7. David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, JSOTSup 30 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984).

utilized proto-AT Esther for its translation of the canonical material and then employed LXX Esther as a donor text for the Additions.<sup>8</sup>

Three key points Clines and Fox make are as follows: (1) MT Esther and AT Esther witness two separate Semitic traditions of the Esther story; (2) LXX Esther was dependent upon MT Esther for the base narrative of Esther; (3) The final version of AT Esther was completed after LXX Esther, and it drew either directly from LXX Esther for the Additions or from the same sources as LXX Esther. Though the work of Clines and Fox has become well-respected and accepted by many scholars, other positions and dissent with the main points above have been registered.<sup>9</sup>

As to the number of Semitic traditions, Charles Dorothy (1997) and Jon Levenson (1997) perceive the existence of more than two Semitic *Vorlagen* for the Esther texts. Dorothy's form-critical assessment of the three texts of Esther (while also attentive to Josephus's version, the Old Latin, and the Old Greek) deduced the probability of multiple Semitic *Vorlagen*

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8. Michael V. Fox, *The Redaction of the Books of Esther: On Reading Composite Texts*, SBLMS 40 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991).

9. In addition to the dissenting positions that will be summarized in the main text, another deviating theory regarding Esther's textual development comes from the study of the Qumran scrolls. J. T. Milik has argued that six Aramaic fragments found in Qumran Cave 4, 4Q550, should be called 4Qproto-Esther Aramaic. Milik concludes that the Greek text of Esther from which the Old Latin (OL) is translated is the oldest Greek text of Esther with AT Esther and LXX Esther being developed later. The Greek *Vorlage* of the OL, Milik argues, was based on 4Q550. He says that MT Esther was actually a Hebrew translation of one of the Greek versions and was not produced until 70 CE. J. T. Milik, "Les Modèles Araméens du Livre d'Esther dans la Grotte 4 de Qumrân," *RevQ* 15 (1992): 321–39. However, Sidnie White Crawford argues that such clear connections and reliance cannot be made without heavy speculation, though she still finds connections between 4Q550 and Esther (both within the canonical material and the Additions). Sidnie White Crawford, "Has Esther Been Found at Qumran? 4QProto-Esther and the Esther Corpus," *RevQ* 17 (1996): 307–25. Her conclusion is that 4Q550 is better termed "Tales of the Persian Court," following Robert H. Eisenmann and Michael Wise, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Uncovered: The First Complete Translation and Interpretation of Fifty Key Documents Withheld for over Thirty-Five Years* (Rockport, MA: Element, 1992). Thus, 4Q550 may have served as a Semitic source for both proto-Esther (a predecessor of MT Esther and proto-AT) and the Additions. In 2000, Michael Wechsler proposed that 4Q550 does not represent a text or proto-text of Esther, but is a supplement to the Esther story, as well as to Ezra-Nehemiah, and functions as a prequel to Esther that is similar to the "Jew in the Foreign Court" genre. Michael Wechsler, "Two Para-Biblical Novellae From Qumran Cave 4: A Reevaluation of 4Q550," *DSD* 7 (2000): 130–72.

for the different textual traditions of Esther including different *Vorlagen* for MT Esther and LXX Esther.<sup>10</sup> Levenson has also argued for multiple Semitic traditions including a Semitic *Vorlagen* for LXX Esther that was not that same as MT Esther.<sup>11</sup> Levenson writes, “In the main, the Greek Version [LXX Esther] is itself a translation of a lost Hebrew original that was quite close to the MT but not ... identical to it.”<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, the priority of LXX Esther as older than AT Esther in its final form has also been questioned. Karen Jobes (1996) agreed with the general theory of Clines and Fox that MT Esther and AT Esther shared sources and developed into separate Semitic traditions of the Esther story. However, she finds that AT Esther, translated in Egypt from proto-AT Esther and to which the Semitic originals of Additions A, C, D, and F were added, existed prior to LXX Esther’s translation. Jobes adds that the translator of AT Esther either added Additions B and E or composed them himself. She posits that the Hasmonean dynasty and centralization of Jerusalem necessitated a new translation that would supplant the existing Greek Esther text (AT Esther) and bring it into agreement with the Hebrew text known in Jerusalem (MT Esther). The Additions were then copied from AT Esther to the LXX Esther.<sup>13</sup> Serge Frolov (2002) also argues for the priority of the final form of AT Esther over LXX Esther. Through an investigation of what he calls “the narrative of the botched regicide,” which is found in all three texts in various locations (MT Esth 2:21–23; LXX Esth 12:1–6, 2:21–23; AT Esth A:11b–8), Frolov concludes that the redactor/compiler of LXX Esther had both MT Esther and AT Esther at his disposal, which is why the account is doubled in LXX Esther.<sup>14</sup>

In stark contrast to Jobes and Frolov, Kristin De Troyer (2000) not only argues for AT Esther’s dependence on LXX Esther but returns to the

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10. Dorothy, *Books of Esther*, 277–349. See esp. p. 335 and diagrams on pp. 331–32.

11. Jon Levenson, *Esther*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

12. Levenson, *Esther*, 27. Levenson also describes how he follows the assumption that AT Esther is witness to a Hebrew tradition earlier than that of the MT. Thus, MT Esther, LXX Esther, and AT Esther are all derived from different Semitic *Vorlagen*. “The Alpha text (AT) contains a stratum that recounts the tale in ways that are different from both the MT and the LXX and cannot be derived from either of those closely related textual traditions” (32).

13. Jobes, *Alpha-Text of Esther*, see conclusions on pp. 223–33.

14. Serge Frolov, “Two Eunuchs, Two Conspiracies, and One Loyal Jew: The Narrative of Botched Regicide in Esther as Text- and Redaction-Critical Test Case,” *VT* 52 (2002): 304–25, see conclusions on pp. 323–24.



older hypothesis that states that AT Esther is actually a recension, or creative reworking, of LXX Esther.<sup>15</sup> By examining the end of AT Esther, De Troyer concludes that AT Esther was a recension of LXX Esther revised in the first century CE to elevate the character of Mordecai and equate the character with Agrippa I. With Mordecai's role elevated and more royal in AT Esther, De Troyer connects Agrippa's intercession to the Roman emperor Claudius on behalf of the Jews in Alexandria suffering under Flaccus to Mordecai's intercession with Artaxerxes on behalf of the Jews suffering under Haman.<sup>16</sup>

Previously, Emanuel Tov (1982) had also supported the older hypothesis of AT Esther's reliance on and revision of LXX Esther though with a distinct clarification. Tov maintained that the translator/redactor of AT Esther had MT Esther, LXX Esther, and an additional Hebrew text at his/her disposal. Tov argued that the additional Hebrew text was a midrashic-type rewriting of Esther that included Additions A, C, D, and F. The translator/redactor of AT Esther's purpose then was to "correct" LXX Esther toward the "rewritten" Hebrew text.<sup>17</sup> To come to this conclusion, Tov utilized the work of Moore (1973) and Raymond Martin (1975) who

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15. See De Troyer, *End of the Alpha Text of Esther*, 395–403. While De Troyer's book is the most recent comprehensive textual study of the three versions of Esther, a review by Sidnie White Crawford seems to indicate that De Troyer's conclusions are against the grain of Esther scholarship. White Crawford writes, "No one among Esther scholars today, I believe, would dispute that the AT was at some point revised in the light of the LXX. Thus, De Troyer's examples of where the AT shows its relationship to the LXX do not prove her hypothesis. Rather, it is in those places where the AT radically differs from the LXX that I find it difficult to accept the notion that the AT was simply a 'very free reworking' of the LXX." Sidnie White Crawford, review of *The End of the Alpha Text of Esther*, by Kristin De Troyer, *JAOS* 121 (2002): 131–32.

16. De Troyer, *End of the Alpha Text of Esther*, 395–403. Of LXX Esther, De Troyer posits that it translated and interpreted MT Esther in light of the events of the Maccabean revolt. She suggests that the letters of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his successor Antiochus V were a source of inspiration for LXX Esther's translator. She also contends that just as LXX Esther presents Jewish people as a loyal partner to a non-Jewish king, Jews in Ptolemaic Egypt had an alliance and loyal partnership with Ptolemy XII Auletos because he lacked support from Rome (398–99).

17. Emmanuel Tov, "The 'Lucianic' Text of the Canonical and Apocryphal Sections of Esther: A Rewritten Biblical Book," *Text* 10 (1982): 1–25. Prior to Tov, Torrey had argued that the Aramaic *Vorlage* of LXX Esther had included Additions A, C, D, and F, and that the translator had added Additions B and E ("Older Book of Esther," 472–75).

had considered the Additions' literary character, Hebraisms, theological content, and syntactical criteria of Semitic-to-Greek translations to determine which of the Additions had Semitic *Vorlagen*. Their conclusions were that Additions A, C, D, and F have Semitic *Vorlagen*, while B and E are original Greek compositions.<sup>18</sup>

In 2008, Tov returned to considering Esther's textual history by examining LXX Esther. Similar to his argument for a Hebrew *Vorlage* for AT Esther that included the Semitic additions, Tov posits that a Hebrew *Vorlage* also existed for LXX Esther that was similar to MT Esther but also was expanded to contain Additions A, C, D, and F. Tov asserts that this extended Hebrew version of Esther was a rewritten version of the story similar to other Second Temple rewritten biblical texts such as 3 Kingdoms, Dan 4–6, the Samaritan Pentateuch, 11QT, Genesis Apocryphon, and Jubilees. LXX Esther, then, is a free translation of this Hebrew rewritten version of Esther and the royal edicts in B and E were likely added by the translator.<sup>19</sup>

Tov's premise concerning a longer Hebrew *Vorlage* is compelling since the Additions on their own are not complete texts and would have been unintelligible separate from the canonical Esther story. Though Clines's reconstruction of the Esther's textual history indicates that the Additions are secondary to LXX Esther's translation of the canonical material and existed independently before being inserted into the LXX translation, Clines even admits that he cannot prove the Additions' independent existence: "It is perhaps not impossible, for example, that the Semitic additions

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18. Carey A. Moore, "On the Origins of the LXX Additions to the Book of Esther," *JBL* 92 (1973): 382–93; Raymond A. Martin, "Syntax Criticism of the LXX Additions to the Book of Esther," *JBL* 94 (1975): 65–72; and Moore, *Daniel, Esther, and Jeremiah: The Additions*, AB 44 (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 155. In his initial article, Moore was unsure about Addition D, though Martin's work confirmed Addition D was a translation. However, Martin said his criteria yielded unclear results about Addition F.

19. Tov, "LXX translation of Esther," 507–26; Tov, "Three Strange Books of the LXX," in *Die Septuaginta—Texte, Kontexte, Lebenswelten: Internationale Fachtagung Veranstaltet von Septuaginta Deutsch*, WUNT 219 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 369–93. Though De Troyer does not suggest a Hebrew *Vorlage* which contained the Additions, she also uses the term "rewritten" biblical text in reference to LXX Esther though she suggests the Greek translator was the creator of the rewritten text. Kristin De Troyer, *Rewriting the Sacred Text: What the Old Greek Texts Tell Us about the Literary Growth of the Bible*, TCS 4 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 9–28.

were incorporated into a *Hebrew* text prior to the translation of the LXX.”<sup>20</sup> However, unless further manuscript evidence is uncovered, Tov’s theory is difficult to prove. Further, given the fluidity of Esther’s authoritative status in the late Second Temple period, it would be difficult to label any version of Esther “rewritten” since that would imply that a written authoritative version existed at the time.<sup>21</sup> Tov’s theory does, however, provide a move toward considering the Additions synchronically with the rest of the book, as is my aim.

As evidenced in the brief discussion above, the textual history of the three extant texts of Esther is quite complex and views on the subject are varied. Since this study provides a reading of the final form of LXX Esther, it is unnecessary to rehearse, defend, and dismiss further details of each position. I will note, however, that in light of what De Troyer has termed the “general consensus” of scholarship in understanding the dependence of LXX Esther on MT Esther and the similarities between MT Esther and LXX Esther in the canonical material, I will draw upon the work of contemporary scholars on both LXX Esther and MT Esther to conduct my synchronic reading of LXX Esther.<sup>22</sup> A synchronic reading of the canonical material and each of the Additions in their integrated locations is similar to the method of Lewis Paton and Levenson in their commentaries, though each interprets the canonical material from MT Esther and the Additions from LXX Esther instead of reading LXX Esther as a discrete text.<sup>23</sup>

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20. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 69. Also see Clines’s diagram on p. 140. Fox’s diagram on the history of the Esther texts also seems to agree with Clines on the independent existence of the Additions (*Redaction of the Books of Esther*, 9). Quotation is from Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 186 n. 3, emphasis original. Moore also labels the Additions as secondary but acknowledges the possibility that some of them were a part of a Semitic text of Esther at a later point (*Additions*, 153–55).

21. Sidnie White Crawford describes criteria for understanding “rewritten” scripture—one of which is that an authoritative version needed to exist for a rewritten version to surface. Sidnie White Crawford, *Rewriting Scripture in Second Temple Times*, SDSS (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–15.

22. De Troyer offers a thorough history of scholarship in Esther textual studies and reaches the conclusion that scholarship of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has, by-and-large, come to agreement on LXX Esther’s reliance on MT Esther (*End of the Alpha Text of Esther*, 15–71, see esp. p. 37).

23. Lewis B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, ICC 13 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), v–vi; Levenson, *Esther*, 28.

## DATING AND PROVENANCE

This section considers the dating and provenance of LXX Esther's final form in order to establish potential reading locations for the earliest readers of the book and their sociohistorical settings as related to the dynamics of imperial power.

The *terminus ad quem* for LXX Esther is the estimated date applied to Josephus's paraphrase of the Greek version of Esther with Additions in *Jewish Antiquities* (93–94 CE).<sup>24</sup> For those who establish dependence between LXX Esther and the MT Esther, the *terminus a quo* of LXX Esther would be the completion of MT Esther. However, an exact date for the final composition of MT Esther has never been firmly agreed upon by scholarship. A spectrum for dating MT Esther begins with the reign of Xerxes I of Persia (486–465 BCE) as the earliest possible date because of the posited fictionalized inclusion of this historical figure.<sup>25</sup> But due to the inaccuracies, implausibilities, or exaggerations surrounding the Persian Empire that appear in the book, most commentators have deduced that at least some measure of distance from the reign of the historical Xerxes I must have existed.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, commentators of MT Esther, such as Adele Berlin, Fox, and Levenson, settle on dates in either the late Persian period or the early Hellenistic era (400–200 BCE).<sup>27</sup> A minority view situates the

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24. Moore, *Additions*, 161.

25. Adele Berlin, *Esther: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2001), xli–xlii; Frederic Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, WBC 9 (Dallas: Word Books, 1996), 295–96.

26. See, e.g., Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 131–34. Among the various inaccuracies and implausibilities Fox mentions are the number of provinces/satrapies of the Persian empire (Esther mentions 127 satrapies while only 20–31 existed), and the unlikelihood that the historical Xerxes would issue an edict like the one in 1:22. Such creative license would likely only take place sometime after the actual setting of the fifth-century Persian Empire that is portrayed by the mention of Xerxes I.

27. Berlin dates Esther to the late Persian era (400–300 BCE) because a linguistic analysis shows MT Esther's Hebrew to be similar to the Late Biblical Hebrew of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles, and because she finds the book to be a burlesque of the Persian court which she writes, "would be less effective after the Persian Empire ceased to exist" (*Esther*, xli–xlii). Fox lands on a third century dating, finding MT Esther's Hebrew to be at the end of the Late Biblical Hebrew spectrum (*Character and Ideology*, 139–40). (For analysis of MT Esther's Hebrew, see Ron Bergey, "Late Linguistic

final composition of MT Esther in the late second century BCE.<sup>28</sup> When scholars locate MT Esther in the late second century, they associate the persecution of Jewish people in Esther with the horrors experienced by Judeans under Seleucid control in the early 160s BCE. With a late date, the Persian locale of the story is considered to be intentionally separated from

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Features in Esther,” *JQR* 75 [1984]: 66–78, and Bergey, “Post-exilic Hebrew Linguistic Developments in Esther: A Diachronic Approach,” *JETS* 31 [1988]: 161–68.) Fox also discounts MT Esther as Persian since he says it is “unlikely that a writer would refer to the 127 satrapies of Persia while the Persian Empire was still in existence, any more than a modern work about the United States would be accepted as history if it spoke of the 300 States of the Union” (139). Levenson writes that MT Esther was “probably written in the fourth or third century BCE, but the dearth of Jewish literature that can be securely dated to those centuries and the complete absence of compositions known to come from the Persian Jewry in antiquity make it extremely difficult to place the book within the frameworks and typologies that are available” (*Esther*, 25–26). Levenson notes the linguistic evidence, attitudes toward the Persian Empire, and also contrasts MT Esther with literature that stems from after the Seleucid persecution.

28. Ruth Stiehl was an early proponent of a late date for Esther (“Das Buch Esther,” in Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther*, 249–67). In addition to arguing from the similarities between Esther and Daniel saying they “atmen den gleichen Geist” (“breathe the same spirit”), Stiehl also makes a case from archaeological evidence from Susa since in Esther the *apandana* is on the same hill with the court, but such was not the case until the time of Antiochus III (223–187 BCE). Carey A. Moore dispels her argument by noting that the use of midrashic sources can easily explain Stiehl’s main points. Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, AB 7B (Garden City, NY: Doubleday), 1971 lix. More recently, a strong argument for a late date has been made by Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World*, Myth and Poetics (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 1–15, 99–100. Wills identifies Esther, Daniel, Tobit, Judith, and Joseph and Aseneth as belonging to a genre he calls the Jewish novel. According to Wills, these novels emerged after a dark age in Jewish literary history that ended around the time of the Maccabean revolt (167–164 BCE). Wills has three principal reasons for his dating. First, Wills considers a scene of revenge and forced conversions (as found in chs. 8 and 9 of MT Esther) to have a historical equal only one place in Jewish history—the Hasmonean kingdom under John Hyrcanus. Second, the prohibition against Jewish practices by Antiochus IV is often regarded as the first religious persecution in history. Wills states, then, that it would have been unlikely for widespread persecution to play a crucial role in the story of Esther had it not already been a part of the popular consciousness. Third, the Persian influence in the book can be more easily explained from the distance of a late second century setting—a Persian king could be portrayed amicably since the Persians had aided the Hasmoneans, and Persian customs and words were included to support the novelistic setting in Persia while Greek loanwords were excluded for the same reason.

its contemporary reality under the Seleucid regime to create a fictionalized setting.<sup>29</sup> Arguments against a late second-century date contend that an amicable view of Artaxerxes at the end of the book would not exist at a time when extreme dissension existed between the Jewish people and a non-Jewish king.<sup>30</sup> Thus, these arguments surrounding MT Esther's date create a wide span for locating LXX Esther: sometime between the final composition of MT Esther (fifth century to the second century BCE) and Josephus's apparent use of LXX Esther for his paraphrase (93–94 CE).

Another clue to dating LXX Esther is found in its colophon, which states, "In the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, Dositheus, who said that he was a priest and Levite, and his son Ptolemy brought to Egypt the preceding Letter about Purim, which they said was authentic and had been translated by Lysimachus son of Ptolemy, one of the residents of Jerusalem" (11:1).<sup>31</sup> Elias Bickerman identified the Ptolemy mentioned in the colophon with Ptolemy XII, thus dating the delivery of the Greek translation of Esther with Additions to Alexandria in 78/77 BCE.<sup>32</sup> Bickerman further notes that the style of the Greek is similar to that used in Jerusalem during the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (103–76

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29. Wills, *Jewish Novel*, 100.

30. E.g., Berlin, *Esther*, xlii; Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 295–96; Levenson, *Esther*, 26. For the purposes of this study, the name "Artaxerxes" is chosen to represent the character called אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ (Ahasuerus) in MT Esther, Ἀσσηςῆρος (Ahasuerus) in AT Esther, and Ἀρταξέρξης (Artaxerxes) in LXX Esther since that is the name given the king in the focal text of this study.

31. Unless otherwise noted, this study utilizes the New Revised Standard Version's translation of LXX Esther.

32. Elias J. Bickerman, "The Colophon of the Greek Book of Esther," *JBL* 63 (1944): 339–62. Bickerman finds only three Ptolemies associated with a Cleopatra in the fourth year of their reign. But in the fourth year of Ptolemy IX Soter (114–113 BCE) and Ptolemy XIII (49–48 BCE), the queen acted as a regent for her son or brother, thus the queen's name preceded the king's name on documents. Thus, the Ptolemy of the colophon must be Ptolemy XII Auletos and his fourth year of reign dates to 78–77 BCE. While Bickerman's article is indeed dated, his argument is strong and many contemporary scholars continue to accept, or at least note, his conclusion. Recently, Tricia Miller has proposed that in addition to a date of 78/77 BCE (which she concedes is generally accepted by scholars) a date of 142 BCE in the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy VIII and Cleopatra II is equally viable as a referent for the deliverance of LXX Esther to Alexandria mentioned in the colophon. Though, due to her perception that strong anti-Semitism was present in Alexandria in the second century BCE, she concludes that 142 BCE fits better the themes she reads in LXX Esther.

BCE).<sup>33</sup> Though the inclusion of Ptolemy and Cleopatra's names in the colophon may also be a historicizing detail, evidence to doubt its validity does not abound as is the case with implausible descriptions of the Persian Empire found throughout the book of Esther.<sup>34</sup>

The colophon insinuates that LXX Esther came into its present form by 78/77 BCE and was brought to Egypt (presumably Alexandria) from Jerusalem—the place of its creation. LXX Esther, as well as MT Esther, has often been regarded as having a prodiasporic character and some have even suggested a diaspora provenance for MT Esther instead of a Judean one.<sup>35</sup> On whether or not MT Esther was composed in the diaspora, I do not wish to argue. However, since sufficient reason to question the colophon of LXX Esther does not exist, I suggest a Judean provenance for LXX Esther but with some intention for it to travel for diasporic readings, specifically Ptolemaic Egypt.

#### PTOLEMAIC AND HASMONEAN AUDIENCES IN THE FIRST CENTURY BCE

The following section first notes how scholars have presented evidence of connections between LXX Esther and audiences in first-century BCE Ptolemaic Egypt and Hasmonean Judea. Then, constructions of these audiences are offered. In no way are these constructions intended to be complete by the standards of historical criticism, but are merely offered as examples of the perspectives readers in these locations may have had. The aim of this study is not primarily historical in nature but is to offer an imperial-critical literary reading that would have been plausible for the early readers of LXX Esther in their imperial contexts as constructed here.

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Tricia Miller, *Three Versions of Esther: Their Relationship to Anti-Semitic and Feminist Critique of the Story*, CBET 74 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 113–19, 137–43.

33. Bickerman, "Notes on the Greek Book of Esther," 115.

34. Moore, *Additions*, 161. John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 111.

35. See, e.g., Arndt Meinhold, "Die Gattung der Josephsgeschichte und des Estherbuches," *ZAW* 87 (1975): 306–24; W. Lee Humphreys, "Lifestyle for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel," *JBL* 92 (1973): 211–23; Robert Gordis, "Religion, Wisdom, and History in the Book of Esther: A New Solution to an Ancient Crux," *JBL* 100 (1981): 375; Sidnie Ann White [Crawford], "Esther: A Feminine Model for Diaspora," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 161–77.



## JEWS IN PTOLEMAIC EGYPT/ALEXANDRIA

Specifically, because the colophon indicates that LXX Esther was delivered to Egypt, we may assume some interest in the book being read by the community of Jewish people in Ptolemaic Egypt in the early first century BCE.<sup>36</sup> Observing some measure of Egyptian influence in LXX Esther,

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36. Considerable discussion has taken place concerning the nature of the designation Ἰουδαῖος or Ἰουδαῖοι as “Judean” or “Jew.” Richard Horsley, Shaye Cohen, Cynthia Baker, and Amy-Jill Levine provide examples of the nature of this discussion. Richard Horsley argues that religion was embedded in the political and socio-economic life of people living in Judea in the first and second centuries CE, thus there was no need for a religious designation of Judaism or Jews. Richard Horsley, *Galilee: History, Politics, People* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 1–15. More relevant to the time frame of this study, Shaye Cohen surveys inscriptions and literary evidence to demonstrate that prior to 100 BCE, Ἰουδαῖος or Ἰουδαῖοι always referred to an ethnic-geographic designation of people who originated from Judea with a particular set of cultural institutions including religion. However, after the demise of the Hasmonean state, the political definition of the term faded into a more religious definition (those who believed in the God of the Judeans). Shaye Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*, Hellenistic Culture and Society 31 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 69–106. Cynthia Baker complicates Cohen’s concept of Ἰουδαῖος/Ἰουδαῖοι as primarily an ethnic-geographic representation with later religious connotations, by demonstrating the continuous multiethnic and multiracial nature of the Jewish people. Thus, Ἰουδαῖος or Ἰουδαῖοι may be more of an ethnoreligious designation than an ethnic-geographic one. Cynthia Baker, “From Every Nation under Heaven: Jewish Ethnicities in the Greco-Roman World,” in *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies*, ed. Laura Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 79–99. Amy-Jill Levine also demonstrates the great diversity among Judaisms in the first century CE that are important for scholars to note and describes how there is not one universal sense of being “a Jew” at any point in history. Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperSan-Francisco, 2006), 119–66. However, she argues, that if “Jew” is replaced with “Judean” in the New Testament in particular, “thus we have a *Judenrein* (‘Jew-free’) text, a text purified of Jews” (160). For the purpose of this study, I have chosen to use the terms *Jew* and *Jews* to keep the ethnoreligious element of identity, per Baker, at the forefront. Cohen’s study also denotes the complication of a solely ethnic-geographic designation post-100 BCE as is the time frame suggested by this study. But like Levine, I would be remiss if I did not note the diversities of Judaisms and Jewishness in the first century BCE as well as the first century CE. As Levine states, “But by all means ... when we write or teach, we might think about that young man with the swastika and the jack-boots. What sins of commission have we made in the classroom, in the pulpit, in the



John J. Collins notes connections between LXX Esther and a setting in Ptolemaic Alexandria.<sup>37</sup> He observes that the identification of Haman as a Macedonian relates well to Alexandrian Jews since “the relevant courtiers who were rivals to the [Alexandrian] Jews were the Macedonians.”<sup>38</sup> Additionally, Collins finds that the separatist piety of Esther reflects well the Hasmonean milieu. Collins posits that the exclusive and nationalist view of the Hasmoneans is reflected in LXX Esther’s commendation to Alexandrian Jews to be separatist in their religious observance as in festivals such as Purim.<sup>39</sup> But despite their exclusive religious practice, Alexandrian Jews would also be commended to maintain political allegiance in order that they may rise in service of the kingdom in which they live.<sup>40</sup> Another scholar who finds connection between LXX Esther and Ptolemaic Egypt is De Troyer. De Troyer connects the Jewish community faithful to the reigning non-Jewish king in LXX Esther with Jews in Ptolemaic Egypt who were loyal to Ptolemy XII Auletos because he sought an alliance with Jews when he lacked support from Rome.<sup>41</sup>

As to the situation of Jews in Ptolemaic Egypt, the city of Alexandria yields the most evidence in constructing a portrait of Jewish life in Egypt. Evidence suggests that Jews in Ptolemaic Alexandria in the second and first centuries BCE were able to interact in political, social, and eco-

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religious education bulletin that could have made his move to Nazi ideology easier? And what sins of omission might we have committed such that we failed to keep him on the path of love rather than of hate?” (*Misunderstood Jew*, 166).

37. Both Moore and Collins note Egyptian influence in LXX Esther (Moore, *Additions*, 161, 166; Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 110). Jacob even argued that the colophon should be rejected in terms of Judean provenance in favor of Egyptian in light of several Greek renderings of Hebrew words—such as ἐθονισθη for כַּסְתּוּ מַלְכוּתוֹ in 1:2 (“Buch Esther,” 280–87). However, as Moore points out, Egyptian influence can exist without discarding the claim of the colophon since “the translator had some sort of Egyptian background since Lysimachus’ father had an Egyptian name, Ptolemy” (*Additions*, 161 n. 17).

38. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 112.

39. Collins does note that the use of Greek language and style is compatible with a separatist view of Judaism, as he demonstrates is also the case in the epic of Theodotus. In both LXX Esther and the epic of Theodotus, nationalism is blended with Hellenization, which demonstrates that the Judaizing policies of the Hasmoneans were not religious in intent, but rather political (*Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 60, 111–12).

40. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 112.

41. De Troyer, *End of the Alpha-Text of Esther*, 398–99.

conomic realms of life. Describing the situation of Jews in Alexandria, Erich Gruen writes,

It [testimony from Egypt] suggests that the Jews in the Ptolemaic era fared surprisingly well.... Jews enrolled in regular units of the army, could obtain rank, and received land grants like any others in the lists of the royal forces.... Jews, in fact, can [also] be found at various levels of the Hellenistic administration in Egypt, as tax-farmers and tax-collectors, as bankers and granary officials. No barriers, it appears, existed to prevent their engagement of the social and economic world of Ptolemaic Egypt. By the time of the early Roman principate (and doubtless earlier) the Jews in that land were shop-owners, farmers, merchants, shippers, traders and artisans. They even turn up as policeman.<sup>42</sup>

But even though Jews were able to perform various functions within the socioeconomic world of Ptolemaic Alexandria, John Barclay also adds, "We may assume that the bulk of the Jewish residents in Alexandria were of limited means."<sup>43</sup> Aryeh Kasher writes of Jews in Ptolemaic Alexandria, "By nature of their work, however, they were simple people earning meager living by the sweat of their brow. It seems proper therefore to place them on the lower rungs of the social ladder, and that position was probably reflected in their civic stratification."<sup>44</sup> It is important to remember that while some Jews were able to integrate into Alexandrian socioeconomic systems, integration was not necessarily the equivalent of equal standing or advancement.

Politically, though there is reason to doubt that Jews had Alexandrian citizenship, Philo (*Flacc.* 53) and Josephus (*A.J.* 14.188) assert that Jews termed themselves "Alexandrians."<sup>45</sup> But even though they identified

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42. Erich S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 68. Also found in Gruen, "Jews and Greeks," in *A Companion to the Hellenistic World*, ed. Andrew Erskine, BAW (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 274. Gruen draws this information about the range of roles Alexandrian Jews were able to fill from Aryeh Kasher, *The Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt: The Struggle for Equal Rights*, TSAJ 7 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1985), 29–74.

43. John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), 43.

44. Kasher, *Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, 73–74.

45. For citizenship, see P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria, Vol 1: Text* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 54–55; also, Kasher, *Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, 29–30. For the Jews calling themselves Alexandrians, see Gruen, "Jews and Greeks," 275.

themselves with their city, most of the Alexandrian Jews, which grew to a great number, lived in a separate (though not ghettoized) portion of the city known by the letter Δ—the Delta quarter.<sup>46</sup> Here Alexandrian Jews were able to achieve a rare degree of autonomy, perhaps having their own administration, legal system, or even an ethnarch.<sup>47</sup> P. M. Fraser notes that the separate administration of the Alexandrian Jewish community was a mark of esteem, but Barclay perceives that such separation may have also been a cause for discontent between Jews and non-Jews in Alexandria who may have viewed the separation as a sign of favoritism.<sup>48</sup>

Other issues Barclay cites as problematic for relationships among Jews and non-Jews were matters of Jewish involvement in political affairs. In the dispute between Ptolemy Philometor and Euergetes II (also known as Physcon) in the mid-second century BCE, some Jews sided with Philometor and were able to rise in prominence when he was on the winning side. However, in the moments when Euergetes, who had considerable support in the city among non-Jews, found success, some Jews were subject to great persecution and possibly even a considerable massacre.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, later some Jews were able to influence Cleopatra

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46. The Letter of Aristeas, a source from the third or second century BCE, relays that Ptolemy I removed up to one hundred thousand Jews from Judea to Egypt (Let. Aris. 12–13, 35–36), though Gruen notes that the numbers are “inflated and incredible” (“Jews and Greeks,” 274). In a later source, Philo (*Flacc.* 43) claims there were one million Jews in Alexandria in the early Roman period, but according to Barclay, his numbers should be “taken with a pinch of salt” (*Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 41). Nevertheless, the size of these numbers should indicate the significant size of the Jewish community at Alexandria. For the lack of a Jewish ghetto, see Gruen, “Jews and Greeks,” 273. Joseph Méléze Modrzejewski describes the synagogues that existed in other parts of Alexandria and writes, “Jews also lived elsewhere in Alexandria; the philosopher Philo informs us that there were several synagogues in all the sectors of the city (*Embassy to Gaius*, 132).” Joseph Méléze Modrzejewski, *The Jews of Egypt from Rameses II to Emperor Hadrian*, trans. Robert Cornman with a foreword by Shaye J. D. Cohen (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 91.

47. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 43.

48. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 55. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 38–41, 45–46.

49. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 37–39. Fraser also describes the events that unfolded between Philometor and Euergetes and the Jews involvement, and writes, “Shortly after his return, too, he [Euergetes] turned against the population, particularly the supporters of Philometor, the Greek population, and the Jews, and there seems to have been a considerable massacre, stretching over a long period,

into not occupying Hasmonean Judea (late second or early first century BCE), which resulted in a perception of suspect loyalties among Jews and possibly also a violent outbreak against them in 88 BCE.<sup>50</sup> This pattern of distrust of Jews by the non-Jewish Alexandrians was perpetuated when Alexandrian Jews and the Hasmonean dynasty aided Rome in the early first century BCE.<sup>51</sup>

But despite potential dissension between Jews and non-Jews in Alexandria based on their separation, rise to influence, and loyalties in political matters, Gruen argues that Alexandrian Jews, like other diaspora Jews, were unapologetic about their hybridized identities.<sup>52</sup> Gruen acknowledges the loyalties Alexandrian, and other diaspora, Jews had to the “homeland” with Jerusalem and the temple as the center, or metropolis, to their Jewish colonies. Loyalty to the center was even demonstrated by some with a yearly pilgrimage to pay a tithe to the temple.<sup>53</sup> However, finding no tension with their local communities in these acts of loyalty, Gruen writes, “Commitment to the local community and devotion to Jerusalem were entirely compatible.”<sup>54</sup>

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though details are lacking. This is the more regrettable since the proportions which were assigned to it, and to the accompanying measures, by our ancient sources show them to have been one of the milestones in the decline of civilized society in Alexandria” (*Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 121). Tricia Miller examines Greek writings about Jews (Manetho, third century BCE; Lysimachus, second century BCE; Diodorus, first century BCE; Apion first century BCE) and argues that with or without evidence of actual persecution, anti-Semitism toward Jewish people was present in second and first century Alexandria where LXX Esther was delivered (*Three Versions of Esther*, 119–28).

50. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 39–40.

51. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 40–41. With all these tensions existing between Jews and non-Jews, Günther Hölbl even finds that “Alexandria was rife with anti-Semitism at the beginning of the first century BCE.” Günther Hölbl, *A History of the Ptolemaic Empire*, trans. Tina Saavedra (New York: Routledge, 2001), 211.

52. Gruen, “Jews and Greeks,” 275–77.

53. Gruen, “Jews and Greeks,” 275–77. Modrzejewski also notes that the Hasmoneans were aware of the goodwill brought upon them by the Egyptian Jews and thus sought to bolster their ties by inviting the Egyptian Jews to join them in celebrating the Feast of Hanukkah (2 Macc 1:1–9) (*Jews of Egypt*, 122–23). In a similar manner, perhaps the delivery of LXX Esther invited the Egyptian Jews to join in celebrating the Feast of Purim in order to strengthen their connection.

54. Gruen, “Jews and Greeks,” 276.

Fraser also finds little tension among the religious commitments of Alexandrian Jews. Religiously, Fraser states that Alexandrian Jews had relative freedom in their religious practice of reading from the Septuagint, practicing circumcision and Sabbath, and observing religious festivals.<sup>55</sup> Evidence of some accommodation to their surrounding culture can be found in synagogue inscriptions and dedications, which are to “the Most High God,” but also “on behalf of” the reigning sovereign.<sup>56</sup> But while synagogues were dedicated on behalf of the sovereign, the Ptolemies granted asylum to the synagogues and did not force dynastic cult worship.<sup>57</sup> Even though some extreme Jewish orthodox circles existed as attested by the Sybilline Oracles, Fraser concludes, “On the whole the Jews were content to accommodate themselves to the pagan world in the required degree, and probably neither proselytization nor apostasy was frequent.”<sup>58</sup> Gruen makes similar observations on matters of religious asylum and the commitments of Alexandrian Jews and also concludes that no religious tension existed for them nor did choices between assimilation and adherence to faith.<sup>59</sup>

With descriptions of accommodation to Ptolemaic culture interspersed with moments of social tension and even political persecution, Alexandrian Jews likely experienced ambivalence toward Ptolemaic Egypt. The concept of ambivalence will be discussed with greater detail later in this chapter, but at present it is worth noting that the appearance of accommodation and low levels of tension do not always match the feelings and motivations of colonized people. Neither do intermittent measures of persecution mean attitudes of persistent dissent must be present. Instead, it is more likely that Alexandrian Jews both appreciated and benefited from their Ptolemaic rulers, while simultaneously desiring to be free from the rule of Ptolemaic power.

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55. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 285. Evidence exists that Onias even established his own temple in Alexandria when he fled Judea around the time of the Maccabean crisis. This temple, with its own sacrificial system and priestly establishment, existed for more than two centuries before being destroyed in 73 CE. See Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 35–36; and Modrzejewski, *Jews of Egypt*, 124–29.

56. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 281–84. Apparently the Jews also dedicated pagan objects to the sovereign (283).

57. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 298.

58. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 299–300.

59. Gruen, *Diaspora*, 68–69; and Gruen, “Jews and Greeks,” 272–73.

## JEWS LIVING UNDER THE HASMONEAN DYNASTY

Even though Ptolemaic Egypt in the first century BCE would have been a relevant location for readers of LXX Esther, there is no reason to deny that the text was also read in Judea where it originated. Many scholars find the message of LXX Esther to address the new situation of the Jewish people after the independence they achieved during the Maccabean revolt that occurred in 167–164 BCE.<sup>60</sup> With the recent collective memory of their oppression under the Seleucid regime, a story about a king ordering the annihilation of Jewish people that is averted by subsequent Jewish victory would have resonated. As mentioned previously, this theme, even present in MT Esther, was enough to lead some scholars to explore dating MT Esther to the late second century BCE. However, specific to LXX Esther, connections to Daniel, the antigentile spirit of the Additions' theology, and the apologetic and apocalyptic tendencies of the Additions are also cited as reasons for associating it closely with post-Maccabean revolt Judea.<sup>61</sup>

However, Judea experienced great changes over the eighty to ninety years between the Maccabean revolt and the dating of the colophon in 78/77 BCE. Judeans morphed from an oppressed people fighting to survive, to a loosely organized moderately independent vassal of the Seleucid empire, then into a somewhat independent state under the Hasmonean dynasty by 142 BCE.<sup>62</sup> According to Dorothy, LXX Esther addressed the need for unification of religious practices after the achieved independence of Judeans.<sup>63</sup> Jobs, who finds AT Esther to be older than LXX Esther, also

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60. See, e.g., Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther," *NIB* 3:947.

61. For the antigentile attitude, see Moore, *Additions*, 166–67. Moore finds that at the least Additions A, C, D, and F originated in the second century in Judea, with perhaps B and E being composed in Alexandria. For the apologetic and apocalyptic tendencies, see Levenson, *Esther*, 31–32.

62. While some sources (Josephus, *A.J.* 13.213–214; 1 Macc 13:33–42) claim that Simon's ascendancy brought complete independence, Gruen asserts that the relations between the Hasmoneans, Seleucids, Ptolemies, and Romans were much more nuanced than the term *independence* would imply ("Jews and Greeks," 268).

63. Dorothy writes, "As to function, the later 'dream frame' [of Additions A and F] operates to cast the entire novella and feast legislation as a type of prophetic revelation, and to raise Mordecai to the rank of prophet. As to intention, this study concludes that the primary goal in such a propheticization is to legitimize a festival that was not part of the five books of the Torah, probably at a time when communal identity needed to

notes the Hasmonean dynasty's influence over the tradition and practice of Jews in the diaspora that would have necessitated a new Greek translation (LXX Esther) in place of AT Esther, which she hypothesizes was previously known in Jerusalem.<sup>64</sup> Jobes's connection of LXX Esther with the Hasmonean influence to unify Jewish practice supports a Hasmonean readership without the assumed need for LXX Esther to supplant an older Greek translation.

As is demonstrated by Dorothy and Jobes, LXX Esther was a text that emerged from Jerusalem and the concerns for the existence of the Jewish people living under the new Hasmonean dynasty; and certainly such a text would be read from the center as well as from the margins. Readers in Hasmonean Judea could easily make connections between LXX Esther and their past/continued struggles with and under the Seleucids, thus perhaps reading the book as "Hasmonean propaganda" for staying true to the newly re-formed Jewish state.<sup>65</sup> But in LXX Esther readers could also have found traces of the Hasmonean dynasty's mimicry of previous imperial powers.

Though there was an elevated level of independence for the Hasmonean state in Judea between 167 BCE and 63 BCE, that measure of independence came with the rule of a dynasty that often had aims of expansion and conquest not unlike the empires who had ruled over Jews previously. Not only were the Hasmonean rulers busy fending off the Seleucids and intervening in Seleucid civil disputes, rulers such as John Hyrcanus I and Alexander Jannaeus also conducted campaigns into the nearby lands of the Transjordan, Samaria, and Idumea.<sup>66</sup> Military efforts toward expansion

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be solidified, and/or communal variation needed to be harmonized.... A time period which would favor such propheticization of Mordecai ... [would be] when the Jewish state achieved independence and the rival temples in Egypt and diverse practices in the diaspora needed to be harmonized with the revived Judean home as much as possible" (*Books of Esther*, 341–42).

64. Jobes, *Alpha-Text of Esther*, 223–24.

65. The phrase "Hasmonean propaganda" is used by Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 112.

66. For the interactions between the Hasmoneans and Seleucids, see, e.g., Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1959; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 236–43. For Hasmonean expansion, see, e.g., Chris Seeman, *Rome and Judea in Transition: Hasmonean Relations with the Roman Republic and the Evolution of the High Priesthood*, AUSTR 325 (New York: Lang, 2013), 137–241.



had to be funded through heavy taxation and numerous soldiers—the type of funding that normally came at the cost of the common people.<sup>67</sup>

In addition to directing their efforts externally, the Hasmoneans also had to deal with internal dissension. One example of this dissent can be found in the narrative of 1 Macc 14:25–49. In the narrative, Simon's high priesthood is affirmed by several groups—he is acknowledged by the Seleucid ruler Demetrius II, the Romans accepted his envoys, and the priests resolved Simon to be their leader forever. But 1 Macc 14:46 also adds that all the people agreed to grant Simon the right to rule. Chris Seeman finds this ratification by the people to be suspicious and unnecessary.<sup>68</sup> Thus, he posits, “The very existence of the decree points, therefore, to serious opposition (actual or contemplated) to Simon's regime, though its nature and extent cannot be determined on the basis of the decree alone.”<sup>69</sup> The Hasmoneans were non-Zadokite rulers who began occupying the high priesthood and perhaps some internal opposition to such rulers existed.<sup>70</sup>

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67. For taxation, see Gruen, “Jews and Greeks,” 270. Eyal Regev has countered the case for the perception of Hasmonean taxes as heavy by arguing, with Bezalel Bar-Kochva, that the taxes were lower than those levied by the Seleucids and were necessary to maintain the army and state. Eyal Regev, *The Hasmoneans: Ideology, Archaeology, Identity*, JSJSup 10 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 271; Bezalel Bar-Kochva, “Manpower, Economics, and Internal Strife in the Hasmonean State,” in *Armées et fiscalité dans le monde antique: Paris, 14–16 octobre 1976*, ed. H. van Effenterre (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1977), 167–77. Seeman notes that Josephus (*B.J.* 1.61 and *A.J.* 13.249) even records that John Hyrcanus I raided the tomb of King David to plunder three thousand talents of silver to fund recruitment of foreign mercenaries for his army (*Rome and Judea in Transition*, 174, 441). Though Seeman demonstrates evidence to doubt the authenticity of Josephus's story, he indicates that the utilization of mercenaries by John Hyrcanus I is not in doubt. See Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 257–58, concerning the common people.

68. Seeman, *Rome and Judea in Transition*, 150–61.

69. Seeman, *Rome and Judea in Transition*, 160.

70. Ezekiel 44:9–31 describes that only Zadokites may occupy the high priesthood. Exploring Qumran scrolls, such as the Damascus Document, Peshier on Habakkuk, and 4QpPs<sup>a</sup>, Hanan Eshel demonstrates the existence of such dissent with non-Zadokite rulers assuming the high priesthood in the narratives that describe the enmity between the “Teacher of Righteousness” and the “Wicked Priest.” Hanan Eshel, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Hasmonean State*, SDSS (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 29–61.



Another example of civil unrest in the Hasmonean period is found in the reign of Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE). Perhaps ruling at the time of LXX Esther's delivery to Egypt, Alexander Jannaeus was able to expand the Hasmonean territory to a size similar to that of Israel during the reigns of David and Solomon.<sup>71</sup> However, the ruler is perhaps more infamously known for his brutality and violence toward internal discord. Josephus (*A.J.* 13.379–383) describes a conflict between Alexander Jannaeus and Jewish opponents (identified as Pharisees in 4Q167) in which the ruler defeats his opponents with many dying in battle. Then, he brought those who did not die, about eight hundred of them, to be crucified. But before crucifying these opponents, he first slaughtered their children and wives before their eyes.<sup>72</sup> Causes and motives of the rebellion against Alexander Jannaeus aside, its existence demonstrates some measure of distrust in the Hasmonean rulers; and if the existence of the rebellion was not enough, surely the cruel brutality executed by the ruler against his own people stirred some measure of dissent.<sup>73</sup>

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71. Larry R. Helyer, "The Hasmoneans and the Hasmonean Era," in *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 46.

72. Though the validity of Josephus's account has been questioned, the discovery of Peshar on Hosea B (4Q167) and Peshar on Nahum have confirmed at least the legend of such a gruesome account. See Eshel, *Dead Sea Scrolls and the Hasmonean State*, 117–31.

73. After discussing the allegiance of many people with the Pharisees who were the chief opponents not only of Alexander Jannaeus but the Hasmonean dynasty in general, Tcherikover writes, "It is thus a historical fact that fifty to sixty years, approximately, after Judah the Maccabee, the alliance between the people and the Hasmoneans broke down. What caused the nation to transfer its allegiance to the foes of the dynasty, and why did it sympathize with the Pharisees who fought against it, and not with the Sadducees who were its supporters? The answer is not difficult to give, if we transfer the question from a political to a social setting.... We can conjecture that the Hasmonean conquests furnished the men of capital with an easy opportunity for enrichment.... But it is an open question how far the lower orders of the nation profited from the new policy of the Hasmoneans. In Herod's reign things were to reach the point where the state authority weighed grievously upon the people, taxation grew intolerable, the small man's property was destroyed and the peasants fled to the hills, where robber bands had their refuge. We may well believe that the beginning of the process can be traced back to the period of the last Hasmonean kings" (*Hellenistic Civilization*, 257–58).

Despite these examples of a lack of universal support for the Hasmonean leadership, like the ambivalence of Alexandrian Jews to Ptolemaic rule, Jews in Judea also benefited from Hasmonean rule. Eyal Regev argues strongly for popular support of Hasmonean rule, since the aim of the Hasmoneans was ultimately “the welfare of the Jews.”<sup>74</sup> Readers of LXX Esther in Judea may have had ambivalent attitudes toward the Hasmoneans that could have been reflected in reading the book as positive Hasmonean propaganda, as anti-Hasmonean since the Hasmonean dynasty may have imitated the rule of the Persians presented in LXX Esther, or perhaps even from both perspectives.

Keeping in mind these first century readers in Ptolemaic Egypt and Hasmonean Judea who both benefited from but also dissented with their rulers, I now turn to consider the nature of imperial-critical approaches and their intersection with gender studies in order to establish the framework with which I conduct a synchronic reading of LXX Esther.

#### TOWARD A DEFINITION OF AN IMPERIAL-CRITICAL APPROACH

Imperial-critical approaches in biblical scholarship are a relatively recent development in the field. Also known as empire criticism and empire studies, imperial-critical scholarship has found a niche in New Testament work since it began in the 1990s.<sup>75</sup> Acquiring acceptance and momentum in

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74. Regev, *Hasmoneans*, 268–72.

75. I follow Warren Carter in choosing the nomenclature of imperial-critical approaches or studies rather than empire criticism or empire studies. Carter prefers the use of *critical* to align with other critical, evaluative approaches in biblical studies such as historical-critical, narrative-critical, etc. The use of critical emphasizes the discerning approach of identifying imperial structures in a text and the varied ways in which a text negotiates those structures. Additionally, connecting critical to discernment debunks the misunderstanding that texts have a strictly oppositional stance to empires. In relation to imperial-critical approaches to the gospels Carter writes, “The term ‘imperial-critical’ foregrounds the importance of interactions between imperial realities and the Gospels, and signifies multivalent presentations and forms of negotiation (not monolithic opposition).” Warren Carter, “Christian Origins and Imperial-Critical Studies of the New Testament Gospels,” in *Christian Origins and the Early Jesus Movement*, ed. Stanley Porter and Andrew Pitts, TENTS 12 (Boston: Brill, 2018), 16–17. For its history, see Carter, “Empire Studies and Biblical Interpretation,” *OEBI* 1:275. Scot McKnight and Joseph Modica trace the beginnings of imperial-critical scholarship specifically to the work of Warren Carter and also to the skilled writing of N.T. Wright and Richard Horsley. Scot McKnight and Joseph Modica, *Jesus*

the field, some have even regarded empire engagement in New Testament studies as a “paradigm shift.”<sup>76</sup> However, the engagement of imperial-critical approaches with the Hebrew Bible is still in an infancy phase, though it is growing.<sup>77</sup>

Imperial-critical approaches foreground the presence of empire in biblical texts by making visible the structures and interactions of imperial power represented in and by the text and by exploring the varied ways in which the texts display and/or advocate for negotiation of the imperial world of the text.<sup>78</sup> This study will take the particular tack of conducting a synchronic literary reading of LXX Esther by observing the structures of gendered imperial power and gendered negotiation of imperial power present in the text’s narrative, or the world of the text. But throughout the literary reading, I also posit connections with the constructions of early audiences in first century BCE Ptolemaic Alexandria and Hasmonean Judea offered previously in order to demonstrate the plausibility of this reading.

In order to conduct this type of reading, this and other imperial-critical approaches are eclectic in methodology and employ the following

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*Is Lord, Caesar Is Not: Evaluating Empire in New Testament Studies* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 16.

76. Raymond Pickett, “Luke and Empire,” in *Luke-Acts and Empire: Essays in Honor of Robert L. Brawley*, ed. David Rhoads, David Esterline, and Jae Won Lee, Princeton Theological Monographs 151 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 1.

77. For a few examples of imperial-critical approaches to the Hebrew Bible, see essays by Norman Gottwald, Walter Brueggemann, and Jon Berquist in Richard Horsley, ed., *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster Knox, 2008); essays by Douglas Stuart and Mark Boda in Stanley E. Porter and Cynthia Long Westfall, eds., *Empire in the New Testament*, MNTS 10 (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011); essays by Donald C. Polaski, Brent A. Strawn, Jean-Pierre Ruiz, and Jon Berquist in Jon L. Berquist, ed. *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period*, SemeiaSt 50 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007); Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *Jonah, Jesus, and Other Good Coyotes: Speaking Peace to Power in the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007); Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea*; Horsley, *Revolt of the Scribes*; Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*; David M. Carr and Colleen M. Conway, *An Introduction to the Bible: Sacred Texts and Imperial Contexts* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); and Leo G. Perdue, and Coleman Baker, *Israel and Empire: A Postcolonial History of Israel and Early Judaism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

78. Carter, “Empire Studies and Biblical Interpretation,” 275–76; Carter, “Christian Origins and Imperial-Critical Studies.”

methods: literary criticism to reveal how the literary features of a text (e.g., characterization, plot, reversals, irony, allusions, repetitions, external and internal dialogue) inscribe and expose imperial power dynamics and their negotiation; historical criticism to construct the context of the authors and audiences in their imperial locations though with respect to the effects of the winning and losing of history “from below”; social-scientific models and postcolonial studies to understand how empires and dominants wield power and how subordinates negotiate with those with power; and gender studies to consider the intersections of the performance of gender and power.<sup>79</sup>

Because illuminating gendered imperial power and its gendered negotiations is the primary contribution of this reading, in the following sections I describe some of the social-scientific models and postcolonial concepts this study utilizes to make empire visible and to elucidate the varied and complex forms of negotiation of imperial power present in LXX Esther. Then, I will explore the connections of gender studies to imperial-critical approaches.

#### MAKING EMPIRE VISIBLE

The literature of the Hebrew Bible and the Second Temple period was written in and reinscribes multiple imperial contexts: the Egyptian, Assyrian,

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79. Examples of literary scholarship utilized by this study include Fox, *Character and Ideology*; Berlin, *Esther*; Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997); Beal, “Esther,” in *Ruth and Esther*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999); Linda M. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther*, JSOTSup 186 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995); and Day, *Esther*, AOTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005). Examples of historical constructions utilized by this study to understand the earliest audiences of LXX Esther include: Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*; Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*; Kashner, *Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*; Joshua Efron, *Studies in the Hasmonean Period*, SJLA 39 (Leiden: Brill, 1987); Peter Green, *Alexander to Actium: The Historical Revolution of the Hellenistic Age*, *Hellenistic Culture and Society* 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Green, ed., *Hellenistic History and Culture*, *Hellenistic Culture and Society* 9 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Modrzejewski, *Jews of Egypt*; Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*; Gruen, “Jews and Greeks”; Eshel, *Dead Sea Scrolls and the Hasmonean State*; R. Malcolm Errington, *A History of the Hellenistic World 323–30 BC*, BHAW (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008); Seeman, *Rome and Judea in Transition*.

Babylonian, Persian, and Hellenistic Empires, all of which possess characteristics of agrarian-aristocratic societies or empires as described by Gerhard Lenski and John Kautsky.<sup>80</sup> Lenski presents various characteristics of advanced agrarian societies, the most important of which was a hierarchical structure of social classes with a significant gap between the wealthy and powerful elites and the majority of the population.<sup>81</sup> Rulers and governing classes comprise no more than 2 percent of the population of agrarian-aristocratic societies though they hold the vast majority of the wealth, power, and control of the resources of land and labor.<sup>82</sup> Other characteristics of agrarian-aristocratic societies include a makeup of various ethnic groups, ever-present warfare, internal strife when external threats were low, monarchical governments, widespread occurrence of urban communities, diversity in vocations, development of trade and commerce industries, the invention and implementation of money, limited literacy, and religious involvement in state matters.<sup>83</sup>

In addition to the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and Hellenistic Empires, the kingdoms of monarchic Israel/Judah and Hasmonean Judea also embodied the majority of these characteristics of agrarian-aristocratic societies. Like its imperial neighbors autocratic Israel/Judah had monarchic governments, they experienced civil strife which at times was the result of the inequitable distribution of wealth (e.g., Amos 1–9), and they developed in the areas of trade and commerce especially beginning with Solomon and his construction of the First Temple (1 Kgs 4–7). Monarchic Israel/Judah dealt with frequent warfare, as evidenced in their conflicts with Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, and smaller skirmishes with groups such as Edom, Moab, as well as Israel with Judah and Judah with Israel. Hasmonean Judea even experienced near constant warfare in its efforts to both defend itself from the Seleucid and Roman Empires and expand into surrounding territories such as Perea, Samaria, Idumea, and Galilee. Additionally, Hasmonean Judea also suffered internal conflicts often related to religious matters as the high priests and rulers vied for power (e.g., Aristobulus II and Hyrcanus II). Archaeology also provides evidence

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80. Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) and John H. Kautsky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1997).

81. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 210–96. See esp. graphic representation on p. 284.

82. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 219.

83. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 196–209.

that the Hasmonean dynasty issued its own coinage as a display of independence like nearby imperial powers.<sup>84</sup> Neither monarchic Israel/Judah nor Hasmonean Judea ever had the territorial reach of empires such as the Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, or Hellenistic Empires which meant numerous urban centers did not exist and their ethnic makeup was not extremely diverse; nevertheless, they demonstrate many of the characteristics of an agrarian-aristocratic society or empire.

Understanding the imperial contexts around and of Judea as agrarian-aristocratic societies, or even empires, imperial-critical approaches consider the structures and processes by which empires rule. According to Michael Doyle, "Empire ... is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political entity. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by economic, social, or cultural dependence. Imperialism is simply the process or policy of establishing or maintaining an empire."<sup>85</sup> Unveiling how control is established and maintained by a central state over its peripheral entities is the key to understanding empire. The question of who gets what, why, and how underlies the structures of empire.<sup>86</sup>

Imperial structures, or imperialism as termed by Doyle, are the means by which rulers and a small group of elites maintained control of power and wealth.<sup>87</sup> These exercises of power included physical force, (re)writing and enforcing laws, shaping public opinion through educational and religious institutions, claiming proprietary rights to all land and its production in the state's domain exacted through taxes, tribute money, rents, services including conscripted labor, booty, and confiscation, conferring offices and land to governing classes, and performing perceived beneficence by

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84. See, e.g., David Hendin, "Hasmonean Coin Chronologies: Two Notes," *INJ* 17 (2009–2010): 34–38.

85. Michael Doyle, *Empires*, Cornell Studies in Comparative History (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 45.

86. Lenski identifies "who gets what and why?" as the basic question of the distributive process (*Power and Privilege*, 1–3). Though Lenski's statement of the question leaves out the "how," the means by which people obtain resources is central to understanding the dynamic relationship between the "haves" and the "have-nots."

87. Lenski describes how control over the economic surplus (any resources above what is necessary for basic survival) results in power, privilege, and prestige, which the rulers and elites of aristocratic-agrarian empires have and desire to keep (*Power and Privilege*, 43–68).

means such as building programs.<sup>88</sup> While these exercises of power were initiated by the state, rulers often used a retainer class consisting of personal assistants, servants, slaves, state officials and administrators, scribes, and religious officials to mediate imperial structures to the population. In exchange, the retainer class was allowed to share in the benefits of power including wealth and status, though with limits.<sup>89</sup>

Michael Mann describes these imperial structures in terms of the sources of an empire's institutions of power. Mann describes societies as "constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power."<sup>90</sup> Interacting with Weber and Marx, Mann demonstrates that sociospatial networks of power come from four sources: ideological, economic, military, and political power.

First, *ideological* power is derived from the creation of meaning, norms of behavior, and aesthetic/ritual practices. Ideological power is exerted by influencing the way people think and believe, and by being able to explain aspects of existence in new and relevant ways. Religious movements are the most obvious examples of this kind of power, but political societies can also exert ideological power by portraying themselves as a "sacred" or "transcendent" form of authority.<sup>91</sup> Leo G. Perdue describes ideological power as the "imperial metanarrative" that has the purpose to "inculcate among the colonials values conducive to the interests of the metropole and the importance of mimicking their civilization. Creators of metanarratives imagine and generate a national mythology that speaks of their origins, superior civilization, and accomplishments."<sup>92</sup> Perdue writes that the dissemination of this metanarrative results in "colonization of the mind." Colonized individuals are taught that "the empire reflects the natural or mythic order of reality and that their highest ambition should be to

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88. For shaping public opinion, see Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 50–54. For taxes, etc., see 210–19. For the governing classes, see 219–30. Warren Carter describes how Rome used building projects to be ever-present through apparent altruism as it provided amenities such as water supply, civic buildings, roads, harbors, baths, markets, etc. Warren Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 60–64.

89. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 243–48; Carter, *John and Empire*, 54.

90. Michael Mann, *A History of Power from the Beginning to AD 1760*, vol. 1 of *The Sources of Social Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1.

91. Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, 19–24.

92. Perdue and Carter, *Israel and Empires*, 30.



serve the empire. They become colonized colonials who learn to abhor their own culture.”<sup>93</sup>

Mann’s second “network of power” comprises *economic* power derived from control over the systems of extracting, producing, transforming, distributing, and consuming objects of nature. Groupings of people, classes, are formed around each of these tasks. So, for example, those who form the classes that are in charge of distribution and exchange exert power over those who do the actual production. Power is exerted through taxes, tolls, tributes, levies, and confiscation. Economic power is most effective when the systems of subsistence and class structures within the economic system are in balance, that is, the production classes (workers) are able to work in harmony with the exchange classes (controllers of goods), rather than the exchange classes exerting too much pressure so that the productivity of the production classes is affected.<sup>94</sup>

Mann’s third “network of power” comprises *military* power—the exertion of physical defense and aggression in a large organization of geographic and social spaces. This includes the concentration of force in war, but also coerced labor and physical enforcement of imperial laws/demands (paying tribute, proper recognition and honor of the emperor, etc.). Military power is relative to the geographic proximity of the military and is controlled by the elite and its influence.<sup>95</sup> Particularly, military power is the agent of male control with elite males commanding armies comprised of lower status males. In this male-dominant network of military power, rape was often used as a tool in order to subjugate and control populations.<sup>96</sup> Susan Brownmiller writes,

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93. Perdue and Carter, *Israel and Empires*, 31.

94. Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, 24–25.

95. Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, 25–26.

96. Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Allen and Unwin, 1993), 31–113. Pamela Gordon and Harold Washington address the use of rape in military metaphors within the Hebrew Bible and by the Roman poet Ovid. They profoundly conclude that while cities, personified by women, which are “raped” can be restored, actual women of biblical antiquity can never find such restoration. Indicative of the reality of military power for women, biblical metaphors of military rape of cities perpetuate male domination. Pamela Gordon and Harold Washington, “Rape as a Military Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 8 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 308–25.



It has been argued that when killing is viewed as not only permissible but heroic behavior sanctioned by one's government or cause, the distinction between taking a human life and other forms of impermissible violence gets lost, and rape becomes an unfortunate but inevitable by-product of the necessary game called war. Women, by this reasoning, are simply regrettable victims—incidental, unavoidable casualties—like civilian victims of bombing, lumped together with children, homes, personal belongings, a church, a dike, a water buffalo or next year's crop.<sup>97</sup>

Finally, fourth in Mann's analysis, *political* power stems from how centralized, institutionalized control of social relations is exerted. It includes regulations and coercion administered from the center to the periphery—state power. While other sources of power (ideological, economic, and military) can be located in various places, political power is always located in the center extending outward.<sup>98</sup>

As the rulers and elites who create narratives of ideological power, who decree and enforce the laws of political power, who comprise the classes that control extraction and distribution in economic power, and who lead and fight for military power are overwhelmingly men, exertion of power through all of these areas are performances of masculinity. Imperial power and masculinity are inextricably linked and thus an imperial-critical reading takes into account not only the sources of power, but also the gendered aspects of these expressions of power. Throughout this reading of LXX Esther, I attend to the presentation of the Persian government, its ruler, its elites and/or retainer classes in light of its exercise of ideological, economic, military, and political sources of power with attention to how gender is performed in exertions of power.

#### EXPLORATION OF VARIED AND COMPLEX MEANS OF NEGOTIATION

Beyond making imperial structures visible, imperial-critical approaches also investigate the diverse means by which subordinates negotiate imperial power dynamics. Too often imperial interaction within texts is solely deemed as being either pro- or antiempire. Richard Horsley describes the multifaceted attitudes and interactions with empire represented in biblical texts. Horsley writes, "Biblical books are not unanimously and

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97. Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 32.

98. Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, 26–28.

unambiguously anti-imperial or pro-imperial. They speak with different and sometimes ambivalent voices. Biblical texts have been used to justify imperial rule *and* to motivate resistance to oppressive imperial domination.”<sup>99</sup> Imperial-critical approaches recognize that the poles of accommodation and active revolt are not the only two means of negotiating with empires. Subordinate negotiations with imperial power are varied and multivalent. Exploring imperial negotiation includes considering how the texts “validate, cooperate with, imitate, reinscribe, contest, compete with, counter, or attack (and combinations thereof)” their imperial contexts.<sup>100</sup> These complex means of interaction are the reason the

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99. Horsley, *In the Shadow*, 7, emphasis added. Critics of empire criticism, like Scot McKnight and Joseph Modica, seem to indicate that empire studies of the New Testament only present negative or oppressive presentations of Rome as something that must be resisted (*Jesus Is Lord, Caesar Is Not*, 211–14). In their concluding editorial comments to the collection of essays, McKnight and Modica express the value in recognizing Roman context of New Testament texts, but they do not find the concerns of empire to be at the foreground of the New Testament writers’ minds. E.g., instead of viewing the kingdom of God as a challenge to the Roman Empire, they insist that the kingdom of God exists in opposition to the kingdom of Satan—the kingdom of God is not of this world. But they neglect to appreciate the alignment of Satan and Rome in texts such as Matt 4:8, Luke 4:5–7, and Rev 12–13. They argue that while Roman context informs, and the Roman Empire may be included as a device in the kingdom of Satan, it must be kept within the framework of the cosmology of the intertestamental literature. In contrast, they find empire studies to be removing the “cosmology” of the text to only focus on opposition to the Roman Empire. So they write, “One must critically evaluate Rome, but does the New Testament always view it as oppressive or negative? Bryan [in an article included in the collection] observes that there were many ‘tangible benefits’ afforded by the empire (harbors, water supplies, road systems)” (213–24). But as mentioned here, imperial-critical approaches *are* focused on the day-to-day negotiations of empire. In an article on Rome and the New Testament, Peter Oakes highlights the fact that six different attitudes existed about Rome in all of the biblical texts: awe, appreciation, resentment, contempt, denial of ultimate authority, and expectation of overthrow (though he admits appreciation of Rome may be absent in Revelation). Peter Oakes, “A State of Tension: Rome in the New Testament,” in *The Gospel of Matthew in Its Roman Imperial Context*, ed. John Riches and David C. Sim, JSNTSup 276 (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 75–89. So, one can notice and find ways that the day-to-day realities of Roman existence are appreciated in and by biblical texts (e.g., the road systems that McKnight and Modica mention), but with an imperial-critical perspective one cannot forget the tormented labor conditions that had to be endured for those systems to be created.

100. Warren Carter, *The Roman Empire and the New Testament: An Essential Guide*, Abingdon Essential Guides (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), x. Though Carter’s

word *negotiate* is chosen to describe the means of subordinate interaction with power, rather than a word such as *resistance*, which would seem to imply only antiempire or oppositional attitudes and interactions. For the purposes of this study, I strongly rely upon the work James C. Scott and concepts from postcolonial studies in order to define the varied and complex forms that subordinate negotiation can embody.<sup>101</sup>

### Scott's Framework for Understanding Complex Negotiation

Scott's work has been utilized extensively by biblical scholars who employ imperial-critical approaches.<sup>102</sup> A significant summary of Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* is included here because it proves vital in offering a framework for reading elements of imperial negotiation in LXX Esther.

Scott describes the public and private "performances" (words, behaviors, actions, interactions, etc.) between people involved in dominant power groups and those who are subjected by those powers. Of these performances, Scott differentiates between public transcripts, which constitute the open interactions between subordinates and dominants, and hidden transcripts, which comprise discourse occurring "offstage" outside of the direct observation of the opposing group.<sup>103</sup>

Throughout time, public transcripts have constituted the majority of what history has recorded about imperial contexts. Public transcripts "affirm and naturalize the power of dominant elites."<sup>104</sup> Dominants tell their stories through affirmation, concealment, euphemization, stigmatization, and unanimity in order to validate their own rule. In this way, the audience of the public transcript of dominants is mostly themselves since

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book is referring directly to New Testament texts and the Roman Empire, his descriptions of various interactions of texts with empire apply to Hebrew Bible texts and the various imperial contexts its texts engage.

101. James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

102. Use of Scott's work has even elicited a volume of *Semeia* that examined how Scott's theories can be applied to Jesus and Paul. Richard A. Horsley, ed., *Hidden Transcripts and the Arts of Resistance: Applying the Work of James C. Scott to Jesus and Paul*, SemeiaSt 48 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004).

103. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 1–16.

104. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 18.

subordinates can see beneath the performance.<sup>105</sup> But the public transcript never tells the whole story for either dominants or subordinates. For subordinates, public transcripts are often dominated by impression management since subordinate groups, who need to ensure their own survival and well-being, tend to publicly accommodate themselves to the actions and behaviors that the power-laden groups would desire. So, while public transcripts may provide convincing evidence of the hegemony of dominant values, they cannot be trusted to reveal the actual opinions of subordinates, their attitudes, and activities.<sup>106</sup> In contrast, the hidden transcripts of subordinates are what is said or practiced only among the subjected that either confirm, contest, contradict, or inflect what may appear in the public transcript. Hidden transcripts may consist of discourses of power-reversal fantasies, insults against the powerful that are shared among the oppressed group, or clandestine practices such as tax evasion, poaching, pilfering, bribery, tampering, or guerilla-type tactics.<sup>107</sup>

Given these definitions of public and hidden transcripts, Scott identifies four realms of political discourses of resistance among subordinate groups from the safest to the most volatile. Where Scott chooses the word *resistance* to describe subordinate interactions with dominants, I choose the word *negotiation* to better signify a range of actions employed by subordinates.

First, the safest forms of political negotiation of power are public transcripts that flatter the self-images of the elites. Subordinates can use flattery of their dominants (i.e., praising their compassionate care and provision) in order to secure better conditions or more humane treatment.<sup>108</sup> Understanding the attitudes behind public deference is significant to this first realm. Simply because a subordinate defers to a dominant does not mean that the subordinate is affirming or accepting the hegemonic ideology; in fact, the subordinate may be doing just the opposite.<sup>109</sup> Scott recounts how African slaves in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries learned to “play dumb” in order to ingratiate the view their masters had of them. Slaves knew if their masters considered them smart, they might begin to worry about insubordination. Thus, acting became a

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105. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 45–69.

106. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 1–4.

107. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 4–16.

108. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 18.

109. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 23–24.

political resource for slaves. Scott writes that simply to see (false) smiles and (reluctant) movement of subordinates in their performance “is to see the performance as totally determined from above and to miss the agency of the actor in appropriating the performance for his own ends. What may look from above like the extraction of a required performance can easily look from below like the artful manipulation of deference and flattery to achieve its own ends.”<sup>110</sup> This first kind of negotiation, then, tends to be characterized by masks and performances.<sup>111</sup>

Second, in their hidden transcripts subordinates can safely speak the words of anger, revenge, and self-assertion that must be concealed in the presence of their overlords. Outside the purview of their masters, subordinates tend to gather to create a sharply dissonant political culture that desires liberation or the reversal of powers. For hidden transcripts to develop, subordinates require leadership and a safe place in which to speak.<sup>112</sup>

Scott’s third realm of negotiation discourse is one of political disguise that takes place in public view, yet has double meaning representing the hidden transcript. Scott finds that disguised forms of negotiation have often been overlooked, but they are perhaps the most powerful. Scott even argues that some sort of coded or ambiguous form of the hidden transcript is always present in the public transcripts of subordinate groups.<sup>113</sup> Scott identifies several significant methods of performing the arts of political disguise that he also calls a voice under domination. He distinguishes between elementary forms of disguise, more elaborate forms, and institutionalized ways of expressing a voice under domination.

A first elementary form of disguised negotiation is anonymity—disguising the message or the messenger. Acts of anonymity include gossip, rumors, speaking the hidden transcript under the guise of spirit possession, veiling actions under the guard of night, or speaking a message through apolitical means like allowing women to lead in public opposition since they were considered apolitical and powerless, thus the worst forms of punitive retaliation could be avoided.<sup>114</sup> A second form of disguised negotiation is euphemisms that exist in the public transcript to allude to the dominant. While associations are known among the subordinates,

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110. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 34.

111. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 28.

112. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 28.

113. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 19.

114. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 140–52.

such as veiled reference to the Yankees and the North in slave hymns mentioning “Jesus” and “home,” denials can be made in public.<sup>115</sup> Third, grumbling can be another form of stopping short of insubordination in the public transcript, yet still being able to express one’s discontent and possibly exert a veiled pressure of concern onto elites.<sup>116</sup>

Scott then moves to discuss more elaborate forms of political disguise in which ideological insubordination takes the form of popular or folk culture. This may include the oral culture of subordinate groups more often than in written form since oral traditions were more malleable to given situations (folk songs could have numerous forms to relate to multiple settings). Trickster tales were also a form of insubordination veiled in folk culture. These tales included stories like that of Brer Rabbit who uses his guile and agility to try to defeat Brer Wolf though persistently encountering setbacks. Additionally, artistic and religious representations of symbolic inversions and topsy-turvy worlds functioned to ambiguously express hopes for societal reversal. Though most often visually represented through prints in which normal hierarchies were inverted (“world upside down” imagery such as mice eating cats, fish flying in the air, wives beating husbands, masters serving slaves, etc.), the prints were representative of a broader culture of symbolic inversion that could also be found in satirical songs, theater, and millennial expectations.<sup>117</sup>

Scott also describes how institutionalized forms of elaborate political disguise can take on the mode of carnival. The general attitude of immodesty in carnival provides social sanction for full-throated voices of disapproval that could be costly to vent outside of carnival. Scott notes, though, that carnival should not be seen strictly through the “safety-valve” theory in which carnival merely provides a way to relieve social tensions so that one can easily return to the routines of domination. A “safety-valve” view limits the agency in carnival to the elites alone. Instead, Scott prefers to see carnival as a kind of “dress rehearsal” for actual defiance. More often carnival provides a means for subordinates to find agency and express normally suppressed speech and aggression in public ways.<sup>118</sup>

Fourth, the most explosive, and potentially most dangerous, political discourse of power negotiation is that of the rupture between the hidden

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115. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 152–54.

116. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 154–56.

117. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 156–72.

118. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 172–82.

and public transcript.<sup>119</sup> When a subordinate decides to stand up and publicly speak in front of the dominants what has only to that point been said in private, a kind of explosion happens and the effects ripple through the subordinate community. Scott finds that such a rupture is indeed rare. “Only on the rarest and most incendiary occasions do we ever encounter anything like an unadorned hidden transcript in the realm of public power relations.”<sup>120</sup> Some subordinates explode out of anger or perform atomized insubordination and are subsequently labeled “bad” or merely disappear from the scene. But when these explosions are “cooked,” or fully developed within the hidden transcript of the subordinate society to support the concerns of the whole, they can sometimes provide a spark to embolden further public action.<sup>121</sup>

The great contribution of Scott’s work is in demonstrating that negotiation of power can take many forms. The absence of overt, explicit, and/or violent insubordinate action must not be equated with the absence of all opposition. Sometimes the person who outwardly appears to be the most devoted and compliant subject actually holds the most dissent with power. Whether it be through flattery of dominants, hidden conversations among subordinates, disguised political maneuvers, or direct confrontations, Scott argues that in any situation where a power relationship exists multiple forms of negotiation are bound to occur. This study will draw on Scott’s descriptions of complex negotiations of those under power to provide an imperial-critical reading of the negotiation present in LXX Esther.

While Scott’s work has been used extensively in imperial-critical approaches in biblical studies, not all scholars have found it convincing. Anatheia Portier-Young’s *Apocalypse against Empire* describes the imperial resistance of Second Temple apocalypses. In creating her argument, Portier-Young critiques Scott to particularize her own view of resistance. She finds Scott’s theory to rest heavily on what she calls a false dualism between mind and body. While Scott understands the mind to be able to resist while the body conforms to behaviors of the dominant system, Portier-Young erases that dualism and suggests a mutual interdependence of mind and body. So, for example, while Scott’s belief that a literary creation of fantasized and symbolic inversions of power functions as disguised negotiation to provide hope for a future reversal of power, Portier-Young

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119. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 19.

120. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 156.

121. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 206–20.



posits that the act of writing and reading apocalypses is in itself an overt and public act of rebellion. For Portier-Young, imagining a narrative of the reversal of power is the same as taking revolutionary action to bring that reversal to pass. She argues that if images of reversal are only kept in the realm of fantasy rather than being acted out, then structures of domination in controlling the behavior of subordinates are perpetuated.<sup>122</sup> But, according to Scott's view, Portier-Young undervalues the power of imagination to negotiate and/or dissent in situations where other more visible actions are not possible. Scott would argue that even when domination is perpetuated, the agency of the actor in manipulating a performance (whether that of a literary piece or an act of service to those in domination) cannot be removed. For Scott, the agency of the subordinate in varied forms of negotiation *and* the agency of dominant in maintaining the structures of domination exist simultaneously.

### Imperial Negotiation Concepts Drawn from Postcolonial Studies

Postcolonial studies also contribute to understanding the complexity of subordinate negotiation. Though postcolonial studies and imperial-critical approaches have slightly different aims—with postcolonial biblical interpretation focusing on analyzing a text's originating circumstances as well as its reception and imperial-critical approaches narrowing to consider primarily the imperial dynamics of the text's origination and its earliest reading—several concepts emerge from postcolonial studies that are particularly informative to reading biblical texts with imperial-critical approaches, such as contrapuntal reading, hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence.<sup>123</sup>

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122. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*, 35–37.

123. Fernando F. Segovia, "Mapping the Postcolonial Optic in Biblical Criticism: Meaning and Scope," in *Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: Interdisciplinary Intersections*, ed. Stephen D. Moore and Fernando F. Segovia, Bible and Postcolonialism (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 24. Carter highlights the differences between imperial-critical approaches and postcolonial studies ("Empire Studies and Biblical Interpretation," 282). But though imperial-critical approaches highlight historical circumstances, that is not to say that they are disinterested in contemporary relevance, but only that their primary aim is to make visible ancient imperial contexts and how the biblical texts may evidence interactions of subordinate peoples with dominant powers. As such, imperial-critical approaches and their attunement to reading texts through the lens of empire can inform postcolonial studies in the same way that concepts of postcolonial-



Edward Said introduced the approach of contrapuntal reading in his pioneering works on postcolonial studies.<sup>124</sup> Said argues that no text can be separated from its worldliness or context—specifically, the cultural experiences of being either a ruler or one who is ruled. All literature exhibits characteristics and silences that are informed by the imperialism that surrounds it. Contrapuntal reading, then, takes the experiences and concerns of both the dominating party as well as those of the dominated party into consideration when reading a text.<sup>125</sup> “The point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded.”<sup>126</sup> R. S. Sugirtharajah picks up on this concept and draws attention to silences in the text, and opens the way to new readings that are more sensitive to imperial dynamics. “Contrapuntal reading is an activity which leads to a larger world of texts and enables an interpreter to see connections. It unveils what might have been buried or underdeveloped or obscured in a single text.”<sup>127</sup> In its imperial-critical approach, this study aims to read contrapuntally with attention to how the perspectives of dominators and dominated are constructed in LXX Esther.

With attention to the perspective of both dominants and subordinates, interaction between the two and how that interaction influences culture and its products (e.g., literature) are a key concern. When one culture dominates another, the concern is how much each culture is impacted in the interaction. Said argues that culture is not impermeable, but all culture is borrowed and the result of human interconnectedness. “Culture is never just a matter of ownership, of borrowing and lending with absolute debtors and creditors, but rather of appropriations, common experiences, and interdependencies of all kinds among different cultures.”<sup>128</sup> This borrowing and lending of cultures results in hybridity. Hybridity is “the recognition

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ism inform imperial-critical readings of texts. Perdue also highlights these concepts that contribute to the postcolonial history of Israel and early Judaism that he offers (Perdue and Carter, *Israel and Empire*, 9–19).

124. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978); Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

125. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 3–61.

126. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 66–67.

127. R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, Practice* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 143.

128. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 217.

of the fact that all culture is an arena of struggle, where self is played off against the purportedly 'other,' and in which the attempts of the dominant culture to close and patrol its hegemonic account are threatened by the return of the minority stories and histories, and by strategies of appropriation and revaluation."<sup>129</sup> Hybridity is evident in the world of LXX Esther as Jewish people, Mordecai and Esther, who are subject to Persian power, enter into Persian culture taking on some its practices, while still trying to appropriate those cultural realities for their own ends.

One dynamic of hybrid cultures is reinscription. Those under domination often reinscribe, or adopt, the practices of their oppressors, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously. For example, Warren Carter describes salvation in Matthew's gospel with an imperial-critical perspective, and writes,

Matthew's vision of salvation reveals the world to be sinful, under imperial power and controlled by Satan. Jesus' words and actions create an alternative community and demonstrate God's empire that is yet to be fully established. The Gospel envisions salvation as the end of this sinful world, the defeat of Rome, and the establishment of a new heaven and earth under God's sovereignty. But the irony must be noted. This bold vision of the completion of God's salvation and overthrow of Roman imperial power co-opts and imitates the very imperial worldview it resists!<sup>130</sup>

The adoption of Roman ideology and symbols into the language and thought of early Jesus followers is evident. Whether or not it is a conscious adaption, we cannot be sure. But as Carter notes, "In the end, it seems the Gospel cannot imagine a world without imperial power."<sup>131</sup> It

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129. Andrew Smith, "Migrancy, Hybridity, and Postcolonial Literary Studies," in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. Neil Lazarus (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), 252. R. S. Sugirtharajah names this focus on the intertwining of cultures beyond dichotomies a third stream of postcolonialism. "It is a space where one is equally committed and disturbed by the colonized and the colonizing cultures." R. S. Sugirtharajah, "Postcolonial Theory and Biblical Studies," in *Fair Play: Diversity and Conflicts in Early Christianity; Essays in Honour of Heikki Räisänen*, ed. Ismo Dunderberg, Christopher Tuckett, and Kari Syreeni, NovTSup 103 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 543.

130. Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire: Initial Explorations* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 89.

131. Carter, *Matthew and Empire*, 90.

seems subjects have difficulty avoiding reinscription of the powers that exist among them.

But beyond mere adoption of practices or ideology, subordinate cultures often are called to imitate aspects of the dominant culture. Colonizers claim difference between themselves and the colonized and thus assert superiority over the cultures they conquer, yet colonizers expect the colonized to imitate their “superior” ways. Homi K. Bhabha describes the complicated effects of this call to imitation.<sup>132</sup> When the colonized attempt to imitate the colonizers, they do not become exactly like the colonizer but rather a hybridized version of the dominant culture occupying a third, or in-between, space. This third space of almost, but not quite, in which the colonized dwell, inherently destabilizes the authority of the colonizers whose dominance is built upon difference and the perspective of being superior to the colonized. Therefore, mimicry is a way that the colonized are both dominated and able to gain agency. The colonized are able to reorder the symbols of the hegemonic culture in their mimicry and to become *subjects* of the third space rather than *objects*. By imitating the colonizers, though with intentional differences, mimicry produces “a partial vision of the colonizer’s presence; a gaze of otherness that ... liberates marginal elements and shatters the unity of man’s [*sic*] being through which he extends sovereignty.”<sup>133</sup> Mimicry is able to be resemblance and menace at the same time. Thus, mimicry functions, at least in part, as a means of subordinate negotiation of power in order to create agency by changing the colonial discourse.

Ambivalence, then, is a term that is used to describe the ambiguous and confused way that colonizers and colonized interact with one another. Colonizers consider the colonized inferior, yet also admire them as exotically Other. As mentioned, the existence of difference is a key element of the colonizer’s perception of superiority. Thus, the colonizers call for imitation from the colonized yet try to hold firm to difference which, consequently, is complicated when the agency of difference shifts to the colonized in mimicry. Bhabha writes, “colonial presence is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference.”<sup>134</sup>

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132. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 121–74.

133. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 126–27.

134. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 153. For more on ambivalence of the colonizers, see 145–74.

Ambivalence is also a reality for the colonized as they not only despise their oppressors, but also simultaneously desire, appreciate, and adopt the dominant culture.<sup>135</sup> Frantz Fanon captures the postcolonial ambivalence of the colonized acutely when he writes, “This hostile, oppressive and aggressive world, bulldozing the colonized masses, represents not only the hell they [the colonized] would like to escape as quickly as possible but a paradise within arm’s reach guarded by ferocious watchdogs.”<sup>136</sup>

#### PREVIOUS INTERPRETATION ON EMPIRE IN ESTHER

With the framework and concepts for considering the structures of imperial power and its complex negotiation established for this study, I will briefly describe previous interpretation of empire in Esther in order to demonstrate the necessity of this work’s imperial-critical approach.

The first element of scholarship’s discussion on empire in Esther considered here is the presentation of the Persian king. Though Artaxerxes orders the annihilation of Jewish people in Esther, modern scholars often remark that the book contains a positive attitude toward a non-Jewish ruler since Artaxerxes is still on the throne when the “happy ending” arrives.<sup>137</sup> After Haman is executed and Esther and Mordecai are elevated, Artaxerxes lends his weight to a new edict which commends the Jews, allows them to defend themselves on the appointed day, and even discourages people from following the previous edict (8:1–12; 16:1–24). Because of this conclusion to the crisis, Lawrence Wills notes that the book “is actually remarkably *pro*-Gentile. The king is ultimately positive, and the Jews live happily in a foreign land.”<sup>138</sup> These comments on the book’s positive attitude toward a non-Jewish king seem to be a stretch when the king personally gives the order to kill all Jewish people, regardless of how the book’s plot concludes. Even more than MT Esther, LXX Esther further

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135. Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1963; repr., New York: Grove Press, 2004), 52–54.

136. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 16.

137. E.g., Levenson, *Esther*, 26; Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 296; Berlin, *Esther*, xlii. Though Berlin regards the attitude toward the Persian Empire in Esther as comedy or burlesque in which the king is jokingly mocked, she sees the point of the humor as eliciting laughter rather than offering critique through satire (*Esther*, xvi–xxii). Therefore, in Berlin’s opinion, jokes made at the king’s expense are not a negative portrayal of the king.

138. Wills, *Jewish Novel*, 97.

emphasizes the king's role in the order of annihilation by including the king's words in the edict found in Addition B (13:1–7).

In addition, scholars such as Frederic Bush make special effort to apologize for any potential negativity by Persians against Jews, and by Jews toward the Persians. Bush argues that the Persian government and the majority of the polyglot, non-Jewish population in Persia do not exhibit hatred toward the Jews, though, he concedes, "there clearly must have been a sufficient element of the population willing to act on Haman's decree to make it a significant threat."<sup>139</sup> When Jews fight back, Bush argues that they only do so against those who wished to cause them harm; therefore he writes, "The book displays antagonism on the part of the Jews only toward those who seek to harm the Jewish community ... [and has] a generally amicable attitude."<sup>140</sup>

I would conjecture, however, that scholarly comments that suggest the book's portrayal of Artaxerxes is positive and that attempt to meliorate any antagonism present between Jews and Persians are reactionary. Until the mid-twentieth century, commentators often painted the book of Esther as nationalistic and antigentile. These attitudes were likely influenced by Martin Luther's infamous repudiation of Esther in his *Table Talk*, "I am so hostile to this book [2 Maccabees] and to Esther that I wish they did not exist at all, for they Judaize too much, and have much heathen impropriety."<sup>141</sup> Articles by Bernhard Anderson and Levenson began to shift the perspective on the book away from antagonistic views of Jews as Judaizers who murder those who do not convert, toward understanding the book as a "folk tale rather than an ethical treatise" that ends in a scene of Jew-Gentile harmony.<sup>142</sup> Such a shift in perspective was indeed necessary following World War II and the Holocaust.

However, the presentation of Artaxerxes and the relationship between Jews and Persians is indeed more complicated than a reaction of simply regarding the book as ending in harmony. The complexities of how power is portrayed and negotiated in the language and literature of subordinates is emphasized in this study to present a more nuanced and multivalent

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139. Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 296.

140. Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 296.

141. As quoted in Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 6.

142. Bernhard W. Anderson, "The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible," *JR* 36 (1950): 32–43. Jon D. Levenson, "Scroll of Esther in Ecumenical Perspective," *JES* 13 (1976): 440–52; the quotation is from pp. 443–44.

picture of the complicated power relationships presented in the book of Esther. Quite before his time, Bickerman commented in the same vein: "Modern scholars class this work as pro-gentile and that as anti-gentile. With the same disarming naiveté they can discuss whether some Greek author, say Posidonios, was 'anti-semitic.' The Greek Esther shows that this lazy dichotomy is not sufficient."<sup>143</sup>

Another element of scholarship's conversation regarding empire in Esther is how the Jewish characters in the book demonstrate the realities of living in imperial locations. With a favorable outcome for Jews under foreign rule at the end of the book, many have suggested that Esther is a model for how Jewish people can accept the reality of the diaspora and learn to live agreeably as subjects of a foreign power with loyalty to both their (gentile) imperial location and their Jewish community.<sup>144</sup> Acceptance and accommodation to a subordinate position in an imperial power structure is emphasized by these readings as the book is primarily viewed as a model for right behavior in the diaspora.

Other scholars, though, highlight a more strained existence of dual loyalties in which maneuvering within imperial power and manipulating it may be necessary for survival. Sidnie White Crawford shows how Esther not only accepts her subordinate position but learns to use it to her advantage. Esther is "not a passive character" but takes actions to demonstrate that successful life in the diaspora involves "accepting the reality of a subordinate position *and* learning to gain power by working within the structure rather than against it."<sup>145</sup> Clines also finds that Esther accepts her situation while performing her actions as a way to swing Persian power so that it is enacted for a Jewish cause rather than against the Jews.<sup>146</sup> Clines

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143. Bickerman, "Notes on the Greek Book of Esther," 133.

144. See, e.g., Humphreys, "Lifestyle for Diaspora," 211–23; Meinhold, "Gattung der Josephsgeschichte," 306–24; Edward L. Greenstein, "A Jewish Reading of Esther," in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and Ernest S. Frerichs (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 232–35; and Stan Goldman, "Narrative and Ethical Ironies in Esther," *JSOT* 47 (1990): 15–31.

145. White [Crawford], "Esther: A Feminine Model for Diaspora," 161–77, quotation on 173, emphasis added.

146. David J. A. Clines, "Reading Esther From Left to Right: Contemporary Strategies for Reading a Biblical Text," in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*, ed. David J. A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl, and Stanley E. Porter, *JSOTSup* 87 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990): 31–52.

does not view Esther's actions as revolutionary but supportive of the imperial power; she merely tries to change the tides and press imperial means into the service of Jewish deliverance. Clines writes, "For it [the book of Esther] tolerates Persian power in every respect except in the ultimate area, that is, over life and death, and it commends co-operation rather than resistance."<sup>147</sup> Aaron Koller also reads Esther as a political book that teaches Jews to live in a foreign society.<sup>148</sup> He writes of the shifting of loyalties for Esther, "Esther indeed wavers between allegiance to the empire and its rules—represented, after all, by her own husband—and her loyalty to the people of her youth."<sup>149</sup>

With its own nuanced analysis of the imperial relationships between dominant and subordinate peoples, this study builds upon descriptions of strained loyalties in Esther and moves to demonstrate how actions such as acceptance, accommodation, and cooperation can be performances of multivalent imperial negotiation. An article that begins to open the door toward this type of interpretation comes from Steed Davidson.<sup>150</sup> Davidson considers the complicated relationship between the diversity upon which empires are built and the difference that can destabilize imperial power. In the story of Esther, as well as the stories of Joseph and Daniel, fear existed that empires would expunge difference through physical elimination or forced assimilation. Davidson argues that access to power, more than advocating for the dismantling of power, seems to be the answer to that fear portrayed in the Esther story. "On the inside of imperial power, Esther and Mordecai advance the interests of their people without undoing the interests of the Persian Empire."<sup>151</sup> But Davidson also hints that more is at play. By difference infiltrating the center of power, the power is actually destabilized, "From the perspective of marginalized Jews in a hostile environment such a move offers relief. But, from the perspective of the managers of diversity, the beneficiaries of the master narratives, the gatekeepers of identity, and the purveyors of imperial power, it is the sum of all their fears."<sup>152</sup> Davidson

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147. Clines, "Reading Esther from Left to Right," 45.

148. Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

149. Koller, *Esther in Ancient Thought*, 73.

150. Steed Vernyl Davidson, "Diversity, Difference, and Access to Power: The Case of the Book of Esther," *WW* 29 (2009): 280–87.

151. Davidson, "Diversity, Difference, and Access to Power," 287.

152. Davidson, "Diversity, Difference, and Access to Power," 287. Davidson points



does not elaborate on this incisive observation, but it demonstrates a key element of understanding the complexities of negotiating imperial power, that, contra Clines, cooperation can also be negotiation.

Like Davidson's work, this study provides an analysis of the multifaceted presentation of negotiation in LXX Esther. Besides these two themes raised in interpretation—the presentation of empire and its negotiation—a few articles have ventured in the realm of contextualized liberation or postcolonial readings.<sup>153</sup> However, to my knowledge, no comprehensive treatment of any of the three extant versions of Esther through an imperial-critical lens has been attempted.<sup>154</sup>

#### GENDER STUDIES AND ITS INTERSECTIONS WITH IMPERIAL-CRITICAL APPROACHES

I now move to reflect upon gender studies, specifically the use of feminist criticism and masculinity studies in biblical interpretation, and to demonstrate how the intersection of empire and gender informs this study. Following a description of gender studies, I also briefly consider how this study's approach to gender in Esther compares to previous interpretation.

The insights of early feminist interpretation in its focus on women, femininity, and femaleness led scholars also to begin reflecting upon

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to Beal's recognition that Esther's hiding and subsequent revelation are tools that function to introduce difference into the center. Beal writes, "With Esther's disclosure, that pattern [sameness] is shattered. Her revelation, which draws the marginal other into the very center uninvited, puts an end to any such cozy feelings. It introduces the other into the center of the order in a way that exposes and explodes all imagined sameness" (*Book of Hiding*, 98).

153. E.g., Roy Sano, "Ethnic Liberation Theology: Neo-Orthodoxy Reshaped or Replaced?," *Christianity in Crisis* 35 (1975): 258–64; Orlando E. Costas, "The Subversiveness of Faith: Esther as a Paradigm for a Liberating Theology," *ER* 40 (1988): 66–78; and Aquiles Ernesto Martínez, "Mordecai and Esther: Migration Lessons from Persian Soil," *Journal of Latin American Theology* 4 (2009): 16–50.

154. A notable article is Chris Frilingos's brief exploration of Josephus's retelling of Esther. Frilingos examines the use of violence in Josephus's Esther in *Jewish Antiquities*, the Greek romance of Achilles Tatius, *Leucippe and Clitophon*, and the Infancy Gospel of Thomas in the context of the first century CE of the Roman Empire to show how local cultures reinscribed Roman violence for their own religious claims in order to destabilize the universal/global Roman influence. Chris Frilingos, "It Moves Me to Wonder': Narrating Violence and Religion Under the Roman Empire," *JAAR* 77 (2009): 825–52.



maleness and masculinity. These further explorations became known as gender studies. Rather than simply describing the roles or experiences of “women” or “men” in the Bible, gender studies redirected the focus toward analyzing gender as a product of ideologies rather than nature. “It became commonplace to observe that masculinity and femininity were socially constructed ideas, culturally variable, rather than innate traits inherently connected to physiological sex.”<sup>155</sup> In attempting to describe the aims of gender criticism, Ken Stone writes,

Instead of studying “men” or “women” as such, gender criticism analyzes critically the cultural notions and social processes that function not only to differentiate “men” from “women,” but also to differentiate men or male characters from other men or male characters, and some women or female characters from other women or female characters. It also highlights instances in which gender takes unexpected forms or fails to conform to dominant assumptions, including the widespread assumption that gender can always be understood in strictly binary terms (e.g., male versus female, or masculine versus feminine). Refusing to be confined by this assumption, gender criticism even explores such gender-related topics as “female masculinity” or intersexed bodies—hardly conventional objects of analysis for either “men’s studies” or women’s studies” as traditionally practiced.<sup>156</sup>

Thus, gender studies of the Bible are informed by feminist interpretation as well as masculinity studies in order to critically analyze cultural notions of gender as they are constructed in the text.<sup>157</sup> This section describes

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155. Claudia V. Camp, “Gender Studies,” *NIDB* 2:533.

156. Ken Stone, “Gender Criticism,” in *Judges and Method: A New Approach to Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale A. Yee, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 183–84.

157. Some examples of gender criticism in the Hebrew Bible include Claudia V. Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy: The Strange Woman and the Making of the Bible*, JSOT-Sup 320 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000); Ken Stone, *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2001); Deborah F. Sawyer, *God, Gender and the Bible*, Biblical Limits (London: Routledge, 2002); and Cheryl B. Anderson, *Women, Ideology, and Violence: Critical Theory and the Construction of Gender in the Book of the Covenant and the Deuteronomic Law* (London T&T Clark, 2004). Deryn Guest explores the implications of feminist biblical studies expanding into gender studies. She provides a history of scholarship, observes the trends emerging in queer and masculinities studies, and provides examples of how readings can become more inclusive to include critical considerations of the performance of gender as well as

significant developments and aims in feminist interpretation and masculinity studies to explain the particular approach of this study as related to how the performance of gender intersects with imperial power dynamics.

### Feminist Biblical Interpretation

Feminist biblical interpretation began in the 1970s and 1980s with the pioneering work of scholars such as Phyllis Trible (Hebrew Bible) and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New Testament).<sup>158</sup> Important works from early feminist biblical interpretation of Hebrew Bible also include those of Claudia Camp, Carol Meyers, Phyllis Bird, Mieke Bal, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky.<sup>159</sup> These scholars utilized sociohistorical and literary methods to make the social realities, portrayal, descriptions, and experiences of women the central focus of their interpretation.<sup>160</sup> Because feminist interpretation

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its instability and liminality. She suggests naming this approach genderqueer studies. Deryn Guest, *Beyond Feminist Biblical Studies*, *The Bible in the Modern World* 47 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012).

158. Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978); and Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, OBT 13 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1983); and Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984).

159. Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and Feminine in the Book of Proverbs*, BLS 11 (Decatur, GA: Almond Press, 1985). Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). For a collection of some of Bird's work, see Phyllis Bird, *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997). Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories*, ISBL (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

160. Meyers, Bird, and Frymer-Kensky all utilize socio-historical methods to construct new understandings of what life for women in ancient Israel would have been like. Meyers provides a sociohistorical reconstruction of women in premonarchic Israel to show that they were equal producers in a household economic system (*Discovering Eve*). Bird concludes that women had a much larger role in the Israelite cult and its worship than has been attributed to them in the past ("The Place of Women in the Israelite Cultus," in *Missing Persons*). Frymer-Kensky explores the move from a male-female god-goddess system in ancient Mesopotamia to the more male-dominant monotheism of ancient Israel, though she argues that women were not considered inherently inferior, but could relate to God equally with men despite

utilizes numerous methods and has various aims, like imperial-critical approaches, it is largely perspectival.<sup>161</sup> Schüssler Fiorenza describes many different approaches and strategies to feminist interpretation, including attempts to revise dominant interpretations, to recover the stories and histories of women, to imagine different sociohistorical descriptions or alternative readings, to make women the subjects of readings rather than the objects, and to uncover the androcentric ideology of texts.<sup>162</sup>

While many continue to approach feminist interpretation in this manner, Schüssler Fiorenza also furthered efforts by recognizing the parallel oppressions that women face from more than just patriarchy, but also from social, political, and economic structures. Schüssler Fiorenza coined the term *kyriarchy* to describe the “multiplicative interstructuring of the pyramidal hierarchical structures of ruling which affect women in different social locations differently.”<sup>163</sup>

This recognition of the larger networks of power that affect women led scholars to begin to read the biblical text in light of multiple oppressions, as is exemplified in postcolonial feminist interpretation. Kwok Pui-lan offers this definition: “A postcolonial feminist interpretation of the Bible needs to investigate the deployment of gender in the narration of identity, the negotiation of power differentials between the colonizers and the colonized, and

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having a subordinate social position and no access to the priesthood (*In the Wake of the Goddesses*). Tribble’s work provided rhetorical readings of love stories to show how human sexuality is a metaphor for understanding the image of God (*God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality and Texts of Terror*). Following Tribble, Bal and Camp also utilized primarily literary methods. Bal confronts dominant literary readings of love stories, not to overthrow the dominant readings, but to destabilize meaning demonstrating that feminist interpretations can be plausible (*Lethal Love*). Camp explores the female figure of Wisdom through a literary analysis in which the personification of Wisdom is a metaphor in which the vehicle for understanding the tenor of the metaphor (Wisdom) is the Israelite woman (*Wisdom and the Feminine*). However, Camp also makes sociohistorical connections that legitimate her literary reading. In this way, my own method of providing a literary reading and then making intertextual connections with (con)texts is similar to that of Camp.

161. Nancy R. Bowen, “Feminist Interpretation,” *NIDB* 2:448–49; and Bowen, “Feminist and Womanist Criticism,” in *The Postmodern Bible: The Bible and Culture Collective*, ed. Elizabeth A. Castelli et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 225–71.

162. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 20–50.

163. Schüssler Fiorenza, *But She Said*, 115; see also 102–32.

the reinforcement of patriarchal control over spheres where elites could exercise control.”<sup>164</sup> In postcolonial feminist work scholars consider how gender intersects with the larger networks of sociopolitical power of colonization or imperialism.<sup>165</sup>

Kwok writes that one way women are disadvantaged by imperial structures is through the symbolic usage of women in narratives of power. In order to illustrate, she points to examples of gendered power in biblical texts. She observes the gendered imagery of Ezek 23 in which woman is used as a trope for the land and nation of Judah and Israel and their subjugated colonial subjects, while the foreign powers of the colonizers are portrayed as hypermasculine.<sup>166</sup> Another example comes from Davina Lopez, who demonstrates how visual representations of Roman imperial ideology symbolized Rome’s rulers as violent men penetrating and brutalizing females, who represented the nations that were conquered and subjugated.<sup>167</sup> In its symbolism and imagery, imperial ideology often portrays women as weak, vulnerable, and exploitable objects.

Kwok also identifies women in imperial systems as being in the “contact zone.” Women in the contact zone are those who encounter people from different geographical, historical, social, economic, and/or racial backgrounds, and their interactions are shaped by inequity. In the contact zone, women exist as objects that are exploited in the power dynamics of

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164. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 9.

165. An example of postcolonial feminist biblical interpretation comes from Joseph Marchal, who considers Paul’s calls to imitation and the roles of Euodia and Syntyche in the community at Philippi in light of mimicry and the roles of colonized women. Joseph Marchal, *The Politics of Heaven: Women, Gender, and Empire in the Study of Paul* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

166. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 81. For a similar treatment of Ezek 23, see Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, “The Metaphorization of Woman in Prophetic Speech: An Analysis of Ezekiel 23,” in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to The Latter Prophets*, 244–55. Additionally, Renita Weems describes the detrimental effects of the metaphor found in Ezek 23 for women. In addition to symbolizing political or military power, women characters are also used in biblical texts to represent and symbolize class struggles. Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 96–106. See, e.g., Gale A. Yee, *Poor Banished Children of Eve: Women as Evil in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); and Camp, *Wise, Strange, and Holy*.

167. Davina C. Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul’s Mission, Paul in Critical Contexts* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 26–55.

colonial ideology, though women in the contact zone do not all have the same experiences.<sup>168</sup>

Women among the colonized suffer from colonial oppression, the patriarchal system of their colonizers, the patriarchal system of their own colonized people, and likely from fragmentation and power struggles among their fellow colonized women.<sup>169</sup> Colonized women suffer the effects of conquest directly as they are used by both colonizer and colonized men. For example, as mentioned previously, women in the contact zone experience particular oppression in the expression of military power. The maleness of war perpetuates patriarchy.

War provides men with the perfect psychological backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women. The very maleness of the military—brute power of weaponry exclusive to their hands, the spiritual bonding of men at arms, the manly discipline of orders given and orders obeyed, the simple logic of hierarchical command—confirms for men what they long suspect, that women are peripheral, irrelevant to the world that counts, passive spectators to the action in the center ring.<sup>170</sup>

Colonized women are raped in conquest and exist as objects used in the masculine act of gaining military control. Further, colonized women lose their resources to those in power as a consequence of conquest, as well as being robbed of some aspects of their cultural identity through the hybridization of colonization. But simultaneous to their objectification, women also can gain new opportunities or employment among the colonizers if they utilize discourses of negotiation. The ambivalence present for colonized women means that while they are doubly disadvantaged, occasions for agency still exist.

Similarly, women among the colonizers enjoy some privileges over the colonized resulting from the exercise of power, but, concurrently, they are oppressed for their gender in being restricted from gaining power from the men who have experienced the benefits of power and intend to keep their position. They also experience some measure of hierarchy among colonizer women. Women among both the colonized and the colonizers are able to find some measure of access to power and agency through negotiation, as

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168. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 82.

169. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 20.

170. Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 32.

Scott outlines, though the level to which power can be attained by women is varied.

Further, historical narratives of imperial societies often do not contain women in the contact zone, neither women among the colonizers nor among the colonized. Joan Scott writes that even within a history from below women are often excluded only to be “awkwardly included as special examples of the general (male) experience, or to be treated entirely separately.”<sup>171</sup> They do not reach the status of subject, but are only useful for the role they play in the struggle for power. Postcolonial feminist studies do not attempt to add women into a masculine history of power but try to allow women in the contact zone to claim their voice and speak for themselves.<sup>172</sup>

This study argues that in the world that the text of LXX Esther creates Vashti and Esther are literary depictions of women in the imperial contact zone for whom ambivalence exists in their subjugation to both imperialism and patriarchy. They are special examples included in a book defined by the general (male) experience, especially a contest for hegemonic masculinity, as I will argue throughout the course of the book. I turn now to describe the development and tenets of masculinity studies as it relates to this work.

### Masculinity Studies

Masculinity studies of the Bible have grown out of gender criticism, specifically in reflecting upon how readings “presuppose or contribute to cultural notions and social practices pertaining to manhood.”<sup>173</sup> Clines has been a pioneer in masculinity studies as related to interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>174</sup> Clines’s work attempts to utilize biblical texts to

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171. Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, rev. ed., Gender and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 84.

172. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*, ed. Charles Lemert, 4th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010), 536–40.

173. Ken Stone, “Masculinity Studies,” *NIDB* 3:829.

174. David J. A. Clines, “David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible*, ed. David J. A. Clines, JSOTSup 205 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 212–43; Clines, “He-Prophets: Masculinity as a Problem for the Hebrew Prophets and their Interpreters,” in *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory*

catalog male traits that comprise the “biblical man.” Some of the traits Clines identifies as markers of biblical men are strength and violence (both verbal and physical) especially in warfare, maintaining male honor, wisdom, persuasive speech, beauty, and acting independently from women. Scholars have built on Clines’s work by identifying other traits of biblical masculinities through similar descriptive means, while others have drawn upon sources from the cultures of the ancient Near East. Results of these studies have described other aspects of masculinity in the Hebrew Bible including displaying sexual potency, avoiding the feminine and the private social sphere of women, having responsibility and authority, and protecting one’s women from being violated.<sup>175</sup>

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of Robert Carroll, ed. Alastair G. Hunter and Philip R. Davies, JSOTSup 348 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002); Clines, “Being a Man in the Book of the Covenant,” in *Reading the Law: Studies in Honour of Gordon J. Wenham*, ed. J. G. McConville and Karl Möller, LHBOTS 461 (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 3–9; Clines, “Dancing and Shining at Sinai: Playing the Man in Exodus 32–34,” in *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible and Beyond*, ed. Ovidiu Creangă, Bible in the Modern World 33 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010); Clines, “The Book of Psalms, Where Men Are Men ...: On the Gender of Hebrew Piety,” unpublished paper, <https://tinyurl.com/SBLPress3552a>; Clines, “Loingirding and Other Male Activities in the Book of Job,” unpublished paper, <https://tinyurl.com/SBLPress3552b>. Another pioneering work came from Howard Eilberg-Schwartz’s *God’s Phallus: And Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon, 1994). Eilberg-Schwartz exposes the dilemma and opportunities of understanding how human males lovingly relate to the monotheistic, male, sexless, and unembodied God as their father.

175. Cynthia Chapman draws upon Assyrian resources to demonstrate how king’s power is directly equated with symbols of his virility (e.g., battering rams penetrating city walls, kings depicted standing erect). Cynthia Chapman, *The Gendered Language of Warfare in the Israelite-Assyrian Encounter*, HSM 62 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004). Mark George examines Deuteronomy and describes how men are assumed to be looking for sex and are permitted to have sex with a number of different women including married women, engaged women, virgins, former wives, father’s wives, mothers-in-law, sisters, temple prostitutes (Deut 22:30; 23:17–18; 24:1–4; 27:22–23). Mark George, “Masculinity and Its Regimentation in Deuteronomy,” in Creangă, *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible*, 70–71. While working with a spindle is a source of pride for a woman (Prov 31:9), it leads to a bad reputation for men (2 Sam 3:29) (Ken Stone, “Masculinity Studies,” 3:829). Men are also forbidden to wear women’s clothing (Deut 22:5) (Mark K. George, “Masculinity and Its Regimentation in Deuteronomy,” 72). John Goldingay finds having responsibility and authority to be an aspect of masculinity as described in Gen 1–4. John Goldingay, “Hosea 1–3, Genesis 1–4, and Masculist Interpretation,” *HBT* 17 (1995): 39. Susan E. Haddox describes



However, as one might expect, being able to catalog or describe one definitive picture of masculinity in the Bible and as associated with nearby cultures can be complicated. For example, though avoidance or separation from women may seem to be associated with biblical manhood, John Goldingay and Dennis Olson have argued that connectedness to women is an important aspect of biblical masculinity rather than appearing womanless.<sup>176</sup> Also, while wisdom is considered a trait of biblical masculinity, several scholars have demonstrated how wisdom is often associated with women instead of only men.<sup>177</sup>

Further examination of biblical masculinities can also be considered in relation to the studies of Greco-Roman masculinity that have been utilized by New Testament scholars. Though Rome had not yet conquered Hasmonian Judea and Ptolemaic Egypt in the setting of the early first-century BCE readers constructed by this work, the Greek ideals continued by Rome were most certainly experienced by the earliest readers of LXX Esther.

The work of Colleen Conway will be summarized here in order to offer a portrait of Greco-Roman masculinity to which masculinities in LXX Esther might be compared.<sup>178</sup> Conway draws a portrait of Greco-Roman masculinity from “philosophical, anatomical, and physiognomic treatises,

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protecting and providing for one’s women as an aspect of honor, though she finds that the patriarchs struggle with living up to this ideal. Susan E. Haddox, “Favoured Sons and Subordinate Masculinities,” in Creangă, *Men and Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible*, 5–6.

176. Goldingay, “Hosea 1–3, Genesis 1–4,” 41; and Dennis T. Olson, “Untying the Knot? Masculinity, Violence, and the Creation-Fall Story of Genesis 2–4,” in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to the Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katherine Doob Sakenfeld*, ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 80.

177. See, e.g., Claudia Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine*; Linda Day, “Wisdom and the Feminine in the Hebrew Bible,” in Day, *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World*, 114–27; Jacqueline Lapsley, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women’s Stories in the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); and Rebecca S. Hancock, *Esther and the Politics of Negotiation: Public and Private Spaces and the Figure of the Female Royal Counselor*, Emerging Scholars (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013).

178. Colleen M. Conway, *Behold the Man: Jesus and Greco-Roman Masculinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Another excellent resource on interpretation of the New Testament in connection with Greco-Roman masculinities is Stephen D. Moore and Janice Capel Anderson, *New Testament Masculinities*, SemeiaSt 45 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).



moral discourses, legal codes, and biblical commentary, as well as material evidence from ancient coins, altars, statues and inscriptions ... [from] texts that span several centuries ranging from the first century B.C.E. (and sometimes earlier) to texts from the fourth century C.E.”<sup>179</sup> She argues that her breadth is intentional to demonstrate the persistence of these features of masculinity. With the time range reflected in the texts from which Conway draws, her description of the features of Greco-Roman masculinity are applicable to a construction of a first century BCE audience in Hasmonean Judea and Ptolemaic Egypt.

Conway outlines numerous characteristics of the dominant ideology of masculinity in the Greco-Roman world including bodily traits and actions. Bodily, a man has a warmer temperature than a woman, is well-proportioned, acts sexually rather than is acted upon, and does not have a weak voice, glance, posture, mode of walking, inclination of the neck, or upturned palms when conversing.<sup>180</sup> In acting like a man one must have virtue including piety, wisdom, intelligence, generosity, faithfulness, love of truth, prowess in battle, and courage including willingness to exhibit noble sacrifice while enduring pain bravely; he must avoid lust, luxury, avarice, and excess, be self-controlled and restrained in emotions especially anger; and he must be educated and a good orator.<sup>181</sup>

Perhaps most significantly, masculinity featured active behavior in both sexual and social roles. Conway writes, “To be active often involved expressing one’s dominion over another. To be passive meant to submit to this domination.”<sup>182</sup> Craig Williams also emphasizes the exertion of power or domination over others as a trait of masculinity in classical antiquity such as the Roman period. Williams writes, “A man must exercise dominion over his own body and his own desires as well as the bodies and desires of those under his jurisdiction.”<sup>183</sup> Executing active power and dominion were central to the performance of Greco-Roman masculinity.

With the recognition of various portraits of how masculinities are performed within the Bible and its connected cultures, biblical scholars also often turn to masculinity theorist Raewyn W. Connell to explain masculin-

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179. Conway, *Behold the Man*, 16.

180. Conway, *Behold the Man*, 16–20.

181. Conway, *Behold the Man*, 21–34.

182. Conway, *Behold the Man*, 22.

183. Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity*, Ideologies of Desire (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 141.

ity and its appearance in different forms.<sup>184</sup> Connell argues that masculinity should be studied not as an object, but as the “processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives.”<sup>185</sup> Gender is the social practices of the reproductive area as opposed to biological base; it refers to bodies and what bodies do, it is not reduced to the body alone. For Connell, the structure of understanding gender, then, is based on three relations: (1) power, that is, the subordination of women; (2) production, in other words, how gender and its performance divides labor and leads to an inequity of wealth; and (3) cathexis, or emotional attachment, that is, the practices that shape and realize desire as subjects and objects.<sup>186</sup>

Through the various configurations of these three relations of power, production, and cathexis, especially as they intersect with race and class, masculinity exhibits different patterns in the social order—hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, and marginalized. Hegemonic masculinities are the configuration that presents a currently accepted strategy to maintain patriarchy’s ultimate authority in a particular social system. This type of normative standard of masculinity may be modeled by a small number of highly visible figures (e.g., film actors or athletes in the twenty-first-century United States), but is not practiced by the majority of “men” and is often challenged. However, all men benefit from hegemonic masculinity, because even if they do not meet the standards or compete to exercise its power, they still reap the patriarchal dividend of subordination over women. Subordinate masculinities include those expelled from the circle of legitimacy, those at the bottom of the masculinity hierarchy who can never escape being associated with women and subject to verbal, physical, and cultural violence. Complicit masculinities are practices by those who accept the patriarchal dividend, but are not on the front line. They can compromise with their wives and respect their mothers while still cursing feminists. Marginalized masculinity relates to the intersections of race

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184. Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005). Examples of other masculinity theorists consulted in biblical scholarship include Harry Brod, ed., *The Making of Masculinities: The New Men’s Studies* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987); David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Andrea Cornwall and Nancy Lindisfarne, eds., *Dislocating Masculinities: Comparative Ethnographies* (London: Routledge, 1994); and Maurice Berger et al., eds., *Constructing Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

185. Connell, *Masculinities*, 71.

186. Connell, *Masculinities*, 67–76.

and class as marginalized groups develop their own masculinities (e.g., black masculinities, working-class masculinities, gay masculinities). These masculinities are always subject to the hegemonic ideal, thus even when they conform to hegemonic patterns, they do not receive the benefits of authority.<sup>187</sup> These different kinds of patterns of masculinity explain why masculinity is represented in various ways by diverse groups.

Additionally, with power as *a*, if not *the*, primary relation through which gender is constructed, understandings of masculinities are inextricably intertwined with imperial-critical approaches. Connell directly associates gender and imperial power writing, “Masculinities are not only shaped by the process of imperial expansion, they are active in that process to help shape it.”<sup>188</sup> Williams also describes how Roman masculinity involved both *virtus* (manliness) and *imperium* (dominion); he writes, “A common theme in ancient sources is that true Roman men, who possess *virtus* by birthright, rightfully exercise their dominion or *imperium* not only over women but also over foreigners, themselves implicitly likened to women. An obvious implication is that non-Roman peoples were destined to submit to Rome’s masculine *imperium*.”<sup>189</sup> Constructions of masculinity iterated that manly men not only should have dominion over women and access to social status and economic resources, but they also had the right to dominion over foreign lands. In this way, the masculinity of imperial power functioned to legitimate rule and further conquest.

In this study, the masculinities performed by the characters of Artaxerxes, Haman, Mordecai, and even Esther are analyzed in light of their different roles within imperial power dynamics. Previous studies of masculinities in the Bible and its connected cultural contexts, along with the theory of patterns of masculinities, especially hegemonic masculinity offered by Connell, provide insight into the examination of the portraits of masculinity displayed by main characters.

#### PREVIOUS INTERPRETATION OF ESTHER AND GENDER

With the intersection of gender and imperial power established in terms of feminist interpretation and masculinity studies, I will now offer a brief summary of previous scholarship’s consideration of gender in Esther.

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187. Connell, *Masculinities*, 76–81.

188. Connell, *Masculinities*, 185.

189. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 135.

With a woman as its title character, the book of Esther has elicited various commentary from the perspective of feminist interpretation. Most feminist interpretation has chosen the character of Esther as its point of departure, often constructing readings in relation to a fixed set of gendered values—either the title character is an object in conformity with her patriarchal world, or she defiantly wields authority defying social rules and expectations.<sup>190</sup>

On the one hand, some feminist interpreters view Esther as a woman who submits herself to patriarchy and conforms to gendered expectations, while Mordecai becomes the celebrated hero at the end of the story. For example, Esther Fuchs writes that Esther personifies “the reinstitution of the patriarchal order. Only by reenacting the roles assigned to them by the patriarchal system as wives and mothers can women become national heroines.”<sup>191</sup> Bea Wyler also comments on Esther’s failure as an incomplete emancipator. Though she is able to affect liberation for the Jewish people, Esther’s actions end one step short of complete liberation.

Esther, who has meanwhile become a liberated Jew but remains a discriminated-against woman, would be in her privileged position as queen the ideal figure to pursue that goal [the end of discrimination for women]. However, this does not happen within the framework of the book of Esther.... Queen Esther remains bound to the decrees of men, written in the script and language of her own husband the king (1:22). She has no influence to bring to bear on this state of affairs either for herself or for other women, due to her blindness about her situation as woman; at the single moment when all power is concentrated in her feminine hand (8:1), she hands it all over to Mordecai (8:2).<sup>192</sup>

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190. The observation of the polarization in previous feminist interpretation of Esther has been noted by the following: 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, David L. Peterson, and Kent Harold Richards (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 195–209; Timothy Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, SBLDS 165 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 6; and Hancock, *Esther and the Politics of Negotiation*, 13.

191. 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), 84.

192. Bea Wyler, “Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen,” in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 130–32.

Similar to Wyler's observation concerning Esther's liberation of Jews but not women, Itumeleng Mosala finds Esther's choice for national freedom over freedom for women to be an incomplete model of liberation for her context of African women's struggle for freedom in South Africa.<sup>193</sup>

In interpretations of Esther's character as conforming to patriarchy, Vashti is often viewed as more of a role model character than Esther since she rejects the patriarchal demands placed on her.<sup>194</sup> Alice Laffey contrasts Esther's conformity to gender norms with Vashti's commendable actions in refusing to submit to patriarchal expectations.<sup>195</sup> Mary Gendler also upholds Vashti as a woman who defies patriarchy, though Gendler shows how the story is a cautionary tale about how those who deviate do not succeed.<sup>196</sup> Equally concerning for Gendler are the expectations that Esther creates for Jewish women, "In most ways she [Esther] 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."<sup>197</sup>

On the other hand, some scholars have considered Esther to be a character who subverts patriarchy and gendered expectations and who challenges the authority of male characters as a public presence.<sup>198</sup> For example, Bruce Jones regards Esther's actions as a triumph of wisdom and writes of her, "She is a sage, not a sex-object."<sup>199</sup> In addition, Susan Zaeske

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193. Itumeleng J. Mosala, "The Implications of the Text of Esther for African Women's Struggle for Liberation in South Africa," *Semeia* 59 (1992): 129–37.

194. In addition to Fuchs and Wyler mentioned above, examples of seeing Esther as conforming to patriarchy can also be seen in Nicole Wilkinson Duran, "Esther," *NIDB* 2:317; Moore, *Esther*, liv; and Lillian Klein, "Honor and Shame in Esther," in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susana*, 149–75.

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

196. Mary Gendler, "The Restoration of Vashti," in *The Jewish Woman: New Perspectives*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun (New York: Schocken, 1976), 241–47.

197. Gendler, "Restoration of Vashti," 242.

198. See, e.g., Berlin, *Esther*, lv–lvi; White Crawford's portrayal of Esther as a "feminine model" (White [Crawford], "Esther: A Feminine Model for Diaspora") and Fox's response to negative portrayals of Esther as conforming to patriarchy (Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 205–11).

199. Bruce W. Jones, "Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther," *CBQ* 39 (1977): 177. Kevin McGeough further elaborates on Esther as enacting wisdom in an extreme situation. Because of the extremity of her experience, she is not a role model

sees Esther's actions, specifically her speech, as an example of how marginalized Jews should speak in dangerous rhetorical settings. For Zaeske, the book of Esther is "a source of empowerment. Its message is that there are times when even a lowly person, a woman, must speak to safeguard the community. In the Book of Esther, a woman is ordained by God to transgress female space and defy the prescription of silence to intercede in matters of state."<sup>200</sup> Also, André Lacocque demonstrates how Esther defies convention and utilizes her gender to subversively provide for Jewish survival. "In both cases [that of Judith and Esther], the course of history is changed by a daring act of the heroine.... Their mode of operation is, of course, determined by their gender. They tap all the resources of their femininity.... The feminine stereotype is left behind, but these women are not transformed into men."<sup>201</sup> Finally, Linda Day provides a characterization of the main character of the book in each of the three extant texts.<sup>202</sup> For example, she shows how AT Esther's title character is intelligent and enacts justice through violence; how in LXX Esther she seems weak and emotional but demonstrates the most growth of the character in the three texts, becoming stronger and more confident; and how in MT Esther she is a woman of fortitude who is an excellent speaker.<sup>203</sup> With these different portraits of Esther available, Day comments, "To do justice to ancient texts, the community of women today needs to hear a variety of voices, if

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to be followed, but is a hero that should be admired. Kevin McGeough, "Esther the Hero: Going Beyond 'Wisdom' in Heroic Narratives," *CBQ* 70 (2008): 44–65.

200. Susan Zaeske, "Unveiling Esther as a Pragmatic Radical Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 33 (2000): 203. Levenson also comments on the masterful construction of Esther's speech. Levenson, *Esther*, 101–3.

201. André LaCocque, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 72.

202. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*. Michael Fox also evaluates the presentation of Esther in relation to patriarchy in the three different extant versions of Esther. Fox concludes that Esther in MT Esther is an "independent, dignified, powerful woman." MT Esther does not necessarily contain a feminist message but suggests that a woman can become the deliverer of her people. AT Esther, however, presents Esther as "a pliant tool of Mordecai who is sent to the king to charm him." Esther in LXX Esther, he claims, is not tactical in her use of self-effacement as she is presented in MT Esther, but is subject to the burden of social constraints as a matter of propriety. She is more pious in LXX Esther but less independent than in MT Esther. Michael Fox, "Three Esthers," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, ed. Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon, JSOTSup 380 (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 50–60.

203. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 194–202.

it wishes to enable positive utilization of Scripture and find liberation in it. Study of multiple views of the same figure provides the contemporary community of women the freedom to look to other portrayals for a liberating portrait of these literary women in our religious tradition.”<sup>204</sup>

Outside of these two binary approaches, Esther as submitting to patriarchy or subverting it, the work of four scholars has contributed to reading the book of Esther as more complex than a response to patriarchy. (1) Timothy Beal’s *The Book of Hiding* reads MT Esther in dialogue with discourse on gender, ethnicity, and social ambiguity.<sup>205</sup> Beal argues that convergences of identity, shifting alignments, ambivalences, and marginal locations provide the potential for political subversion.<sup>206</sup> (2) Rebecca Hancock’s *Esther and the Politics of Negotiation* explores the title character’s gender by comparing her actions with those of other wise women involved in political affairs instead of considering her only in reference to supposed tenets of the masculine/public and the feminine/private domains.<sup>207</sup> (3) Nicole Duran’s essay, “Who Wants to Marry a Persian King?,” challenges interpretations that MT Esther is a mere comedy or parody and instead posits that it is a book about gender politics.<sup>208</sup> Duran reads Vashti’s defiance as a social and political rebellion, and argues that Esther is kidnapped and forced into a gender role that she performs as a part of the sexual political order in service of the survival of herself and her people.<sup>209</sup> (4) Esther Menn’s essay, “Prayer of the Queen,” interprets Esther’s prayer in Addition C (14:1–19) in dialogue with the conception of the religious self.<sup>210</sup> Menn describes Esther’s conception of herself as a subject of the divine king, though she exists in multiple hierarchical relationships as also a subject of Mordecai and Artaxerxes. Esther’s body becomes the contested site for

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204. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 238.

205. Beal, *Book of Hiding*.

206. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, ix–x, 119–24.

207. Hancock, *Esther and the Politics of Negotiation*, see esp. 63–82.

208. 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, SemeiaSt 44 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 71–84.

209. Vashti: Duran, “Who Wants to Marry a Persian King?,” 74. Esther: Duran, “Who Wants to Marry a Persian King?,” 75–84.

210. Esther Menn, “Prayer of the Queen: Esther’s Religious Self in the Septuagint,” in *Religion and the Self in Antiquity*, ed. David Brakke, Michael L. Saltow, and Steven Weitzman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 70–90; see esp. pp. 70–71.



human allegiance in a conflict between two kingdoms—the earthly and the divine—but it is precisely Esther’s participation in the earthly kingdom that allows for the success of the divine kingdom.<sup>211</sup>

Each of these four works has reframed essential questions about the performance of gender by female characters in the book of Esther. They have demonstrated how power and gender are interconnected and must be considered in a gendered analysis. The insights of each of these scholars are invaluable for the development of this study in which I examine how the multivalent gendered actions and performances of characters function within the imperial power dynamics represented in LXX Esther.

With regard to how masculinity studies has been applied to the interpretation of the book of Esther, to my knowledge no major monographs, articles, or essays have been written. One can find, though, a few passing notes regarding masculinity and the book of Esther embedded in articles and commentaries. For example, Fox comments on the disparaging scholarly portraits of Esther that called for her to act as Vashti.

It would not have been justified for her [Esther] to assert her ego at the expense of her people’s existence. A story such as Fuchs and Laffey would consider worthy of respect—in which, perhaps, Esther would stomp into the inner court and issue a series of bold, non-negotiable demands, starting with the restoration of Vashti—would have been a bitter satire on the feminine ego. The book we actually have comes closer to being a satire on the *masculine* ego.<sup>212</sup>

Though Fox’s discussion goes no further, it is this type of consideration of how masculinity is performed, upheld, or satirized that this study will reveal. Portrayals of Artaxerxes, Haman, Mordecai, as well as Vashti and Esther are all considered in terms of how they function within a world in which imperial power and hegemonic masculinity are inextricably intertwined.

## CONCLUSION

While acknowledging the complex textual history of Esther, this study will focus its interpretation on a synchronic reading of the discrete literary text of LXX Esther. By constructing early audiences for LXX Esther in

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211. Menn, “Prayer of the Queen,” 73–84.

212. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 209, emphasis original.



first-century BCE Ptolemaic Alexandria and Hasmonean Judea, I demonstrate an appropriate context for an imperial-critical reading of the book. My approach will be to conduct a literary reading that illuminates the gendered structures of empire and its gendered negotiations as present within the world of the text, and to demonstrate connections to the imperial contexts of early audiences. This approach will contribute to scholarship's perspective on the book of Esther by reframing the essential questions toward exploration of the complex imperial dynamics presented in the book, and toward consideration of performances of gender as intertwined with the interplay of imperial power instead of investigating their relation to a fixed set of values known as patriarchy.

Chapters 2–8 of this study offer this reading of LXX Esther through the lenses of empire and gender. The next chapter begins the reading with an analysis of the LXX Esther's opening in Addition A.



## 2

# Dreams, Dragons, Deference, and the Cosmic Contest for Hegemonic Masculinity (11:2–12:6)

To blow the colonial world to smithereens is henceforth a clear image  
within the grasp and imagination of every colonized subject.

—Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*

LXX Esther commences with cosmic drama and subversive plotting—dreams and dragons, noises and chaos, tumult and earthquakes, oppression and deliverance, assassination attempts and executions. This chapter focuses on Addition A (11:2–12; 12:1–6) and how it functions to frame LXX Esther. In this chapter I argue that Mordecai represents the ambivalence of colonized identity, and his dream and actions display multivalent imperial negotiation. Moreover, I argue that Addition A frames LXX Esther as a theocentric story in which the competition for hegemonic masculinity between God and Artaxerxes is waged by their representatives—Mordecai (and eventually Esther as well) and Haman respectively. I proceed by discussing Mordecai's introduction and the hybridity of his colonized identity, analyzing Mordecai's dream in its prophetic and apocalyptic elements, and comparing the dream to representations of symbolic inversions among subordinate people as well as other apocalyptic texts and how they negotiate imperial power. Finally, I consider the discovery of the eunuchs' assassination plot as an example of Mordecai's deferential negotiation of power, and reflect upon the potential masculinization of Esther by Addition A.

## MORDECAI'S DREAM (11:2–12)

## SETTING OF THE DREAM (11:2A)

The first scene in LXX Esther, Mordecai's dream, is set "in the second year of the reign of Artaxerxes the Great" (11:2). Even though Artaxerxes is the first character mentioned in the book, his name functions merely as setting in the introductory verses until he is properly introduced in 1:1–8. Yet a description of τοῦ μεγάλου ("the Great") immediately asserts Artaxerxes's masculine and imperial power. The second year of Artaxerxes's reign places the events of Addition A one year prior to the upcoming lavish banquets and conflict with Vashti (1:1–22) and five years before Esther meets Artaxerxes and becomes his bride (2:16–18).

More specifically, though, Mordecai's dream takes place on the first day of Nisan in the second year of Artaxerxes's reign. Levenson connects the deliverance foretold by Mordecai's dream to other scriptural events worth celebrating which also occurred on the first day of Nisan—the drying up of the floodwaters in the story of Noah (Gen 8:13) and the establishment of the tabernacle by Moses (Exod 40:2, 17).<sup>1</sup> Indeed, possible allusions to both of these events could exist for the reader.

In a potential allusion to the flood of Gen 6–8, readers may be reminded of the flood's annihilation of all humans except one righteous family chosen by God. Similarly, as will be described in the analysis of Mordecai's dream later in this chapter, the righteous nation is delivered from the evils that threatened their existence that anticipates the end of LXX Esther's narrative. Like Noah's story, there is deliverance for the faithful and utter destruction for those outside of God's favor. In the Genesis flood, the drying of the land, or absence of water, occurs on the first of Nisan, not the flood itself. However, in Mordecai's dream, deliverance will be described as happening not because of the absence of water, but on account of its abundance (11:10).

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1. Levenson, *Esther*, 38. In addition to the allusion to the flood, Levenson also adds, "Perhaps one is also to detect here an echo of the Babylonian and later Jewish idea that the destinies for the coming year were assigned on New Year's Day" (38). Levenson states that the first of Nisan was celebrated as New Year's Day in the Jewish calendar of the Second Temple period instead of the fall date of Rosh Hashanah in the modern Jewish calendar.

The second allusion Levenson connects to the date of Mordecai's dream is the establishment of the tabernacle, which symbolized God's presence and activity among the Israelite people. In contrast to MT Esther in which God is never mentioned, God's direct involvement in LXX Esther is primary to the book and is established at the book's outset as the opening dream portrays God intervening because of the righteous nation's cries. In the description of the dream's fulfillment in Addition F, Mordecai comments, "These things [the events in the narrative of LXX Esther] have come from God" (10:4). The potential connection between the day of Mordecai's dream and the day when the tabernacle was first established may signal to the reader that just as the tabernacle signified God's presence in the wilderness, LXX Esther is a story of God's pervasive activity in the wilderness of dominant foreign rulers and deliverance for the faithful.

#### INTRODUCTION OF MORDECAI (11:2B-4)

Before the discussion of Mordecai's dream, I first consider the introduction of Mordecai positioned at the outset of Addition A. Mordecai's genealogy is son of Jair, son of Semeios, son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin.<sup>2</sup> This genealogy is also given in 2:5. Though the duplication is likely due to the secondary nature of Addition A, LXX Esther appropriately introduces this key character at his first narrative appearance.<sup>3</sup>

Mordecai's genealogy links him, and subsequently Esther as well (2:5), to the lineage of the Israelite king, Saul.<sup>4</sup> The three names in Mordecai's genealogy are likely not meant as successive generations but as key figures in a Benjaminite lineage, with specific emphasis on Kish who was the father of Saul (1 Sam 9:1).<sup>5</sup> Since Mordecai and Esther are portrayed as saviors of the Jewish people in the postexilic setting of the book of Esther, one might assume a Davidic lineage would have been a more appropriate designation for the heroic characters from a narrative standpoint. But,

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2. שמעי ("Shimei") in MT Esth 2:5.

3. Moore, *Additions*, 175.

4. Yitzhak Berger suggests that the more prominent link to Saul is found in Esther's portrayal and actions rather than Mordecai. E.g., Saul and Esther are both good-looking, submissive to a protective guardian, and they are challenged to take initiative in response to a national threat. Yitzhak Berger, "Esther and Benjaminite Royalty: A Study in Inner-Biblical Allusion," *JBL* 129 (2010): 628–31.

5. See, e.g., Berlin, *Esther*, xxxviii–xxxix, 24–25.

instead, the characters are linked to King Saul whose legacy was less than stellar, since Saul's royal mistakes resulted in the spirit of the Lord being removed from him, an evil spirit being placed upon him instead (1 Sam 16:14), as well as Saul being removed as king to make way for David.

In addressing this apparent difficulty, some scholars note the possible connection of Mordecai's conflict with Haman to the episode of Saul and Agag of the Amalekites in 1 Sam 15, since Haman is identified as an Agagite in MT Esth 3:1. Commentators have noted that Mordecai's defeat of Haman, the Agagite, reverses the actions of Saul in failing to destroy Agag under the rules of Israelite war.<sup>6</sup> However, since LXX Esther does not call Haman an Agagite but a Bougean (12:6; 3:1) and a Macedonian (16:10), the possibility of a reference to the reversal of Saul's failure in 1 Sam 15 is not relevant for LXX Esther (more on Haman's identity is discussed later in this chapter).

Other possible explanations for Mordecai's connection to Saul that are relevant to LXX Esther come from Sandra Berg, Elsie Stern, and Koller.

Berg has suggested that the importance of the Davidic dynasty was not universally held in the postexilic era since a Davidic throne was not immediately reestablished when the group of exiles returned from Babylon. Berg writes,

In the Book of Esther, Israel defeats its enemies despite the lack of an independent, autonomous monarchy. Even under foreign rule, the Jews' power increases to the extent that they inspire fear among the peoples of the empire (cf. 8:17, 9:3–4). In effect, the Jews obtain all the benefits and privileges associated with an independent, Davidic-ruled monarchy—without it. The probability that a Davidic ancestry for Mordecai was inappropriate to a diaspora tale, and the fact that Saul continued to be viewed favorably by later traditions, perhaps account for the narrator's choice.<sup>7</sup>

However, differently than Berg's positive analysis of a Saulide connection to Mordecai, Stern suggests that MT Esther was read in Judea as a parody of the disorder of diaspora living, which was not oriented toward

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6. See, e.g., Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 115, Levenson, *Esther*, 56–57; Sandra Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Theme and Structure*, SBLDS 44 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 67; and André LaCocque, *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading, Rethinking Theory* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 65–80.

7. Berg, *Book of Esther*, 69–70.

Jerusalem and particularist practice.<sup>8</sup> Connecting Mordecai to Saul and identifying him as a target of MT Esther's parody, Stern writes, "Only in Diaspora could a descendant of Saul achieve the status of king."<sup>9</sup> Stern's argumentation is specific to MT Esther as she finds the Greek versions more likely to have diasporic provenance and positive reflections on living as a Jew in the diaspora.<sup>10</sup>

With a similar emphasis to Stern, but a different conclusion, Koller finds Mordecai's equation with Saul's lineage to be an intentional device used to counter Davidic ideology, which he calls the "Hebrew-Jerusalem-David-endogamy-Exodus-God" complex of beliefs.<sup>11</sup> Koller argues that Mordecai's Saulide genealogy, reflecting nobility, though not Davidic, was a device used to deconstruct the prevalent restoration prophecies and ideologies assumed in the Jewish world during the Persian period.

Indeed, readers of LXX Esther in a diaspora setting, like Ptolemaic Egypt, might have identified with a non-Davidic hero because they were seeking to find ways to live successfully outside of supposed Davidic-theology-laden Judea. However, a non-Davidic hero may have been appropriate for a setting in Hasmonean Judea for other reasons. The Hasmonean dynasty was established when Simon, son of Mattathias, assumed both the high priesthood and his place as ruler over the newly freed Israelite state recognized by Rome (1 Macc 14:35–49). This meant that the Hasmonean dynasty was ruled from a priestly heritage, presumably from the tribe of Levi (though not Zadokites), and not a Davidic line. Thus, it is possible that the Hasmoneans may have perceived any pro-Davidic advocacy or sentiments as a threat to their position as rulers. For Mordecai and Esther to be Benjaminites, or connected to Saul, allows the negotiation of their characters against imperial powers, even powers like the Hasmonean dynasty, to function as Scott's negotiation of anonymity—disguising the message or messenger as an art of political negotiation.<sup>12</sup> Since Benjaminites did not have a traditional claim to an Israelite throne after Saul's demise, Mordecai and Esther, and any potential negotiation of the Hasmoneans they may have represented, would have been disguised.

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8. Elsie R. Stern, "Esther and the Politics of Diaspora," *JQR* 100 (2010): 25–33.

9. Stern, "Esther and the Politics of Diaspora," 40.

10. Stern, "Esther and the Politics of Diaspora," 29.

11. Koller, *Esther in Ancient Thought*, 49–52; quotation from 33–34.

12. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 140–52.

But besides Mordecai's lineage as a Benjaminite, another important detail included in his introduction is that he was a Jew who was a captive from Jerusalem taken by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, to the city of Susa.<sup>13</sup> Several scholars have focused on the chronological difficulty of Mordecai being both a Babylonian captive taken from Jerusalem with King Jeconiah (or Jehoiachin) and yet still alive and active in the days of the Persian king Artaxerxes (or Xerxes), which would have made Mordecai anywhere between 131 and 281 years old depending on the Persian ruler to which LXX Esther's fictional Artaxerxes is affixed.<sup>14</sup> However, chronology is not the main focus of Mordecai's introduction. The emphasis is on Mordecai's ambivalence—his heritage and position as a captive as juxtaposed with his proximity to power under Persian rule.

Besides being named as a captive of Nebuchadnezzar taken with Jeconiah, Mordecai is also described as a great Jewish man living in Susa and serving in the court of the king.<sup>15</sup> The ambivalence demonstrated in

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13. How to translate Mordecai's identification as *Ιουδαῖος* here and in 2:5 (or יהודי in MT Esth 2:5) is a question taken up well by Anne-Mareike Wetter in reference to MT Esther. Anne-Mareike Wetter, "How Jewish Is Esther? Or: How Is Esther Jewish? Tracing Religious and Ethnic Identity in a Diaspora Narrative," *ZAW* 123 (2011): 596–603. Wetter concludes that homeland, or a geographic locale, do not seem to be operative as an ethnic marker in defining the *Yehudite* community in Esther, so she does not think a translation of Judean or Judahite is appropriate in MT Esther. Rather, she finds "Jew" to be an acceptable (though not perfect) translation because the *Yehudim* in Esther share the literary heritage of the Jewish tradition. In LXX Esther, even more so than in the MT, the religious commitment of Mordecai and his injunction to Esther to hold similar values (2:20) is more prevalent. The ethnoreligious element of identity seems to be at the forefront, thus I also choose a translation of "Jew" as pertaining to Mordecai and the whole race of Mordecai (3:7), the people against whom the edict is written in 3:10.

14. For the chronological problem, see, e.g., Moore, *Additions*, 175; White Crawford, "Esther," 948; Howard Clark Kee, ed., *The Cambridge Annotated Study Apocrypha* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 27; W. J. Fuerst, "The Rest of the Chapters of the Book of Esther," in *The Shorter Books of the Apocrypha*, CBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 140. Mordecai's age is assuming he was twenty years old in 597 BCE when the Judeans leaders were exiled with Jeconiah, utilizing the dating of Persian rulers from Xerxes I (486–465 BCE) to Artaxerxes IV (338–336 BCE) found in Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 BC* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2:648.

15. In MT Esther, Mordecai is not described as a great man of power in the king's court until later in the narrative. In MT 2:19 he is described as sitting at the king's gate instead of serving in the king's court as is indicated in LXX Esth 2:19.



Mordecai's position in these descriptions is central to Mordecai's identity as a colonized person. Being taken captive with King Jeconiah would have meant that Mordecai was a person of either wealth, influence, or both, since after the first exile of Nebuchadnezzar "no one remained, except the poorest people of the land" (2 Kgs 24:14, see also 24:8–17). Further, Mordecai, the captive, had lived in Jerusalem at the center of political power in Judah. But, this wealthy person who existed in the center of power was taken away from his place of prestige, brought low, made a captive, suffered oppression, and became colonized and dominated as a man moved to the margins of a different power. Then, the lowly Mordecai somehow negotiated his circumstances so that he was able to return to the new center of power in his world, the Persian king's court in the capital of Susa. Mordecai moves from center, to margins, then back to a newly defined center.

Mordecai may have been cast as an example for readers living under power to emulate, as he is able to gain access to power by moving from marginalized toward the center. Though it is possible that some readers may have shunned the example of Mordecai as a Jewish person who colluded with the Persian court and defiled his Jewish identity, Mordecai also may have been perceived as worthy of honor when associated with the Jerusalem captives. Mordecai was a Jerusalemite leader who became a lowly and oppressed person, and then rises to the status of a great man who has access to the Persian king while still colonized. His short description reveals both the terrors and opportunities of living under power. Mordecai has a hybridized identity as he is simultaneously both a faithful Jew and a loyal Persian subject, a colonized person who has found agency in negotiating access to power.

#### MORDECAI'S DREAM (11:4B–12)

Mordecai's description above also contains striking similarities to the Hebrew Bible characters of Joseph (Gen 37–50) and Daniel (Dan 1–6). Joseph and Daniel were both captives in foreign lands who were able to claim agency and gain access to power. Because of their interaction with non-Jews, some readers of Joseph and Daniel may have found the characters problematic while others may have praised the characters for the value in their hybridized identities.

In addition to Joseph and Daniel's connection to Mordecai's description, they were also Jewish visionaries who had dreams about the power

dynamics in which they were entangled.<sup>16</sup> Joseph, who as an adult finds himself in a position of power in the Egyptian government, had boyhood dreams of his future power over his brothers (Gen 37:5–11). Joseph's dream is realized when Joseph claims agency through gaining access to Egyptian power that results in him being able to choose to provide for his family. Daniel is cast as a Babylonian captive, as well as a Babylonian and Persian court sage (similar to Mordecai's description as a captive who served in the Persian king's court) in Dan 1–6. Apocalyptic dreams and visions (Dan 7–12) that emerged near the time of the Maccabean revolt were combined with the stories of Daniel in Dan 1–6. The apocalyptic dreams and visions of Dan 7–12 correspond to the political realities of living under the reign of the tyrannical Seleucid ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, and prophesy God's triumph over nations that oppose God's people. Similarly, Mordecai's dream, which is discussed in the following section, contains imagery that relates to the character's political realities and location within imperial power dynamics of the text's literary world, as well as God's ultimate victory over the enemies of the righteous.

The description of Mordecai's dream begins with the phrase *καὶ ἰδοῦ*, which recurs three times (11:5; 11:6; 11:8) and functions at each point to introduce significant elements of the dream throughout the account.<sup>17</sup> The Greek word *ἰδοῦ* is a "presentative particle used to draw the hearer's or reader's attention to what follows."<sup>18</sup> Two relevant uses of the particle are that it can (1) introduce an eschatological statement, or (2) when the particle is immediately preceded by *καὶ* and follows a verb of seeing or showing in the past tense (*εἶδεν* in 11:2) it can introduce a report of the vision or sight.<sup>19</sup> Both uses may be relevant here. Certainly the particle is introducing a description of a vision, but the dream also contains imagery that is connected to eschatological and apocalyptic themes, as is discussed subsequently.

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16. White-Crawford, "Esther," 948; Moore, *Additions*, 176, 180; Levenson, *Esther*, 40. LaCocque writes that in the MT "Esther is no 'dreamer' in the manner of Joseph or Daniel.... The Septuagint (LXX) of Esther felt so uncomfortable with this qualitative gap that it prefaced the story by recounting a premonitory dream of Mordecai's, making him thus join ranks with Joseph and Daniel" (*Esther Regina*, 18).

17. The Septuagint text quoted in this study is Alfred Rahlfs and Robert Hanhart, eds., *Septuaginta*, rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2006).

18. *GELS*, s.v. "*ἰδοῦ*."

19. *GELS*, s.v. "*ἰδοῦ*."

## Precursors of Divine Intervention (11:5)

The first *καὶ ἰδοὺ* reports that Mordecai's dream included, "Noises and confusion, thunders and earthquake, tumult on the earth!" (11:5). Each of these words, specifically when they are found paired and in conjunction with one another, are reminiscent of apocalyptic and prophetic passages that predict God's arrival to deliver the faithful.

The two nouns of the first phrase, *φωναὶ καὶ θόρυβος* ("noises and confusion"), are also found together in Dan 10:6, "*καὶ φωνὴ λαλιᾶς αὐτοῦ ὡσεὶ φωνὴ θορύβου*" (LXX Dan 10:6, "and the sound of his words like the sound of confusion"). In Dan 10 the noises are associated with a vision of a man who spoke as God in human form. The voice in Daniel's vision describes anguish that will come from the kings and kingdoms that oppose God and God's people, though deliverance is promised through the angel, Michael (Dan 10–12). Like the vision in Daniel, Mordecai's dream also describes how nations that oppose God's people (Persia in LXX Esther) represent cosmic conflict. The noises and confusion in Mordecai's dream, similarly to those in Daniel's dream, are a signal of the divine presence for God's righteous when they are suffering under an imperial power. For the narrative diasporic setting of Daniel's dream, when the righteous are geographically removed from Jerusalem and from physical symbols of God's presence, Daniel's dream affirms that God still is present among and at work for the righteous.

The next pair of words in Mordecai's dream description, *βπονται καὶ σεισμός* ("thunders and earthquake") are similarly found coupled in Isa 29:6 where the pair of words is also used in proximity to *φωνή* (found in the first pair of words directly preceding these, 11:5). In Isa 29:6, the Lord of hosts intervenes *μετὰ βροντῆς καὶ σεισμοῦ καὶ φωνῆς μεγάλης* (LXX Isa 29:6, "with thunder and earthquake and great noise") to deliver the Jerusalemites who have remained true to God. Again, like the reference above, through the symbols of thunder and earthquake, God's presence with the righteous is highlighted, though in the case of Isaiah, it is among those in Jerusalem who are suffering under a God-ordained attack by their enemies rather than with those in diaspora.

The last phrase in the dream description, *τάραχος ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς* ("tumult upon the earth"), finds similarity with Isa 24:19, *ταπαχῆ παραχθήσεται ἡ γῆ* (LXX Isa 24:19a, "The earth was stirred into utter tumult"). On the day when the earth was stirred to tumult in Isa 24:19, the Lord would appear and punish the kings of the earth with a great cosmic upheaval (Isa 24:17–

23). Likewise, the tumult in Mordecai's dream is also occurring all over the earth and thus sets the stage for a symbolic cosmic struggle that results in God's victory over the kings of the earth (Artaxerxes in LXX Esther).

All of the imagery used in the report of Mordecai's dream following the first *καὶ ἰδοὺ* connects to prophetic and apocalyptic language that is associated with God's intervention to deliver God's people from those who are against them and to defend and establish God's own authority. When there are noises, confusion, thunder, earthquakes, and tumult on the earth, God is presented as being present among the righteous and intruding into human space in order to punish those who, like Artaxerxes and Haman, oppose the righteous and thus, indirectly, God. In this way, the prophetic and apocalyptic language of the dream functions to prefigure the end of LXX Esther and God's deliverance of Persian Jews.

As mentioned in the potential subtle allusion to the establishment of the tabernacle due to Mordecai's dream occurring on the first day of Nisan, the presence and activity of God may be foreshadowed by the dream's date of occurrence. But beyond merely coming to dwell among the people as God had in the tabernacle, the prophetic and apocalyptic elements at the outset of Mordecai's dream set the stage for God to intervene dramatically with victory in accomplishing the divine purpose of delivering God's people. In the dream's prophetic and apocalyptic language, readers in both Ptolemaic Egypt and in Hasmonean Judea may have found allusions to their locations: (1) a diasporic audience in Ptolemaic Egypt removed from physical symbols of God's presence may have been assured of God's existence among them and intention to fight on their behalf against whomever their enemies may be (Ptolemaic rulers or otherwise); (2) a pro-Hasmonean audience could have found affirmation of God's deliverance of them through their recent memory of the successes of the Maccabean revolt; or (3) an audience in Hasmonean Judea who lived in proximity to the physical presence of God in Jerusalem may have been comforted in that even if God ordained suffering under the Hasmoneans, God could still deliver them from it.

#### Cosmic War (11:6–7)

The second *καὶ ἰδοὺ* introduces the next elements of the dream—"two dragons came forward, both ready to fight, and they roared terribly. At their roaring every nation prepared for war, to fight against the righteous nation" (11:6–7). "Dragon" (*δράκων*) has a wide range of meanings in the

Septuagint including serpent (Deut 32:33, Wis 16:10), jackal (Jer 9:10 [MT 9:11]; Mic 1:8), and sea monster (Ps 73:12–13 [MT 74:12–13]; Job 26:10). “Dragon” (δράκων) was also used symbolically for a foreign ruler in Ezek 29:3, in Ezek 32:2 for Pharaoh, and in Pss. Sol. 2.25 for nations that defiled Jerusalem.<sup>20</sup>

Even though a range of meanings exist for dragon, given the appearance of the dragons in a dream/vision that has prophetic/apocalyptic imagery, scholars have often discussed the relationship of the creatures to the mythical sea monsters of ancient Near Eastern creation myths.<sup>21</sup> In these myths, sea monsters often personify chaos and pose a challenge to the orderly creator-god. But in Mordecai’s dream the dragons attack each other instead of a symbol of order.<sup>22</sup> A few additional problems exist in making a direct correlation between the dream dragons and ancient Near Eastern mythical monsters, namely, their aquatic or nonaquatic identity and the rarity of two dragons appearing together.<sup>23</sup> But whether or not these creatures are the sea monsters of ancient Near Eastern creation myths, the setting of their conflict does seem to represent a dispute of cosmic proportions. The apocalyptic and prophetic imagery at the outset of the dream sets the stage for a cosmic battle in which God confronts God’s enemies and defends/vindicates God’s people. When the creatures even resemble the monsters of mythical folklore, the reader of Mordecai’s vision is drawn into an imagination of an ultimate conflict at the cosmic level. With God at the center of this cosmic battle, I demonstrate later in

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20. Moore, *Additions*, 176.

21. See. e.g., Dorothy, *Books of Esther*, 49–50.

22. Levenson, *Esther*, 39.

23. Moore and Levenson note that whether the dragons here are aquatic or not, a key characteristic of ancient Near Eastern mythical monsters, cannot be determined (Moore, *Additions*, 176; Levenson, *Esther*, 39). But, Moore states they do seem “large, ferocious, and awesome to watch.” Additionally, White Crawford and Levenson both comment that it is an anomaly for two dragons to appear in a mythical text (White Crawford, “Esther,” 948; Levenson, *Esther*, 39). To solve this problem, Levenson points to later development in rabbinic eschatology in which two monsters, Leviathan and Behemoth, attack each other. In additions to Levenson’s conjecture concerning the appearance of two dragons, another parallel may exist in Arrian’s *The Anabasis of Alexander* (3.3.5) written in the first or second century CE. In *The Anabasis* two dragons appear and lead Alexander’s army’s campaign with their voices similar to the way the dragons’ roars call the nations to battle against the righteous nation in Mordecai’s dream.

this section that God's hegemonic masculinity may be read as the underlying premise decided by the cosmic clash.

At the end of LXX Esther, Addition F (10:7) clarifies the identity of the dragons in Mordecai's dream. They represent Mordecai and Haman, an official of King Artaxerxes with whom Mordecai has a conflict that results in Artaxerxes issuing the order to destroy the Jews. However, it seems dissonant that Mordecai, an apparent hero in the book, would be represented as a beast whose roar summons the nations to fight against the righteous nation whom scholars presume to be Jews, or, at least, whose roar creates a sound of conflict that leads the nations to side against the Jews.<sup>24</sup> Even though the identity of whom the dragons represent is not revealed in Addition A when reading the book synchronically, when the identity of the dragons is revealed at the end of the book, certainly concern for Mordecai's role in the conflict is warranted.

Scholars have tried to address this potential concern in numerous ways. The attempts of W. J. Fuerst, Fox, Anne Gardner, and Jobes are briefly mentioned here. Fuerst dismisses the problem stating, "This explanation [of the dragons corresponding to Haman and Mordecai] seems inconsistent with the cosmic dimensions of the vision, and serves to remind us that political comment was not the primary goal of the additions."<sup>25</sup> But on the contrary, political comment *does* seem to be the chief concern of the Additions as nations are at war and Israel's fate lies in the balance in Additions A and F; not to mention that two of the other Additions (B and E) are political decrees. So Fuerst's dismissal of the Additions as not political will not suffice.

Fox tries to defuse the problem of identifying Mordecai as one of the dragons by saying the dragons never actually fight. Instead, Mordecai represents a good dragon that is willing to challenge an evil dragon.<sup>26</sup> But still it is the call of both dragons that summons the nations to fight against the righteous, and so calling Mordecai a "good" dragon seems insufficient.

Gardner speculates that the dragons represent the perpetual fighting between the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms over control of the Levant during the time of the Maccabean crisis, but she fails to adequately

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24. See, e.g., White Crawford, "Esther," 948, and her reference to similar formulations in Wis 16:23; 18:7.

25. Fuerst, "Rest of Esther," 140.

26. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 271.

address why Addition F would then identify the dragons with Haman and Mordecai.<sup>27</sup>

Reading through lexical parallels, Jobs connects the dragon imagery of Addition A to LXX Jer 28 (MT 51). She conjectures that the dragon imagery reverses the misfortune brought to God's people in the Babylonian exile by the dragon Nebuchadnezzar. Mordecai takes on the form of Judah's enemy becoming a dragon himself and swallows/devours (*κατέφαγεν*, LXX Jer 28:34 and *κατέφαγον*, 11:11) the exalted enemies.<sup>28</sup> But Jobs does not take into account that it is Esther, the river, who does the devouring in 11:11 and not Mordecai, the dragon.

More recently, Chris Seeman has presented a cogent explanation that has merit for this study. Seeman has connected the dragons' battle with a Hellenistic wrestling match. Focusing on the word used for the dragons' actions, *παλαίειν*, Seeman emphasizes that though this word has most often been translated "fight," its primary meaning is to "wrestle" in the athletic realm rather than in warfare. Thus, he posits that the dragons, Mordecai and Haman, wrestle in an agonistic contest to acquire honor and status rather than a life-or-death battle.<sup>29</sup>

Seeman's equation of the dragons'/Mordecai and Haman's conflict with a wrestling match places their engagement with one another in the contest for masculinity. While an athletic contest would be a way to acquire honor and status, it would also be a means of attaining a greater measure of masculinity by taking another's masculine honor in order to bolster one's own status. Further, because Mordecai and Haman's battle has cosmic proportions, their battle is not just for complicit masculinities (for those who reap the benefit of masculinity but are not on the front-line) but for hegemonic masculinity (the one who dominates all others). However, Mordecai and Haman are not battling for hegemonic masculinity for themselves; they wrestle on behalf of those with whom they are complicit—God and Artaxerxes. Throughout LXX Esther, Mordecai's negotiation of power represents the interests of God and those God designates as righteous, and Haman functions as a representative of Persian power and rule. As the remaining narrative of the book unfolds, each of

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27. Anne E. Gardner, "The Relationship of the Additions to the Book of Esther to the Maccabean Crisis," *JSJ* 15 (1984): 6–8.

28. Jobs, *Alpha-Text of Esther*, 183–93.

29. Chris Seeman, "Enter the Dragon: Mordecai as Agonistic Combatant in Greek Esther," *BTB* 41 (2011): 3–15.



the character's performances of masculinity will be considered for the ways in which they are complicit with God and Artaxerxes and how their performances of masculinity contribute to the determination of who possesses the characteristics of ultimate hegemonic masculinity—and the winner of that contest will be God.

#### A Day of Darkness (11:8–9)

The third *καὶ ἰδοὺ* of the dream describes what follows the conflict of the dragons that brings a threat to the righteous nation, “It was a day of darkness and gloom, of tribulation and distress, affliction and great tumult on the earth!” (11:8–9). Similar to the pairing of words that followed the first *καὶ ἰδοὺ*, this sentence following the third appearance of the particle in 11:8 utilizes three pairs of nouns/phrases to describe the day of great suffering under oppressive rule.

The first two pairs in 11:8 contain nouns that are similar to each other and thus the duplication serves to intensify the meanings. Both nouns in the first pair, *σκότους καὶ γνόφου* (“darkness and gloom”), emphasize the absence of light.<sup>30</sup> Both nouns in the second pair, *θλίψις καὶ στενοχωρία* (“tribulation and distress”) refer to the people's suffering under some set of oppressive circumstances.<sup>31</sup> A pairing of the same nouns, *θλίψις καὶ στενοχωρία* (along with *σκότος*), also exists in Isa 8:22, which describes the grueling conditions when Assyria overtakes Israel. Like the setting of Isa 8, in Mordecai's dream tribulation, distress, gloom, and darkness are descriptors of the intense despair suffered under the oppression of an imperial power.

In the final pair of 11:8, *κάκωσις* (“affliction,” which can also be translated as “maltreatment”) is coupled with *τάραχος μέγας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς* (“great tumult upon the earth”).<sup>32</sup> As the sentence that followed the first *καὶ ἰδοὺ* ended with the phrase *τάραχος ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς* (“tumult upon the earth”), the final phrase following the third *καὶ ἰδοὺ* also ends with a magnification of the tumult mentioned in 11:5 by adding *μέγας* (“great”). With this amplification, the reader feels the escalation, as even light has disappeared and people are enduring extreme suffering. Thus, the righteous nation appears

30. *GELS*, s.v. “σκότος” and “γνόφος.”

31. *GELS*, s.v. “θλίψις” and “στενοχωρία.”

32. For *κάκωσις* as “maltreatment,” see *GELS*, s.v. “κάκωσις.”



to have given up all hope; they are “troubled; they feared the evils that threatened them, and they were ready to perish” (11:8).

In the cosmic setting of a day described by this escalating anguish, the reader may be reminded of the eschatological day of the Lord that brings darkness and not light (Amos 5:18–20), a day in which judgment arrives in the form of disaster (Joel 1:15–3:21). Moore comments that even if the eschatological language of the dragons was obscure,

The biblical source for this imagery is quite clear: Joel 2:2, 10–11; Zeph 1:15 (see also Matt 24:29). The eschatological cast of this verse substantially helps to transform the character of the Greek version of Esther, i.e., the transformation from a historical novel of court intrigue in the Hebrew to an eschatological struggle in the Greek version.<sup>33</sup>

#### Deliverance from a Great River (11:10–11)

So in their hopeless, anguished, and fearful state, the righteous nation pleads to God and God answers with intervention. “Then they cried out to God; and at their outcry, as though from a tiny spring, there came a great river with abundant water; light came, and the sun rose, and the lowly were exalted and devoured those held in honor” (11:10–11). The God who has been alluded to throughout the first nine verses is now called upon by name, and answers. This mention of God’s name in 11:10 is the first of forty-two times that θεός appears in the Additions of LXX Esther, a drastic difference from the complete absence of explicit references to God in MT Esther.<sup>34</sup>

But God’s answer in Mordecai’s dream is enigmatic and has troubled interpreters. God’s deliverance takes the form of a great river with abundant water that emerges from a tiny spring. Even though there has been no mention of famine or thirst, the symbol of God’s salvation in the dream comes in the form of water.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, how the river achieves redemption or whether the dragons or nations are destroyed is not mentioned.<sup>36</sup> In seeking to determine the symbolism of the river, prophetic literature is

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33. Moore, *Additions*, 177.

34. Moore, *Additions*, 177.

35. Perhaps this reference of water symbolically, rather than physically, bringing deliverance is not unlike the “wells of salvation” referred to in Isa 12:3.

36. White Crawford, “Esther,” 949.

not particularly helpful because the use of rivers in prophetic literature is varied and traverses the spectrum from judgment to deliverance.<sup>37</sup> It has also been suggested that the symbolism of the river indicates an Egyptian provenance, as the Nile River was a metaphor for life and thought to be the source of all blessings.<sup>38</sup> But perhaps for readers in Ptolemaic Egypt, a possible echo may be found in the annihilating waters of the Red Sea, which collapsed upon the Egyptians bringing Israelite deliverance (Exod 14:21–31). Or a return allusion to the Genesis flood could also be read in “abundant water” (ὑδωρ πολύ, 11:10). The abundant waters of the Genesis flood swelled and destroyed every living thing, except Noah, his family, and the animals with him (Gen 7:11–8:1). The allusion to annihilation by water may be perceived as a reference to the annihilation of the Jews that will be decreed in the book. However, since the small spring that develops into a river of abundant water is connected later to the actions of the character of Esther in saving the Jewish people from annihilation (10:6), the abundant water of Esther’s river reverses the potential obliteration of the Jews and turns it onto those outside of God’s chosen in the same way that all but Noah’s family perished in the flood.<sup>39</sup>

In further description of the predetermined result of the actions of Esther, the river, the darkness is abated as light comes and the sun rises (11:11a). The symbols of light and sun are often connected with happiness

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37. This range of uses for rivers in prophetic literature is demonstrated by Amos 8:8, 9:5 when rivers are compared to the earth that rises and is tossed about in judgment, and in Isa 41:18 when the rivers provide relief from a metaphorical famine. Other ranges of symbolic uses for rivers come from Psalms, as the Lord’s people are tormented and imagine violent retaliation as they sit next to the rivers of Babylon (Ps 137), but also the imagery of Ps 46, which contains rivers whose streams make glad the city of God.

38. Moore, *Additions*, 180. As further evidence of potential Egyptian provenance, Moore notes that in Egypt the sun represented Pharaoh and the god Re who was also a source of joy. But elements of Persian influence are also present in the themes of light and strife reflecting the conflict between the fire god Ahura Mazda and the evil Ahri-man (who was often presented as a dragon), and also in the river, which might conjure images of the Persian water goddess Anahita.

39. In AT Esther, Esther remains the little spring and the river is the enemies that attack the Jews. It is unclear in AT Esther how the river as the nations come out of Esther. However, Day finds that since Esther is the river in LXX Esther she has an elevated role in the story that she does not have in AT Esther (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 167–68).

and the morning, the symbolic time of deliverance.<sup>40</sup> As the day of the Lord was one of suffering under oppressive rule, of darkness and not light, the day of deliverance will be ushered in by the sun.

Additionally, the first action in the Gen 1 creation story is God's act of speaking light onto the dark, formless waters of the empty earth, and in doing so, separating day from night. When light appears in this passage following the rush of abundant waters, an allusion to creation may also be recalled by the reader. The same creator God who is sovereign over natural elements displays divine sovereignty over any chaotic conflict created by those who would oppose the righteous. Light not only represents the deliverance following the day of the Lord, but also the sovereign rule of the orderly God as opposed to the chaotic reign of oppressive rulers.

The sovereign rule of God is also indicated as the river's deliverance causes the lowly to be exalted and devour those held in honor (11:11b). The redemption that comes in the exaltation of the lowly is a common biblical theme; however, for the lowly to devour or consume the esteemed takes the theme a step further.<sup>41</sup> More often when the lowly are exalted, the honorable are merely brought low. For example, in LXX Ezek 21:31 (MT 21:26), "the exalted were brought low and the lowly were exalted" (ἐταπεινώσας τὸ ὑψηλὸν καὶ τὸ ταπεινὸν ὑψώσας). But when the lowly devour or destroy the exalted, closer resemblance exists to later apocalyptic literature like 1 Enoch in which the righteous execute judgment on their oppressors with the sword (1 En. 91:12, "After this ... a sword will be given to all the righteous to execute righteous judgment on all the wicked and they will be delivered into their hands.").<sup>42</sup> While the dream predicts that God brings deliverance through the river, the deliverance is in the form of retribution and violence—indeed, the kind that might be imagined in the abundant waters of a river or annihilating flood.<sup>43</sup> God has indeed become the victor and rules like those who reign on earth—with subjugation and oppression.

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40. Moore, *Additions*, 177.

41. For the theme of the exaltation of the lowly, see, e.g., Job 5:11; Prov 29:23; Ps 113:7; and, in particular, as associated with another biblical woman—Hannah's song of praise, 1 Sam 2:1–10.

42. George Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch; 1 Chapters 1–36, 81–108*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 434.

43. Moore comments that the destruction-oriented imagery of the dream may indicate a deep antagonism between Jews and non-Jews (*Additions*, 181). As I will argue below, I find the imagery to reflect a more complicated relationship than mere antagonism.

After the conclusion of the dream report, the passage remarks, “Mordecai saw in this dream what God had determined to do, and after he awoke he had it on his mind, seeking all day to understand it in every detail” (11:12). This closing to the dream indicates that all of the images in the vision were related to God’s determined actions in delivering God’s people from their oppression under Artaxerxes, as the rest of the LXX Esther will describe. Every action that takes place throughout the narrative is under the control and direction of the divine.

#### DREAMS OF REVERSAL

According to Scott, subordinates often employ forms of disguised political negotiation of power—one of which is the use of symbolic inversions. World-upside-down themes of reversal are found throughout subordinate cultures as a way of critiquing the social order. They function to bring hints of the hidden transcript into the public transcript without open declarations of insubordination. For example, a picture of a goose putting the cook into a pot can be passed off as an artistic flight of fantasy, but it can also contain a coded message so that a subversive interpretation of the cooked becoming the chef can encourage those who feel they live in the pot. The medium that demonstrates the inversion themes, whether it be art, literature, oral tradition, or other popular culture, displays double meaning allowing the subordinate person to find agency in expressing their hidden transcripts publicly, even if through allusion or metaphor. The ambiguity of meaning allows for disguise of the hidden transcript and its desire for social upheaval and the fall of the powerful. Nevertheless, ambivalence in political negotiation through symbolic inversions exists. When social reversal remains in the realm of imagination rather than reality, dominance is perpetuated. The farther the symbols are from the realm of possibility, the more dominants are able to keep insubordination at bay.<sup>44</sup>

Mordecai’s dream imagines reversal in which the lowly are exalted and devour those who are held in honor. The dream creates the image of inversion though coded language—dragons and rivers. Further, the dream is clearly outside of the logical realm as mythical creatures battle each other and a spring turns into an abundant river that somehow makes light appear

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44. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 156–72.

and the sun rise. Also, it is not logical for the lowly people to literally eat the exalted ones. The verb *κατεσθῆναι* (“to eat up or devour”) can also be rendered “to destroy,” but its double meaning lends itself to ambiguity. The coded inversion of Mordecai’s dream gives agency to those under power in that a hidden transcript that imagines the fall of the powerful might claim voice in public discourse. But, in Addition A alone (without the fulfillment frame of Addition F) the dream also functions in service of those in power as it keeps power reversal in a realm of imagination with images that exist outside of tangible reality. Mordecai’s dream is both/and—the dream *both* gives agency to those under power to express the hidden transcript of discontent with power as a disguised form of negotiation discourse *and* it serves the interests of the dominants in keeping any potential societal reversal of power in the realm of fantasy.

Moreover, symbolic themes of inversion also function as a reinscription of power. People who are under power struggle under oppression and the way dominants use their power to take advantage of subordinates. Yet, in images and imaginations of reversal, the subordinates yearn to change position with the dominants, shift the power, and become the oppressors of those who oppressed them. As Fanon writes, “The gaze that the colonized subject casts at the colonist’s sector is a look of lust, a look of envy. Dreams of possession. Every type of possessions: of sitting at the colonist’s table and sleeping in his bed, preferably with his wife. The colonized man is an envious man.... There is not one colonized subject who at least once a day does not dream of taking the place of the colonist.”<sup>45</sup> As a subordinate person imagines him or herself in the position of the powerful, images of reversal reinscribe the nature of power. For nations, then, Fanon shows how this reinscription results in underdeveloped or colonized countries striving to prove that they can have the same achievements as the imperial powers.<sup>46</sup> So when Mordecai’s dream imagines the lowly devouring those held in honor, destructive power is perpetuated, only with a reversal of roles. The absence of oppressing power seems to be outside the realm of even the imagination, as symbolic inversions merely sustain the existence of dominance in some form.

But even though in Mordecai’s dream the lowly are the ones who are exalted and devour those held in honor, it is God who holds the ultimate

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45. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 5.

46. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 52–54.

power role in the dream. The dragons may roar and call the nations to war, but when the righteous nation cries out it is God who answers their call with a spring that becomes a river of deliverance. God has supreme power in being able to either allow or cause destruction. Though the first verse of the book mentions the βασιλεύοντος (“reign”) of Artaxerxes, ironically, Mordecai’s dream describes a God who rules supremely not just over earth but the entire cosmos. So as the dream indicates that everything in LXX Esther happens according to God’s predetermined course of events, the book reinscribes earthly power with divine power. In the same way that Artaxerxes orders the annihilation of the Jewish people, so does God seem to order and cause the devouring of the non-Jewish Persians. Yet, for the narrative, the potential theological problem of reinscribing annihilating power to God goes unmentioned and unattended, and instead it celebrates God’s obliterating supremeness.

However, even though the dream shows God’s supremacy and role in preordaining all that will happen, in LXX Esther’s subsequent chapters God will not be as visible in the negotiations of power. Human characters claim agency and negotiate power dynamics as the story unfolds. As God moves to the background in the remainder of LXX Esther, God’s agents, Mordecai and Esther, take center stage to move from lowly to devourer, from oppressed to oppressor, and from the marginalized masculinity of oppressed captives to being representative of and complicit with God’s hegemonic masculinity.

#### MORDECAI’S DREAM, APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE, AND EMPIRES

Biblical interpreters have noticed significant similarities in the language and style of Mordecai’s dream with that of Dan 7–12, which is commonly classified within the genre of apocalyptic literature.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the imagery of Mordecai’s dream connects Addition A with the tradition of apocalyptic literature.<sup>48</sup> Daniel Harrington writes, “Mordecai’s dream in 11:5–12

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47. Moore, *Additions*, 181; Moore, “Origin of the LXX Additions,” 388; Levenson, *Esther*, 40. In contradiction, Wills calls the dream frame of Additions A and F an “artificial apocalypse” that only serves a similar literary function to dreams and oracles in Greek novels (*Jewish Novel*, 116–17).

48. Jobs, *Alpha-Text of Esther*, 185.

places the story of Esther in a cosmic and even apocalyptic framework.”<sup>49</sup> Fuerst also states,

The prologue [of LXX Esther] places the entire book in a certain perspective, that of the apocalyptic dream. The whole complex of events is foreseen, and only remains to be played out in history; in such a world of apocalyptic vision, God’s providence is certain and his deliverance absolutely determined even when momentary circumstances seem to indicate no basis for hope.<sup>50</sup>

An apocalypse has been defined by Collins as “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another supernatural world.”<sup>51</sup> While Mordecai’s dream is not a fully developed apocalypse like Daniel’s visions, the apocalypses of the Enochic literature, or others, the dream does contain similar elements.<sup>52</sup> These include: (1) transmission from a supernatural source, (2) mythical imagery, (3) dualism, (4) eschatological upheaval, (5) persecution, (6) a deterministic view of history, and (7) judgment resulting in utter destruction. Elements of apocalyptic literature that the dream does not include are: (1) a review of history, (2) a view of afterlife, or (3) the presence of angels, demons, or a divine mediator of the dream.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, to label definitively the genre of Mordecai’s dream as an apocalypse might seem a stretch, but its affinity to apocalyptic literature is difficult to deny.

Recently two scholars, Portier-Young and Horsley, have made strong cases for the connection of apocalyptic literature to the negotiation of

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49. Daniel Harrington, *Invitation to the Apocrypha* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 46.

50. Fuerst, “Rest of Esther,” 139.

51. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 4–5.

52. 2 Baruch, 3 Baruch, Apocalypse of Abraham, T. Levi 2–5, the partial Apocalypse of Zephaniah, the Testament of Abraham, Jubilees, and the Psalms of Solomon have also been included in groupings of apocalyptic literature.

53. These characteristics and others can be found in Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 5–9, and Christopher Rowland, “Apocalypticism,” *NIDB* 1:190.

imperial power.<sup>54</sup> In her *Apocalypse against Empire*, Portier-Young analyzes Daniel and 1 Enoch and their genre, apocalypse, as a way of responding to Seleucid subjugation.<sup>55</sup> Contesting Paul Hanson's view that apocalyptic literature abdicated the prophetic social responsibility of everyday concerns to the cosmic realm of myth, Portier-Young argues that historical apocalypses are primarily a literature of real-world resistance to empire.<sup>56</sup> When the policies of Antiochus IV aimed to decreate and re-create Judea as a part of the Seleucid Empire, the visions of historical apocalypses put history back together by revealing God's sovereignty.<sup>57</sup> The visions exposed the invisible atrocious character of the ruling powers and reimagined an alternative world not ruled by human empires, but by an imperial God.<sup>58</sup> According to Portier-Young, the use of rich symbolic and mythical images countered imperial mythologies by inverting power dynamics.<sup>59</sup>

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54. Notably, in addition to the two authors who will be discussed in detail, Rainer Albertz includes a brief discussion on the connection between the apocalyptic literature of Enoch and Daniel and resistance to their socio-political contexts. Rainer Albertz, *From the Exile to the Maccabees*, vol. 2 of *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, trans. John Bowden (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 575–97.

55. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*.

56. Paul D. Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 1–31. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*, xxii, 217–18.

57. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*, xxi–xxiii. Portier-Young adopts the language of decreating and re-creating worlds for the imperial program of the Seleucids from Elaine Scarry's study of the effects of torture as an act of power (Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*, 213–14). Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

58. In her presentation of resistance as the inversion of power toward God's sovereign rule, Portier-Young does not include analyses of how these inversions reinscribe imperial power.

59. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*, 44–45. In Daniel, Portier-Young finds a program for nonviolent resistance (223–79). Through prayer, righteousness, wisdom, faithfulness to God even when it required surrender to death, they should nonviolently stand up for their God whom they trusted would ultimately triumph. But the Enochic literature, specifically the Apocalypse of Weeks and The Book of Dreams, she finds to be a call to any and every type of overt and active resistance (313–81). The Seleucid regime is associated with the time before the flood—a time of violence and deceit that must be uprooted. The Jewish people are called to stand with Moses, Elijah, and Joshua in active revolt against the Seleucids by taking any effective actions



Portier-Young's conclusion is that the apocalypse became a literature that encouraged subjugated people to find means of resistance.

In an age of foreign domination, war, and terror, early Jewish apocalypses prompted their readers to look through and beyond visible, familiar phenomena to apprehend God's providential ordering of space, time, and created life. While exposing the violence and deceit of empire and its collaborators, they revealed powerful angelic, semi-divine, and divine actors at work in and beyond human experience and history. Shared memory, interpretation of past and present, and a new vision of the cosmos shaped hope for a transformed future. The apocalypses asserted a threatened identity and covenant and empowered their readers for resistance.<sup>60</sup>

In his *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea*, along with his *Revolt of the Scribes*, Horsley also reads texts, including those commonly known as apocalyptic literature, in the context of the political, economic, and social factors of the late Second Temple Period.<sup>61</sup> Horsley argues that genre descriptors such as wisdom (Sirach) and apocalyptic (1 Enoch and Daniel) have limited the way Second Temple literature has been read.<sup>62</sup> Cultural and religious factors have been emphasized while political and economic factors have been overlooked. In contrast, Horsley seeks, in *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea*, to "understand the three key texts, Sirach, 1 Enoch, and Daniel, in the context of

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that would limit, oppose, reject, or transform institutions, cosmologies, and systems of domination.

60. Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*, 382.

61. Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea*; Horsley, *Revolt of the Scribes*.

62. As this section makes a connection between Mordecai's dream and the apocalyptic literature of the Second Temple period, MT Esther has also been associated with the wisdom genre. E.g., Shemaryahu Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," VT 13 (1963): 419–55; and Susan Niditch, "Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism, and Authority," in Bremmer, *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna*, 26–46. As MT Esther attributes success to humans rather than God, it has similarities to wisdom in providing help in living everyday life. Still, as Horsley argues, a wisdom tale, like apocalyptic literature, needs to be studied in relation to social, political, and economic factors. With LXX Esther's connections to both wisdom and apocalyptic literature, it is worth noting that Horsley also finds both of these genres among texts that directly reflect social, political, and economic realities of living under power.

Second-Temple Judea under Hellenistic imperial rule in a wide-ranging approach that considers the interrelationship of the political-economic structure, the historical background and crisis, and the cultural resources and circumstances.”<sup>63</sup> Similarly, his aim in *Revolt of the Scribes* is to “investigate how images and statements in each particular text may be related to *particular* historical circumstances.”<sup>64</sup>

In both books, Horsley presents an author-centered, imperial-critical approach to reading the texts of the late Second Temple period (Sirach, Daniel, 1 Enoch, and Testament of Moses) and locates the production of the texts among scribes who had divided loyalties. Utilizing textual evidence and consideration of socio-scientific models, Horsley characterizes the scribes as a small group (maybe no more than a few dozen) who were caught in between the aristocratic leaders of the temple-state (including the priestly hierarchy who were loyal to their imperial overlords) and their own faithfulness to preserving the Jewish cultural repertoire. The empire supported the temple-state leaders who in turn supported the scribes so the latter’s livelihoods were dependent upon faithfulness to the empire. However, when imperial policies were in contradiction with the Jewish cultural repertoire, the scribes’ loyalties were divided. The scribes expressed this tension and called for negotiation in their literature.<sup>65</sup>

By reading apocalyptic texts through the lens of the circumstances of the scribes who produced the texts, Horsley concludes that the key con-

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63. Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea*, 9.

64. Horsley, *Revolt of the Scribes*, 7, emphasis original.

65. Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea*, 53–129. In *Revolt of the Scribes*, Horsley posits that there are few indications that scribal resistance influenced popular resistance (193–207). Reading the visions in Dan 11, Horsley finds no connection to Judas Maccabeus, but claims the resistance of the scribal circles received little popular help. They were only later joined into the larger Maccabean revolt. Located in Jerusalem, scribes were unattached to the general populace. When popular revolt did happen, it seems to have been initiated without scribal leadership. A few examples of Horsley’s readings are included here. Daniel’s visions teach that in the absence of a temple and its sacrifices, atonement could now be achieved through active revolt to the imperial state (*Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea*, 179–91). The Enochic literature emphasizes God’s control even in the midst of imperial subjugation and describes how resistance will lead to God’s judgment of oppressive rulers in order for the Jewish people to be restored (*Revolt of the Scribes*, 47–79).

cern of apocalyptic texts is the social, political, and economic realities of living under empire.

A closer examination of late Second Temple “apocalyptic” texts in their historical context thus indicates that the concerns of the learned scribes who composed them were very different from how they appeared in the standard scholarly construct of “apocalypticism.” Far from having turned away from history in despair, they had identified the forces that were at work in the oppression of the Judean people through their interpretations of visions and prophetic oracles. Far from looking for the end of the world, they were looking for the end of empire. And far from living under the shadow of an anticipated cosmic dissolution, they looked for the renewal of the earth on which a humane societal life could be renewed.<sup>66</sup>

Portier-Young and Horsley insightfully connect Second Temple apocalyptic texts (not including LXX Esther) to the realities of living under imperial power. Though apocalyptic texts often appear mysterious and disconnected from everyday life, they argue that the texts actually reflect and address the negotiation of dominant power. In like manner, so too does Mordecai’s dream in LXX Esther contain similar characteristics that portray negotiation of power. LXX Esther has similar audiences to those of the books Portier-Young and Horsley consider in their late Second Temple time frame. LXX Esther’s audiences experienced social, economic, and political oppression, and, like the scribes, were also caught in between their loyalty to the government and their loyalty to their religious tradition.

However, Portier-Young and Horsley both present readings that are heavily weighted toward an oppositional or revolt-centered perspective. As noted in their concluding quotations, Portier-Young finds apocalypses to empower readers to active and overt means of standing up to power and Horsley states that the texts are looking for an end to empire. While I build upon the work of Portier-Young and Horsley, I also find that Mordecai’s dream and the entirety of LXX Esther present not a solely oppositional stance, but complex and varied forms of resistance and a more nuanced view of empire. For Mordecai’s dream to address the situation of its readers as living under power, it did not necessarily have to embolden overt

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66. Horsley, *Revolt of the Scribes*, 206–7.

revolt. As inviting as fantasies of revolt may be, the realities of revolt against great power were significant loss and assured death; thus, pragmatic self-preservation more often won over the enactment of dreams. But as Scott suggests, instead of pushing people into the dismal realities of revolt, the dream of reversal can function as a form of negotiation itself, to create agency in bringing the hidden transcript into public discourse and to encourage subordinates to keep hope. Additionally, while Mordecai's dream does seem to present an oppositional stance toward empire, or "the exalted," it also reflects a sense of appreciation or awe of empire and power as it imitates oppression and seeks to establish a new power with the lowly moved into the position of dominance. The dream presents a view that both abhors empire and yet also longs to reproduce it.

#### A PLOT UNCOVERED (12:1–6)

The dream frame ends with Mordecai pondering his dream after he awakens (11:12), and the next verse (12:1) picks up Mordecai taking a rest, seemingly on the same day, in the king's courtyard. During his rest, Mordecai overhears two eunuchs conspiring against the king with apparent intentions of hurting him, "they were preparing to lay hands on King Artaxerxes" (ἐτοιμάζουσιν τὰς χεῖρας ἐπιβαλεῖν Ἀρταξέξῃ τῷ βασιλεῖ, 12:2).<sup>67</sup> Mordecai turns the eunuchs over to the king and the eunuchs are led away to be executed (12:2b–3). Predictably, the empire violently ends a threat to its existence. Records of the events are kept by the king and Mordecai, and Mordecai is ordered to serve in the court of the king and rewarded, though the narrative does not specify the details of his reward (12:4–5). Even though Mordecai has already been introduced as a servant of the king, and readers would have acknowledged him as both one who was marginalized and successful in negotiating a position with access to power, Mordecai's position is reaffirmed by the reward he receives from the king.

But Mordecai's actions in reporting the eunuchs' plot are not just a means of being rewarded, they are a negotiation of power. Even though he serves in the court of the king, Mordecai is still a colonized subject of the Persian king and the one who dreams of the exalted being devoured. Thus, the reader may reasonably assume that Mordecai's feelings about the king

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67. The rationale for the eunuchs' assassination plot is not explicitly stated.

are ambivalent. He may feel loyalty toward the king who has made him a court servant, but also disdain for his subjected status, especially in contrast to his powerful position in Jerusalem before captivity (even though those two positions were not chronologically possible for the same person, they are narratively possible in LXX Esther). When Mordecai overhears the assassination plot of the eunuchs, the reader might imagine Mordecai being torn over what his reaction should be. Saying nothing and letting the king die might not be too bad. But, instead, Mordecai chooses to report the incident, and is rewarded.

As Scott describes, the safest form of political negotiation of power is the performance of deference. Deferential acts can secure better treatment and greater access by appearing to accept the ideology of power. But outward compliance should not be mistaken for the attitudes of motivation. Underneath a public transcript of deference may lie a hidden transcript with a subversive attitude. However, ambivalence still abounds as subversive attitudes may be mixed with feelings of comfort that come with the predictability of supporting hegemonic power.<sup>68</sup>

Mordecai performs deference in his decision to report the assassination plot. But while his dream may reveal that a subversive motivation coexists with his deference, his choice also represents a desire to keep the status quo for the time being. In either instance, reporting the plot was a way in which Mordecai expresses agency. Rather than staying out of the way of the eunuchs, Mordecai became a subject who acted in the negotiation of power and his negotiation provided him favor with and access to power.

A similar account of the eunuchs' plot, its discovery, and Mordecai's reward is also included in LXX Esth 2:21–23.<sup>69</sup> But one important detail not included in the later duplication is Haman's involvement. After Mordecai is rewarded, the evil villain, Haman, who was held in great honor by the king, appears and is "determined to injure Mordecai and his people because of the two eunuchs of the king" (12:6). The reader is left

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68. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 18, 23–28.

69. Much text-critical discussion has centered on the duplication of this episode of the eunuch's assassination plot in Addition A as well as in LXX Esth 2:21–23. The episode appears in the canonical material of MT Esther (2:21–23). In AT Esther, it appears in Addition A:16–18, but is not duplicated in the canonical material of AT Esther as it is in LXX Esther. A summary of major theories on the relationship between the three texts can be found in Frolov, "Two Eunuchs, Two Conspiracies, and One Loyal Jew," 304–7.

to presume why the situation with the eunuchs would infuriate Haman—perhaps he was a friend of the eunuchs, maybe he conspired with them or possibly hoped their conspiracy would result in his own ascendancy, or perhaps he was jealous of Mordecai's reward.<sup>70</sup> As is discussed later in this study, the edict Artaxerxes decrees in Addition E conjectures that Haman devises his plot against Persian Jews so that Persia might be caught undefended and the kingdom transferred to the Macedonians (16:12–14). This explanation may confirm Haman's conspiracy to overthrow Artaxerxes here in Addition A. But, whatever the case, Haman's alignment with the assassination-plotting eunuchs indicates that Haman is an enemy of King Artaxerxes, just as the eunuchs were, even though the king is apparently unaware of Haman's opposition since he holds Haman in great honor.<sup>71</sup>

In addition to being associated with the eunuchs, Haman is referred to as son of Hammedatha, “a Bougean” (12:6). In addition to the label of “Bougean,” used of Haman here and in 3:1, Haman is characterized in a variety of ways in the different texts of Esther. In Addition E of LXX Esther, Haman is also called “a Macedonian (really an alien to the Persian blood, and quite devoid of kindliness)” (16:10). Additionally, in AT Esther Haman is called a Macedonian (AT Esth A:17), but he is also called a Bougean (AT Esth 3:1). Throughout MT Esther, Haman is only referred to as an Agagite (MT Esth 3:1).<sup>72</sup>

Haman's identity as an Agagite in MT Esther would conjure feelings of enmity from Jewish people, as Agag was the king of the Amalekites, a perennial enemy of the Jews (1 Sam 15, Exod 17:8–15). With a similar emphasis, Haman's portrayal as a Macedonian (LXX Esth 16:10 and AT Esth A:17) would have also evoked sentiments of animosity since the

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70. Levenson (*Esther*, 41) notes that there are inferences of Haman's desire to ascend to the throne in 6:6–9, when Haman asks to wear the king's clothes and ride on the king's horse in order that he be known as the person the king loves, and in 7:8 when Haman reclines on the couch with the queen and the king believes him to be assaulting the queen—taking the king's harem was an act of someone rebelliously trying to usurp the throne.

71. Levenson, *Esther*, 41.

72. Additionally, one Greek manuscript reads γωγαιον (Gogaion) instead of Agagite, Bougean, or Macedonian. Clines writes that this could be a connection to the Gog of Ezek 38–39 but more likely is a misappropriation of the Hebrew גִּגַּי (*Esther Scroll*, 197–98). He also states that Haman's classification as Bougean may have developed out of a confusion of Haman with Memucan of AT and MT 1:16.

Seleucid emperors, who terrorized the Jews, ruled in the line of the most famous Macedonian, Alexander the Great.

But in the location mentioned here (12:6), Haman is identified as a “Bougean.” This term’s meaning is unclear, thus scholars have considered the following possible solutions. (1) Bougean may merely be a corruption.<sup>73</sup> (2) Bougean may refer to a Persian figure named Bagoses, mentioned by Josephus (*A.J.* 11.297–301), who persecuted the Jews for seven years before assassinating Artaxerxes III in 338 BCE.<sup>74</sup> (3) Bougean may be a title of an officer or eunuch rather than a name.<sup>75</sup> (4) Bougean may be taken as a gentilic denoting the Beja who were an inimical, war-like people located in the eastern region of present-day Sudan and who were an enemy to Ptolemaic Egypt.<sup>76</sup> Or (5) though Bougean has geographic origins, it gradually came to be an adjective that described a person who liked to throw his/her weight around, who was a braggart, or who was prone to excessive jubilation.<sup>77</sup> Whatever its referent, Haman’s identity as a Bougean here in 12:6, like the designations of Agagite or Macedonian, is “clearly a term of opprobrium.”<sup>78</sup> In addition to being an enemy of the Persian king, readers now know that Haman is also an enemy of Jews.

Haman’s introduction into the episode of the eunuchs’ plot discovery leaves no doubt as to his role in LXX Esther—from the beginning of the narrative he is presented as an enemy of everyone in the story, and, most specifically, Mordecai and his people.<sup>79</sup> Given that the dream of a clash between two dragons immediately precedes this episode, perhaps the reader is also given an early clue to the identity of the dragons that is later revealed in Addition F. The cosmic battle of dragons will be played out through the antagonistic relationship between Mordecai and Haman.

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73. White Crawford, “Esther,” 951.

74. Karen Jobes, “How an Assassination Changed the Greek Text of Esther,” *ZAW* 110 (1998): 75–78.

75. White Crawford, “Esther,” 951.

76. Michael G. Wechsler, “The Appellation *BOYTAIOΣ* and Ethnic Contextualization in the Greek Text of Esther,” *VT* 51 (2001): 109–14.

77. De Troyer, *End of the Alpha Text of Esther*, 192–93, see esp. n. 39.

78. White Crawford, “Esther,” 951.

79. White Crawford, “Esther,” 951.

## ADDITION A AS A MASCULINIZING OF ESTHER?

While the first episode of MT Esther is of a great and powerful king and a woman who defies him (Queen Vashti) (MT Esth 1:1–12), LXX Esther begins by extolling a male protagonist, Mordecai, who has a dream, saves the king, and is rewarded with access to power (11:2–12; 12:1–6). The positioning of Mordecai as the subject at the beginning of the book, which is titled with a woman's name, has led some to consider if Addition A functions to make the story of Esther more androcentric. For example, in his work, which focuses on the structures of the different texts of Esther, Dorothy considers how Addition A functions in both Greek texts (LXX Esther and AT Esther). Dorothy writes, "One must question how this introduction functions thematically and formally within the whole. Is a measure of androcentricity at work here, diminishing the glory of Vashti and Esther by spotlighting Mordecai and the king?"<sup>80</sup>

Beal similarly argues that the final-form beginnings of the Greek texts of Esther transpose and transgress the beginning of MT Esther. Of MT Esther's beginning Beal writes, "In chapter 1 of MT Esther I have read Vashti as a (non-Jewish) heroine in a gender-based conflict within a very vulnerable patriarchal order."<sup>81</sup> He posits that such a beginning positions the reader on the woman's side of a patriarchal social order from the start. However, when Addition A is added to the Greek versions of Esther, Beal states that the reader, instead, is drawn toward aligning with Mordecai. Further, since Mordecai saves the king, the reader is also empathetic to the king who is not yet known to be drunk and impressionable. When Vashti is introduced in the following chapter she is presented as an enemy of the king and thus also an enemy of the protagonist introduced at the Greek version's beginning as aligned with the king—Mordecai. Thus, Beal contends that a reading of MT Esther, which has traces of challenging the patriarchal order, is destroyed by the transposition of the story that takes place in LXX Esther and AT Esther.<sup>82</sup>

In response to Beal, I would counter that aligning Mordecai and the king because of Mordecai's action to save him is too monolithic. Mordecai's act in divulging the eunuch's plot is ambivalent and may have been

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80. Dorothy, *Books of Esther*, 49.

81. Timothy K. Beal, "Tracing Esther's Beginnings," in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, 107.

82. Beal, "Tracing Esther's Beginnings," 107–10.



a negotiating act of deference. Simply because Mordecai acts to save the king does not mean that Mordecai's attitude and motivations toward the king are nonpolitical and purely positive. The language of alignment that Beal chooses is not complex enough to reveal the ambivalence in Mordecai's relationship with the king. Mordecai benefits from the king being in power and by helping the king, but Mordecai also has a subversive dream of the cosmic reversal of power.

Further, how the narrative leads readers to position themselves with one of the characters is also not as simple as Beal contends. For example, while it may be true, as I argued earlier, that Mordecai could be respected as a leader and captive from Jerusalem and thus considered a model to emulate, it is also equally possible that Mordecai's presentation in Addition A may not have been desirable to Jewish readers who were particularists and who would have found Mordecai's apparent accommodation to Persian power reprehensible. If readers existed among the elite Jews who benefited from the quasi-independence found in Hasmonean Judea, they may have shunned a "hero" like Mordecai who appeared accommodating to a foreign power. Readers among the nonelite Jews in Hasmonean Judea, on the other hand, may have thought Mordecai's negotiation of a foreign power would be preferable to living under the heavy hand of the Hasmoneans or suffering the great losses they had to bear in order to gain independence. Similarly, for readers among Ptolemaic Jews, Mordecai indeed may have been a hero for gaining access to power, but he also may have been disdained for relinquishing an opportunity to allow that power to experience pain. At this point in the narrative, no direct evaluation of Mordecai's actions has been given. Mordecai negotiates power in various ways—he gains access to the Persian center of power, he has a subversive fantasy-like dream of reversal, and in deference and collusion he reports the eunuchs' assassination attempt. To posit decisively a monolithic reading, whether positive or negative, would diminish the ambivalence of colonized identity.

Most importantly, Addition A transitions MT Esther from a story framed by Artaxerxes and Vashti to one framed by God. So more than changing a story that challenges patriarchy to one that inscribes androcentricity, Addition A changes a human-centric story to a theocentric story, and thus one of God's hegemonic masculinity. Mordecai, and eventually Esther, represent God in the contest for hegemonic masculinity against Haman who competes on behalf of Artaxerxes; and, in the end, God's universal hegemonic masculinity will be demonstrated.

## CONCLUSION

At the outset of LXX Esther, Addition A frames LXX Esther as cosmic competition of apocalyptic proportions. Like apocalyptic literature of the same time frame, LXX Esther is a story of God intervening in human affairs to compete with foreign nations for power. Mordecai, a colonized Jew with hybridized identity, is best understood as a character that demonstrates the ambivalence with which the colonized regard power. With dreams of reversal and acts of deference, the presentation of Mordecai demonstrates varied forms of negotiation with power. Through Mordecai, and the acts of others that will be described in the rest of LXX Esther, the story presents how humans become agents in God's assertion of his (!) hegemonic masculinity over Persian, or any other imperial, power.

The next chapter discusses the initial description of Persian power and Artaxerxes, as well as Vashti's defiance to Persian imperial power.

### 3

## Breaking the Surface of Consent: Masculine Imperial Power and Vashti's Defiance (1:1–12a)

Not by the forces of civil war can you govern the very weakest woman.  
You can kill that woman, but she escapes you then; you cannot govern  
her. No power on earth can govern a human being, however feeble, who  
withholds his or her consent.

—Emmeline Pankhurst, “Freedom or Death”

After Addition A begins with a cosmic dream and then narrows the setting to outside the palace gates, chapters 1 and 2 of LXX Esther further constrict the story's location to the Persian imperial palace itself. With this shift of locale into the palace, LXX Esther skillfully narrows the setting from the broadest cosmic venue, to just outside the locus of Persian power, then to the epicenter of human supremacy. Artaxerxes, the star of the physical world, is found at his rightful place on the royal throne, eager to display his regal splendor and control. If only all the king's subjects responded to his authority in monolithic fashion.

This chapter first discusses the ambivalent presentation of the Persian king, Artaxerxes—his military, political, economic, and ideological power, as well as his masculinity (1:1–8). Then, Vashti's refusal of Artaxerxes is examined as an act of defiance against imperial power, which threatens the hegemonic masculinity upon which Persian imperial power is built (1:9–12a).

### ARTAXERXES: RULER OVER ALL THE WORLD (1:1–8)

Chapter 1 opens with a transitional statement. “It was after the following things [μετὰ τοὺς λόγους τούτους] happened in the days of Artaxerxes”

(1:1a). The use of *μετά* (“after”) may signal to the reader that the events preceding this introductory statement, Mordecai’s dream and the deliverance from imperial power it represents (the chief focus of Addition A), should not be dismissed as unrelated to the ensuing developments in the plot.<sup>1</sup> Even though Artaxerxes will be portrayed as the “master of the whole world” (13:2), the reader should not forget that God is still the ultimate power at work in the events that unfold in LXX Esther.

I discuss the presentation of Artaxerxes’s imperial power in 1:1–8 through the lens of Mann’s four networks of sociospatial networks of power.<sup>2</sup> First, Artaxerxes’s political and military power will be considered, then his economic and ideological power. As Mann describes, these sociospatial networks of power are overlapping. Networks of power exist simultaneously and fund each other. For example, when military power is perceived, economic power must exist to subsidize military efforts, political power is present in that the assertion of the central power’s will is being carried out by military force, and ideological power funds a worldview that perceives imperial power (military and otherwise) as superior. This analysis of LXX Esther’s presentation of Artaxerxes’s power considers each network of power individually in order to discuss Artaxerxes’s power in coherent fashion; however, the overlapping nature of the networks cannot be neglected.

#### ARTAXERXES’S MILITARY AND POLITICAL POWER (1:1–2)

Upon first meeting Artaxerxes, the Persian ruler of LXX Esther, the reader learns that Artaxerxes is great and powerful and his kingdom is vast.<sup>3</sup> The

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1. The inclusion of “after these things,” which is not found in MT 1:1, makes the focus of the opening of the episode in LXX Esther different from MT Esther. MT Esther opens with *ויהי בימי אחשורוש* “And it happened in the days of Artaxerxes.” MT Esther’s opening is similar to a common narrative opening of *ויהי* “and it happened,” thus it starts the story at that point. Berlin does note that while in the Hebrew an opening of *ויהי* might seem a natural open to a story, this formation, which includes *בימי* “in the days of,” is actually relatively rare. Introductions to prophetic visions often contain *בימי* but do not open with the narrative *ויהי* (*Esther*, 5). Fox adds that even in its rarity, the phrase opens a story and sets the stage for events that occurred long ago and are being told from a distance. LXX Esther’s addition of “after these things” shifts the tone from introducing a story to understanding the subsequent events in light of what precedes (*Character and Ideology*, 14).

2. Mann, *Sources of Social Power* as discussed in ch. 1 of this study.

3. Writing in 1908 and influencing scholars for subsequent years, Paton equates

vastness of Artaxerxes's kingdom is demonstrated by the description of him as "the same Artaxerxes who ruled over one hundred twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia" (1:1b).

Artaxerxes's dominion is first demonstrated by the sheer number of provinces over which he rules—127. Though scholars have demonstrated concern for the historicity of this number and how it may function in the narrative, no historical allusion is necessary to realize that 127 is a large number meant to convey Artaxerxes's great power and to elicit admiration for the fictitious king in the book.<sup>4</sup> That Artaxerxes rules over 127

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the Hebrew Ahasuerus with Xerxes by describing how in a trilingual Persian monument the Aramaic equivalent of Xerxes contains the consonants *Kh-sh-y-'-r-sh*, which correlate to the Hebrew אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ (*Esther*, 53–54). Therefore, scholars have typically equated the character named אַחַשְׁוֵרֶשׁ (Ahasuerus) in MT *Esther* with the historical Persian king Xerxes I (485–465 BCE), even though LXX *Esther* and Josephus name him Ἀρταξέρξης (Artaxerxes) instead of Ξέρξης (Xerxes). Because of this many scholars choose to refer to him as Xerxes when writing about LXX *Esther* because of the possible historical connection. However, to refer to the ruler in LXX *Esther* as Xerxes implies a historical connection that is unnecessary to the story and can possibly distort the narrative's purposes toward historical description. While the author of *Esther* may have been utilizing the distant memory of a Persian ruler to create a story, naming an exact referent distracts from attention to the narrative. Therefore, I will follow LXX *Esther* and refer to the king as Artaxerxes throughout the study.

4. One hundred twenty-seven does not correspond to the quantity of Persian satrapies/provinces in the days of Xerxes as depicted by Persian and Greek sources, which range from twenty to thirty-two. See Berlin, *Esther*, 6. E.g., Herodotus states there were twenty provinces called satrapies in the time of Darius (*Hist.* 3.89.1). Some scholars have addressed the discrepancy between the number of provinces named in *Esther* (other biblical sources also contradict Persian/Greek sources as well—Dan 6:1 has 120 satrapies and 1 Esd 3:2 has 127) and Persian and Greek sources by suggesting that the word used in *Esther* is not the equivalent of the Persian word for satrapy, but instead a smaller unit or district of a satrapy that would be a province. E.g., H. Bardtke, *Das Buch Esther*, KAT 17.4–5 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1963), 278; and George Glenn Cameron, "The Persian Satrapies and Related Matters," *JNES* 32 (1973), 47–56. Paton, e.g., refers to the symbolic nature of the number to symbolize the king's rule over all of the earth as 127 = 12 (number of tribes of Israel) multiplied by 10 (number of completeness) plus 7 (the number of perfection) (*Esther*, 124). Berlin argues the number should simply be considered an exaggeration (*Esther*, 6). Bush notices that the concern for historicity has obscured the point of the narrative but still points to the fact that including the larger number of the provinces rather than the smaller number of the satrapies is done to paint a more grandiose picture of the Persian Empire (*Ruth/Esther*, 345). However, Bush's concern with the translation of "satrapies" and what they represent still indicates a concern with connecting the story to Persian history.

provinces directs the reader to respect the almost incalculable power that this king possesses.

Further bolstering Artaxerxes's power, the text also states that he rules over provinces that span India to Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup> Drawing on Herodotus, Timothy Laniak states that national honor could be ascribed to a Persian king by the extent of his kingdom's dominion.<sup>6</sup> Geographic vastness of a kingdom was directly connected with the perception of a king's power. Often descriptions of Persian kings included the geographical extent of their kingdom. For example, Xenophon describes Cyrus's empire: "That Cyrus's empire was the greatest and most glorious of all the kingdoms in Asia—of that it may be its own witness. For it was bounded on the east by the Indian Ocean, on the north by the Black Sea, on the west by Cyprus and Egypt, and on the south by Ethiopia" (*Cyr.* 8.8.1).<sup>7</sup> So like other descriptions of glorious Persian rulers, the presentation of Artaxerxes's kingdom as having expansive boundaries indicates to readers the honor, power, and dominion of Artaxerxes.

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5. While *εως αιθιοπιας*, "to Ethiopia," is not included in Rahlfs-Hanhart's Septuagint text, the critical apparatus reveals that some manuscripts do include it. The phrase "over India" could make sense in simply declaring the far reaches of the Persian kingdom, but it is more common to include such phrases in a description that is either from east to west (as is found in biblical references such as 1 Sam 3:20) or by including four corners of the kingdom's stretch as demonstrated by the quotation from Xenophon included in the main text. Thus, following the other manuscripts, it seems more likely that an additional geographic designation would be listed with India in this description of Artaxerxes in LXX Esther.

6. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 38 n. 14. Laniak draws his inference from Herodotus. "Under the rule of the Medes, one tribe would even govern another; the Medes held sway over all alike and especially over those who lived nearest to them; these ruled their neighbors, and the neighbors in turn those who came next to them, on the same scheme by which the Persians assign honor; for the nation kept advancing its rule and dominion" (*Hist.* 1.134.3).

7. Berlin includes this citation in order to demonstrate the mode and purpose of describing the extent of empire in Persian king introductions (*Esther*, 6). Another example comes from a foundation tablet at Persepolis where Xerxes makes claims about his empire. "I am Xerxes, the great king, the only king ... these are the countries ... over which I am king ... Media, Elam, Arachosia, Urartu, Drangiana, Parthia, (H)aria, Bactria, Sogdia, Chorasmia, Babylonia, Assyria, Sattagydia, Sardis, Egypt, the Ionians who live on the salty sea and who live beyond ... the salty sea, Maka, Arabia, Gandara, India, Cappadocia, Da'an, the Amyrgian Cimmerians ... Libya, Banneshu, Kush" (*ANET*, 316–17).

In his rule over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia, Artaxerxes's military power is implied. To establish and maintain a massive kingdom, Artaxerxes would have needed immense military power. One can easily surmise that any regime that amasses such territory has more than sufficient military power at its disposal for conquest and control. Like all other empires, Artaxerxes's fictive kingdom would have been built upon the slaughter of human bodies, rape of women, and destruction of property.<sup>8</sup>

Even though not visible at this point in the narrative, both Jews in Ptolemaic Egypt and in Hasmonean Judea would have been familiar with how imperial power, like that of Artaxerxes, was obtained. Some Jews in Alexandria who were a part of the Ptolemaic army would have even witnessed and participated in the atrocities perpetrated by imperial armies.<sup>9</sup> In Hasmonean Judea, the memory of the violent Seleucid oppression of Judean inhabitants and their attempt to suppress the Maccabean revolt likely persisted.<sup>10</sup> Even more recent to Jews in Hasmonean Judea in the early first century BCE, the ruthless conquests of Hasmonean rulers trying to gain vast kingdoms of their own would have provided vivid and horrific images of the realities of military power.<sup>11</sup>

But beyond simply fearing the military power of Artaxerxes in light of their memories and current realities, readers in Ptolemaic Egypt and Hasmonean Judea would have had a range of responses to presentations of empire. A far-reaching kingdom like that of Artaxerxes's Persia in LXX Esther was possibly admired and envied. Jews in Ptolemaic Egypt may have had respect for their rulers' achievements while also fearing the military power necessary for those triumphs. Likewise, readers in Hasmonean Judea may have had appreciation for the measure of independence and expansion attained by their rulers while simultaneously loathing the methods of its realization.

In addition to the military power revealed in the description of Artaxerxes's massive kingdom, political power is also demonstrated: "In those days, when King Artaxerxes was enthroned in the city of Susa" (1:2). Sitting on his throne in Susa, the center of his kingdom, Artaxerxes's political power is palpable. Artaxerxes can issue royal decrees and make demands of any and all people between the center of his kingdom in Susa and the

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8. Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, 25–26; Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 31–113.

9. Gruen, *Diaspora*, 68.

10. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 175–234.

11. Seeman, *Rome and Judea in Transition*, 137–241.

almost limitless periphery of his territory toward India and Ethiopia. Later in the chapter, the political power represented in Artaxerxes's position seated on the throne in Susa will be exerted through the two decrees issued in response to Vashti's act of defiance.

#### ARTAXERXES'S ECONOMIC AND IDEOLOGICAL POWER (1:3–8)

Following Artaxerxes's brief description including insinuations of military and political power, the narrative describes two extravagant banquets thrown by Artaxerxes (1:3–8) that display not only Artaxerxes's political power, but also his economic reach and ideological sanction.

Banqueting, or feasting/partying, is a central motif in all three versions of Esther.<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Craig, Fox, and Beal find connection between the feasts in MT Esther and the exchange of power that occurs in the book.

Drawing upon Mikhail Bakhtin's notion that feasts are historically linked to moments of change, transition, and renewal in the life of a society, Craig finds that the carnivalesque banquets of MT Esther specifically call attention to transfers of power.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Fox observes ten banquets in MT Esther that are paired to indicate specific shifts in power.<sup>14</sup> Fox's analysis of

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12. Nearly half of the occurrences of the Hebrew *מִשְׁתֶּה* ("feast, banquet") in the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible are in MT Esther. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 156 n. 4; and Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque*, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 62. Craig finds that a "saturation of food and drink" is a common characteristic of literary carnivalesque, a genre that functions to present an inversion of canonized values (*Reading Esther*, 62, 43–44).

13. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984), 9. Craig, *Reading Esther*, 62–68.

14. Fox names the ten banquets in Esther as: (1) Xerxes's banquet for the nobility (1:2–4) (LXX 1:3); (2) Xerxes's banquet for all the men in Susa (1:5–8); (3) Vashti's banquet for the women (1:9); (4) Esther's enthronement banquet (2:18); (5) Haman and Xerxes's banquet (3:15); (6) Esther's first banquet (5:4–8); (7) Esther's second banquet (7:1–9); (8) The Jews' feasting in celebration of Mordecai's glory and counter decree (8:17); (9) The first feast of Purim: Adar 14 (9:17, 19) (Jews outside of Susa); (10) The second feast of Purim: Adar 15 (9:18) (Jews in Susa). Fox observes that the banquets are paired, which he finds appropriate for a book that establishes a two-banquet holiday of Purim. To demonstrate shifts in power between the banquets, Fox connects 1 and 2 (Xerxes's banquets) to 9 and 10 (Jewish banquets of Purim) as the overall power in the book shifts from Persia to the Jews; 3 and 4 are connected as banquets hosted by or for the queens and show a shift in queenly power; 5 and



the banquets in MT Esther shows that the first two banquets (which Artaxerxes throws for the kingdom elites throughout the land and inhabitants of Susa) function as an *inclusio* with the last two banquets (which the Jews throw throughout the land and in Susa to celebrate their victory). The framing parallelism of the two pairs of banquets demonstrates the overall power shift in Esther to be from the Persian ruler to the Jewish people.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, however, LXX Esther frames the book with a prophetic/apocalyptic dream and its fulfillment instead of banquets. So while Fox's analysis of the feasts is helpful, the banquets in LXX Esther function in service of a different overall theme—the assertion of God's hegemonic masculinity through Mordecai and Esther's negotiation of Persian masculine imperial power. Though Beal comments on MT Esther, his contribution supports the basic premise that gendered imperial power is what is displayed or exchanged in the banquets of Esther. He writes, "One quickly realizes that, in this [the Persian] kingdom, parties have something to do with national politics, and that national politics has something to do with sexual politics."<sup>16</sup>

Banquets in LXX Esther serve as a location in which the display and negotiation of gendered imperial power can be portrayed. In the case of the first two banquets thrown by Artaxerxes considered here, the first banquet largely operates to display power, as does the second banquet. However, the final day of the second banquet also becomes an opportunity for masculine imperial power to be negotiated by Vashti, as is discussed in the second part of this chapter. So attention now turns to how the first two banquets function as a location for not only military and political power to be implied, but specifically for economic and ideological power to be displayed and exerted.

#### Artaxerxes's First Banquet (1:3–4)

The narrative describes that in the third year of Artaxerxes's reign, "he gave a banquet" (δοχὴν ἐποίησεν) with a guest list that included four groups

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8 are linked as they refer to the decree to annihilate the Jews and its counter-decree commanding the Jews to defend themselves; 6 and 7 are coupled because banquet 6 confirms Haman's pride and banquet 7 produces his downfall (*Character and Ideology*, 156–58, diagram on 157).

15. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 156. Fox comments that while the first two Persian banquets are used for the display of opulent Persian wealth, the feasts of Jews display the victory of their people.

16. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 15.

(1:3).<sup>17</sup> The first group of guests is Artaxerxes's "friends," who are likely high-ranking government officials that were close to the king, though there is some uncertainty about their identity.<sup>18</sup> The second group is "other persons of various nations."<sup>19</sup> Given that the other three groups in the list are kingdom elites, as is discussed here, the reader may infer that people from other nations would include the leaders among the various nations that have been conquered by Artaxerxes or his Persian predecessors. The vast range of nations represented at the party further bolsters an impression of the military and political power that Artaxerxes possessed in building such a diverse kingdom. The third group of banquet guests is the "Persians and Median nobles." Persia and Media were originally separate nations, though ethnically related, but were merged under the reign of Cyrus and represent the core of Achaemenid Empire.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the fourth group present at the banquet is the governors of the provinces who functioned as a retainer class to enact all forms of imperial power (military, political,

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17. At only the third year in his royal tenure, the reader may imagine Artaxerxes to be somewhat young and inexperienced. In considering the banquets thrown by a young king, Day writes, "Perhaps his desire to impress others through a display of wealth is a sign of his immaturity. As this story progresses, this inexperience will become even more evident as Ahasuerus [Artaxerxes] feels the need to rely greatly upon the advice of his counselors and advisors" (*Esther*, 24).

18. The identity of the "friends" (τοῖς φίλοις) is unclear. Hanna Kahana observes that LXX Esther's φίλος is equated with MT Esther's שר ("ruler") four times—1:3; 2:18; 3:1; and 6:9—but this connection/translation of MT Esther occurs in no other book of the Septuagint. Kahana hypothesizes, "It seems that φίλος or πρότος φίλος was the title of chancellors or high ranking functionaries at the Ptolemaic court, replacing the ἐταῖρος, a more ancient title in this [Persian] court. In any case, the primary meaning ... when appearing in relation to Kings, it would mean chancellor." Hanna Kahana, *Esther: Juxtaposition of the Septuagint Translation with the Hebrew Text*, CBET 40 (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 9–10. If, as Kahana suggests, φίλος is a title from the Ptolemaic court, then readers in Ptolemaic Egypt may have even heard a glimpse of their own government woven into the Persian setting. As the Alexandrian Jewish community may have had its own ethnarch, a high-ranking government official, some Ptolemaic readers may have even identified Alexandrian Jewish leaders with these "friends" of the royal court.

19. The phrase τοῖς λοιποῖς ἔθνεσιν is literally translated "the rest of the nations," though the NRSV renders the phrase "other persons of various nations." This phrase has no equivalent in MT Esther. Both Moore and Kahana posit that the LXX translator misunderstood שר ("ruler or officer") in the Vorlage for שאר ("rest"), which has a Greek equivalent of λοιπός (Moore, *Esther*, 6; Kahana, *Esther*, 10).

20. Berlin, *Esther*, 8.

economic, and ideological) in the vast kingdom.<sup>21</sup> All of these party guests comprise the elites of the kingdom, the best of the best, the king's innermost circle.<sup>22</sup> "That is, the text claims that *everyone that is anyone* [with power, status, and wealth] in the Persian Empire is present."<sup>23</sup>

All of the attendees at the best-of-the-best banquet came to the palace and there Artaxerxes "displayed to them the riches of his kingdom and splendor of his bountiful celebration" (1:4). The purpose of this first feast thrown by Artaxerxes may have been a wedding celebration for Artaxerxes and Vashti; 1:5 begins, "At the end of the festivity" (1:5, ὅτε δὲ ἀνεπληρώθησαν αἱ ἡμέραι τοῦ γάμου), which literally translated is "when the days of the wedding were fulfilled."<sup>24</sup> But, if this feast is for the marriage of Artaxerxes and Vashti, the marriage aspect of the feast is underplayed. By the admission of the narrative (1:4), the chief purpose of this banquet was the ostentation of Artaxerxes. With great territories amassed, sitting at the center of his expansive kingdom, Artaxerxes hosts a banquet to flaunt his abundant wealth and power.

But this display to the kingdom's elites was no minor or brief affair, it occurred over the "course of one-hundred and eighty days" (1:4). The elites from 127 provinces partied for 180 days! Levenson observes the fabricated and exaggerated nature of the fictitious party and points out its chief purpose: "Who was minding the store during this drinkfest of half a year's duration? The description of the banquets is ... less historical than 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."<sup>25</sup> The overwhelming power of the Persians that Levenson says is emphasized here is not only political and military power, but also economic power.

Any king that could afford to throw such an elongated and extravagant feast was one with seemingly limitless resources obtained through eco-

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21. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 50–54, 210–30.

22. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 18.

23. Beal, "Esther," 5, emphasis original.

24. Paton, *Esther*, 136; Levenson, *Esther*, 46. Additionally, reading MT Esther, Berlin notes that Ibn Ezra finds this first feast to correspond to the feast of 2:18, which is the party for Esther's coronation. So this banquet's purpose as a wedding feast may be implied in both LXX Esther and MT Esther (*Esther*, 7). However, Moore speculates that τοῦ γάμου is a corruption of τοῦ πότου "of the drinking party," found later in the verse. Thus, Moore argues that no marriage is implied in this banquet (*Esther*, 6–7).

25. Levenson, *Esther*, 45.

conomic networks of power likely exacted by the very friends, persons, and nobles who were present at the banquet. Through enacting imperial power on the king's behalf, the elites, retainer, and exchange classes, represented by these people in the king's inner circle, extracted the goods produced by the production activity of the common people through taxes, tributes, rents, confiscation, and so on. In turn, they were required to remit (also through taxes, tributes, rents, confiscation, etc.) to the king a percentage of what they exacted and controlled.<sup>26</sup> Lenski finds that the tension of controlling goods, yet being asked to turn them over to the rulers, has historically led to a struggle among rulers and governing classes as each sought to maximize its own privileges and power.<sup>27</sup> But, doubtless the relationship between rulers and governing classes was more complicated. Ambivalence was present as the rulers and governing classes benefited from one another and likely had some measure of appreciation for each other in addition to their ongoing disputes for more power.

While ostentation and the display of economic power may have been at the heart of the banquet, ideological maintenance of power by Artaxerxes, the ruler, is also present. As Perdue writes, the ideological power of an imperial metanarrative demonstrates and sustains an understanding of the superiority of the colonizer's civilization.<sup>28</sup> In only the third year of his reign, the new king strategically uses this banquet as a means of displaying Persian preeminence to colonize the minds of the elites. Through a lavish banquet, Artaxerxes exhibited his wealth to these elites, with whom he had an ambivalent relationship, so that they would fear and appreciate his superior power. Additionally, as benefaction, the banquet also engendered the loyalty of these leaders by inviting them to join him in the superfluous consumption of wealth obtained at the expense of others. In enabling them to experience and be indebted by a further piece of the "power dividend," Artaxerxes exerted ideological influence to convince his leaders that Persia, and specifically Artaxerxes himself, was superior to all others in that he held extravagant economic wealth and was even benevolent in sharing those great resources.

Are readers to imagine Mordecai present at this best-of-the-best party? Addition A notes two times (11:3 and 12:5) that Mordecai served in the court of the king. Though he is not explicitly mentioned in chapter

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26. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 50–54, 210–30.

27. Lenski, *Power and Privilege*, 231–42.

28. Perdue and Carter, *Israel and Empire*, 30–32.

1, serving in the court of the king would likely have placed Mordecai in a circle close to the king. Whether he would be identified as a “friend” of the king or included among “persons of various nations,” the reader may imagine Mordecai participating in this first banquet. Because MT Esther does not introduce Mordecai until chapter 2, Mordecai’s presence is not even detected in chapter 1 in MT Esther. However, in LXX Esther, the reader might imagine Mordecai, who served in the court of the king (11:3; 12:5) and was rewarded for his loyalty (12:5), to linger in the background, perhaps eating and drinking alongside the others and taking part in this six-month grand display of power. Mordecai may even be envisioned hovering in the shadows where he can watch intently as the upcoming conflict with Vashti unfolds and learn from the method and consequences of her negotiation (which is discussed in the second part of this chapter).

#### Artaxerxes’s Second Banquet (1:5–8)

The first banquet is referred to as a *δοχή*, “a reception where guests are entertained,” but the second party is a *πότος*, “a social occasion where drinks are served.”<sup>29</sup> An additional lexical entry for *πότος* equates the word with carousal, a banquet-like event “with participants well lubricated with wine.”<sup>30</sup> After the kingdom elites enjoy six months of food, drink, and merriment, the subsequent banquet will only be a six-day drinking party, which was not prohibited to moderation. “The drinking was not according to a fixed rule; but the king wished to have it so, and he commanded his stewards to comply with his pleasure and with that of his guests” (1:8). The king did not make strict provisions or laws about whether guests were forced to drink or free to exercise restraint, but the point in the drinking not occurring in accordance to “a fixed rule” was to emphasize that pleasure was the theme of the event.<sup>31</sup> “No one was kept from drinking when and as much as he wished, and that *this* was the king’s ‘law’ or edict: to let everyone do as he wished.”<sup>32</sup>

The guests of this six-day drunken-bash held in the courtyard of the palace are “people of various nations who lived in the city” (1:5).<sup>33</sup> These

29. GELS, s.v. “*δοχή*”; s.v. “*πότος*.”

30. BDAG, s.v. “*πότος*.”

31. Berlin, *Esther*, 10.

32. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 17, emphasis original.

33. Though it is not explicitly stated that the elites from far-and-wide are still

people of various nations living in Susa represent the colonized people of Artaxerxes's kingdom who have been displaced. They were people whose homelands had been conquered and they either chose or were forced to relocate to Susa, the center of the Persian Empire. Their identity as "of various nations," though "living in Susa," signals a hybridized identity. They are colonized people caught in the borrowing and lending of cultures.<sup>34</sup>

To display generosity to commoners, like the colonized Susaites, an honorable ruler could host a banquet in order to redistribute resources back to his/her subjects. Lillian Klein finds that Artaxerxes's banquets seem to be opposed to such benefaction since six months' worth of food appears to be reserved for the elites, who did not need it, while the commoners of the city are only offered six-days of wine.<sup>35</sup> Klein writes, "Persian drinking celebrations are historically verified; nevertheless, the narrative renders ironic the redistribution not of nourishing food but of alcohol, which, when consumed in the excessive quantities associated with Persian banquets, is detrimental to life."<sup>36</sup> Klein observes that such a lapse of care for the king's subjects is a detriment to the king's honor, which is further diminished when he relinquishes autonomy over the guests and allows them to drink as much as they want. In doing so, he undermines himself.<sup>37</sup> However, to classify the second banquet only as degrading would be too monolithic. Indeed, the second party may imply a generous spirit of the king to invite these common colonized people to a banquet at all.<sup>38</sup>

Further, in the world of the text, the colonized banqueters may not have been resentful of their drinking-only banquet, but may have been awestruck by the splendor of King Artaxerxes that the banquet represented. After all, another aspect of the second banquet is an enthralling description of the palace. As the depiction proceeds, the reader may identify with the wide-eyed colonized Susaites who, for the first time, may have been viewing the inspiring beauty of the royal palace,

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present for the seventh day of the drinking party, we may assume so since the "friends" present at the first banquet are still close enough to the king to be asked their opinion when Vashti refuses to appear on the seventh day of the second banquet.

34. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 217.

35. Klein, "Honor and Shame in Esther," 153–54.

36. Klein, "Honor and Shame in Esther," 154 n. 1.

37. Klein, "Honor and Shame in Esther," 154.

38. Day notes that commoners outside of Susa were not invited to any of the king's banquets so those living in Susa at least had some measure of greater imperial benefit than those outside the city (*Esther*, 24–25).

which was adorned with curtains of fine linen and cotton, held by cords of purple linen attached to gold and silver blocks on pillars of marble and other stones. Gold and silver couches were placed on a mosaic floor of emerald, mother-of-pearl, and marble. There were coverings of gauze, embroidered in various colors, with roses arranged around them. The cups were of gold and silver, and a miniature cup was displayed made of ruby, worth thirty thousand talents. There was abundant sweet wine, such as the king himself drank. (1:6–7)<sup>39</sup>

The palace was a sight to behold—full of the best fabrics, jewels, stones, flowers, wine, and people. With the king's fine palace on full exhibition, the reader can see that Artaxerxes was putting on his best display of wealth and economic power at this second party to engender the loyalty of his subjects.

Thus, Artaxerxes's second banquet also evidences the king's economic and ideological power. Artaxerxes had acquired enough economic resources, likely exacted by the first banquet's guests from the second banquet's guests or their people, to possess a majestic palace and the abundance of resources necessary to supply enjoyment for the feasts. The division that economic power creates is indicated in the fact that the colonized Susaites' banquet was only a six-day drinking bash, instead of the lavish six-month affair of food and drink provided for the elites. But even though the second feast of drink alone may have sarcastically poked at the redistributive purposes of some Persian feasts, it also would have substantiated a measure of generosity from Artaxerxes. By inviting the colonized people of various nations into his palace courtyard, the king wielded ideological power creating an imperial narrative of himself as a great benefactor, and one whose preeminence in culture was unmatched. But that prestige was obtained at a cost to the very people who marveled at the splendor and benefited from the generosity of the king.

Therefore, a reader would assume that the response of the Susaites to the party could be ambiguous. Though they could not help but stand in awe of the grandeur of the palace, perhaps they also realized its intemperance and how its excess was obtained at their expense.<sup>40</sup> Both Day and

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39. According to Day, nobles of Persian society would have been familiar with such surroundings and thus such great detail would not have been necessary. Instead, the depiction seems to come from the perspective of someone who was seeing the palace for the first time and was overcome by its magnificence (*Esther*, 26).

40. Fox writes, "The exclamatory listing creates a mass of images that overwhelm



Carol Bechtel comment that the episode represents both how the king and his palace embody the beauty of life that he generously shares with others, but also the king's overindulgence and ostentatious excess.<sup>41</sup> Readers could imagine the banquet guests gazing in astonishment at the wonder of the palace and being inspired to loyalty toward their king, but also wondering if this luxury had been built at the cost of their own sweat and blood or the lives of those they loved.

Alexandrian and Hasmonean Jewish readers in the first century BCE could make correlations between the economic and ideological power of Artaxerxes and their own situations. Like the Susaites who came to the king's banquet, some of the readers of LXX Esther may have also lived in the capital cities of Alexandria and Jerusalem. They would have seen the resources economic power could amass and perhaps even marveled at and benefited from the splendor of their own capital cities, but they also may have realized the personal cost of the excess of the powerful. They may have profited from the occasional generosity of their Ptolemaic and Hasmonean rulers, but they also may have realized the disparity between the portions of the leaders and the commoners.

Additionally, readers would have also been witness to the ideological presentations of superiority that Ptolemaic and Hasmonean rulers created. Specifically, for Jews in Hasmonean Judea who lived in or visited Jerusalem, like the description of Artaxerxes's palace, the temple may have served to remind the people of God's support of Hasmonean rule in that God partnered with the Maccabean revolt so that the temple was rededicated in 164 BCE after being desecrated by the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes IV.<sup>42</sup> So like the guests of Artaxerxes's parties, the responses

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the sensory imagination and suggest both a sybaritic delight in opulence and an awareness of its excess" (*Character and Ideology*, 17).

41. Day, *Esther*, 28–29; and Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 2002), 21.

42. Day posits possible overtones of the Jerusalem temple and of international trade present in the palace's portrayal: "Two of the terms in verse 6 are frequently used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, particularly in the priestly tradition, to refer to the fine fabrics used in temple hangings (*tēkēlet*, 'violet hangings'; *'argāmān*, 'purple'). These terms, along with 'fine linen' (*būš*), are also used, particularly in the prophets, to refer to textiles acquired in commercial transactions from other places in the ancient Near East. Both of these aspects together function in particular ways. They provide a sense of how cosmopolitan Ahasuerus's [Artaxerxes's] kingdom is ... [and] bring home to them quite clearly the loss of the temple, reminding them that they are living in a place



of Judean Jewish readers to Hasmonean ideological power may also have been ambivalent. Though God was presented as on the side of the Hasmoneans, those living under their power may have wondered if God was also on the side of those who suffered at the hands of the very same rulers.

#### THE PRESENTATION OF ARTAXERXES'S MASCULINITY IN THE FIRST TWO BANQUETS OF CHAPTER 1

With all ostensible, awe-inspiring, and life-taking networks of power (military, political, economic, and ideological) consolidated around and identified with the king, Artaxerxes is the picture of hegemonic masculinity on earth.<sup>43</sup> Connell and Williams describe how conquering foreign lands and exercising imperial power constitute the central element of male domination and *virtus*.<sup>44</sup> Artaxerxes's presentation shows him performing masculinity through the conquering of nations, ruling over them from the center of power, exacting resources and using them to display and consolidate his power, and holding all of humanity under his thumb by creating a metanarrative of generosity and supremacy. Without ever hearing Artaxerxes speak a word, the reader concludes that he exemplifies hegemonic masculinity through the evidence of his imperial power. There is no other entity on earth—man, woman, Persian, or non-Persian—who is more powerful than he.

But, additionally, like Clines's sketch of biblical masculinities and Conway's depiction of Greco-Roman masculinities, readers could conceive how Artaxerxes demonstrates other traits by which masculinity was performed: skill in warfare, intelligence, generosity, beauty, and womanlessness.<sup>45</sup> First, though not directly stated, Artaxerxes was the head of a kingdom that must have been skilled in warfare in order to have conquered and maintained such immense territory. He also demonstrates

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where the glories of the temple are replaced instead by the glories of the state" (*Esther*, 27). Day's lack of direct biblical references make her connection to the temple unconvincing in an author-centered scenario, but her exposition on the fond remembrances associated with temple echoes being eclipsed by state glory has a similar emphasis to the ambivalence highlighted in this study. Focusing her reading on diasporic audiences in the Persian or early Hellenistic era, Day expresses how the readers would have been both in awe of the palace description, but also saddened by it.

43. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 17–18.

44. Connell, *Masculinities*, 185; Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 135.

45. E.g., Clines, "David the Man," among others. Conway, *Behold the Man*, 21–34.

astuteness in his choice to share in his abundance with both his governing and retainer classes as well as the diverse citizens of Susa through the banquets—a sign of his generosity as well. Next, Artaxerxes's palace, perhaps as an extension of his very self, epitomizes beauty in its grandeur. Finally, no women were present at either of these lavish displays of power. The reader learns in 1:9 that women were only invited to a gender-segregated drinking party with Queen Vashti. Their exclusion portrays their submission to the ultimate male power, Artaxerxes.

But, even though some have argued that womanlessness is a trait of biblical manhood, others have posited that connectedness to women is an important aspect of biblical masculinities.<sup>46</sup> Despite the fact that no women are present at the first two banquets of Artaxerxes, Day discovers that perhaps some measure of femininity is present in the description of the palace by observing that the items included in the description represent a domestic perspective, the decor and the dinnerware, rather than the architecture or engineering.<sup>47</sup> Biblical scholarship has often utilized the assumption that women are associated with private/domestic spheres and men are connected to public space, though some situations allow for those boundaries to be transgressed.<sup>48</sup> However, Hancock, through her study of Esther as compared to Persian and Hellenistic royal counselors and wise women, has argued that such a dichotomy of feminine/private versus masculine/public is too simplistic, since women could function effectively as public figures.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, in a similar vein, even though the description of the palace is domestic in nature, its majesty and beauty function to bolster the authority of Artaxerxes. In this case the feminine functions in service of strength and, thus, masculinity. Within the description of his palace, Artaxerxes's masculinity is ambivalent—it is domestic and feminine, yet its connectedness to the feminine serves a masculine purpose.

Further, while Artaxerxes does seem to possess some of the traits of biblical and Greco-Roman masculinity described by Clines and Conway, there are others that the king does not embody. Artaxerxes does not appear

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46. For womanlessness, see Clines, "David the Man," among others; Stone, "Masculinity Studies"; George, "Masculinity and its Regimentation in Deuteronomy." For connectedness, see Goldingay, "Hosea 1–3, Genesis 1–4"; Olson, "Untying the Knot."

47. Day, *Esther*, 26.

48. See Hancock, *Esther and the Politics of Negotiation*, 38–47 for a summary of these views.

49. Hancock, *Esther and the Politics of Negotiation*, 83–121.

to avoid lust, luxury, avarice, and excess. A six-month banquet held in a courtyard adorned with fine linens, precious jewels, and cups that are worth thirty thousand talents is not exactly the picture of frugality. Nor is commanding unrestricted drinking pleasure a portrait of the restraint necessary in performances of Greco-Roman masculinity, though it does express mastery of great resources.

So while the ruler of the known world in LXX Esther is the bearer of hegemonic masculinity by essence of his position and seemingly limitless power, he still has flaws. He is no doubt the most powerful man on earth, but space is created for the negotiation of his masculinity.

#### VASHTI'S NEGOTIATION THROUGH AN ACT OF DEFIANCE (1:9–12A)

Following the description of Artaxerxes and his two lavish parties, Vashti, the queen, is introduced. Vashti throws her own party for women, defies a command of the king, and then is banished from the king's presence. This section provides a literary examination of Vashti's role and actions, along with considerations of the gendered imperial negotiation depicted by Vashti. I argue that Vashti's refusal is a negotiation of defiance that breaks the surface of consent to masculine imperial power.

#### VASHTI'S PARTY (1:9)

While the king was enjoying drinking with his guests, Vashti also gave a drinking party for the women (1:9).<sup>50</sup> In comparison to the elaborate details provided for Artaxerxes's banquets—who all the guests were, how

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50. "Vashti" is an English transliteration of the queen's name in the Masoretic Text of Esther, וַשְׁתִּי. However, in LXX Esther her name is Ἀστυ. Scholars have sought to make sense of Vashti's name by trying to connect it to Persian sources or even linguistically link it to the Persian king Xerxes I's wife, Amestris, but no consensus has emerged to identify her name historically. Thus, unlike Ahasuerus/Xerxes/Artaxerxes, scholars have not found the need to give her different names to link her to a historical figure, since they find it is likely that she is a fictional creation. For the purpose of this study, rather than transliterating the queen's name from LXX Esther, Astin, I choose to continue using the transliteration of the Masoretic Text to refer to the queen in ch. 1 since neither the name Vashti or Astin has historical implications, but Vashti is the name more commonly known to English readers. For examples of attempts to connect Vashti to names of queens in Persian sources, see Robert L. Hubbard, "Vashti, Amestris, and Esther 1,9," *ZAW* 119 (2007): 259–71; Ran Zadok, "Notes on Esther,"

long it lasted, the decor, what and how they drank—relatively scant details are available for Vashti's party.<sup>51</sup> The only information given about the party is who was invited, "the women" (ταῖς γυναιξίν), and its location, "in the palace where King Artaxerxes was" (ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις ὅπου ὁ βασιλεὺς Ἀρταξέρξης) (1:9).

Until 1:9 the reader may have assumed that the king's banquets were of mixed company, since it is not specified that the "people of various nations who lived in the city" (1:5) were only men.<sup>52</sup> Day suggests the reader may even wonder if women were present at both the king's banquet and the queen's party. She writes, "In other words, are the women recipients of gender discrimination, not invited to the king's party, or are they given special treatment, invited both to the king's party and to the queen's party just for them?"<sup>53</sup> But while Day's insinuation of women being present at Artaxerxes's banquets is curious, most interpreters, with whom I agree, understand the queen's party as providing a separate drinking party for women.<sup>54</sup> Persians did have mixed meals and banquets, and Esther herself dines with men later in the book (5:1–5; 7:1). But since the queen is summoned to the king's party later (1:11), the reader may assume she is not present at the king's first two parties, which are painted as drunken pleasure fests (1:8). Thus we may assume a separation of respectable women from the men in their debauchery.<sup>55</sup> The separation narratively functions

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ZAW 98 (1986): 109–10; and Henry Snyder Gehmen, "Notes on the Persian Words in Esther," *JBL* 43 (1924): 322.

51. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 19; Day, *Esther*, 31.

52. Day refers to the Hebrew term אָדָם ("people") in MT Esth 1:5 as inclusive of people of both genders (*Esther*, 31).

53. Day argues that the story is ambiguous and there is no reason to assume women's absence at the king's drinking party. "As women also tend to look with interest upon other women's beauty (otherwise modern women's magazines would have no reason to sport photos of beautiful models on their covers month after month), female party guests could certainly be expected to be among Vashti's admirers (1:11)" (*Esther*, 32).

54. E.g., Berlin, *Esther*, 11–12; Moore, *Esther*, 13; Levenson, *Esther*, 46; and Bechtel, *Esther*, 23.

55. While Persian women did dine with men as mentioned, Berlin demonstrates from the writings of Herodotus and Plutarch that wives and ladies of nobility did not attend men's drinking parties in order to avoid voyeurism and vulgar behavior. Only concubines were present with the men at their drinking parties (*Esther*, 11–12). Thus, Bechtel suggests we may assume that unrespectable women (or men) were party favors for the king's immoral shindig (*Esther*, 23).

to highlight the licentiousness of the king's party in its male-only excess, as well as Vashti's gendered negotiation in the upcoming verses.<sup>56</sup>

Vashti's segregated drinking party for the women is held in the very palace where King Artaxerxes was located. The king's drinking party was being held in the courtyard of the royal palace, and apparently Vashti's party was not too far away. Rabbinic commentary suggests that instead of having her feast in the women's quarters, Vashti had an immoral purpose in having her party in the palace: to have members of the opposite sex available for gratification of her party guests or to bring the women into the king's bedroom to discuss the intimate details of their relationship.<sup>57</sup> However, no immoral intent is evident in the narrative. Vashti is simply having her own party, which appears to be sanctioned, since it is under the king's roof and thus happening under his authority.

Nevertheless, since Vashti's party is located in the palace, she and her guests are in close proximity to the king and his power. Beal observes that the narratively constructed space of Artaxerxes's power in 1:1–8 is presented in concentric circles. "The king and his officials are located in the palace as the centermost ring, and the king himself, vacuous though he may be, is in the center of that center. In the second ring is Susa, and in the third ring are all the provinces 'from India to Ethiopia.'"<sup>58</sup> Though in the first eight verses women are not mentioned as a part of those concentric circles of power, for Vashti to have her women's banquet in the palace of the king places her near the innermost circle, but not actually in it. She and the women are not outside the centermost ring because they are in the king's palace, but they are also not in the inner circle of power because the queen is the subject who has thrown the women's party.<sup>59</sup> The king had been the subject of every verb in 1:1–8 (giving banquets, displaying his riches, commanding his stewards), but in 1:9 Vashti becomes the acting subject by

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56. Levenson, *Esther*, 46–47; Moore, *Esther*, 13.

57. For the idea of sexual gratifications, see Berlin (*Esther*, 13), who quotes this from R. Abba bar Kahana in b. Meg 12a citing Eliezer Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary*, BJS 291 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 1:251. This rabbinic passage is also discussed in Samuel T. Lachs, "Sexual Imagery in Three Rabbinic Passages," *JSJ* 23 (1992): 246–47. For the view that it was for the discussion of intimate details, see Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 20, 127. Beal cites this example from Targum Sheni. He also refers to other rabbinic traditions that portrayed Vashti in a degrading fashion, as is often the case in rabbinic treatments of non-Jewish women.

58. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 18.

59. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 19–20, 24.

giving this banquet for the women. Becoming the subject of a verb signals Vashti's agency in the episode, even though the action associated with her in 1:9–22 is still presented from the perspective of Artaxerxes.<sup>60</sup>

Consequently, Vashti's location in the entire episode is liminal and ambivalent.<sup>61</sup> She is a part of Artaxerxes's world of concentric circles of power, but she exists in a liminal space between the centermost ring and the second ring of Susa. Vashti is both an object in a narrative dominated by Artaxerxes's perspective, and a subject, an agent, who can throw her own party. As a liminal woman she has access and agency that other women, who are perhaps not even included in the book's concentric circles of power, do not have. She has the freedom to be a subject as long as her agency does not threaten the boundaries of the masculine imperial order, but the access of her liminality also provides opportunity for subversion of that order.

#### ARTAXERXES'S COMMAND OF EXHIBITION (1:10–11)

The stage for the upcoming confrontation is set on the seventh day (presumably the seventh and final day of the king's drinking party for all the people of Susa), "when the king was in good humor" (ἡδέως γενόμενος ὁ βασιλεύς, 1:10a). MT Esther describes the king's state on this seventh day, literally, "as the heart of the king was good with wine" (בטוב לב־המלך בייין, MT Esth 1:10a), thus implying that the king was drunk.<sup>62</sup> Though it is not explicitly stated in LXX Esther, we may assume that since the king is in "good humor" on the seventh day of a drinking party, drunkenness, impaired judgment, and irrational behavior are implied in LXX Esther as well.<sup>63</sup> Artaxerxes's loss of self-mastery, crucial for hegemonic masculinity,

60. For Vashti as agent, see Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 19. Day, *Esther*, 29, maintains it is still presented from the perspective of Artaxerxes.

61. As is discussed subsequently, Beal observes the liminality of the eunuchs in ch. 1 and makes the case that their liminal status allows them to challenge the social order ("Esther," 9–10). Beal also sees the importance in boundaries throughout the book (palace gates, city gates, territorial borders) and those occupying those thresholds including Mordecai (*Book of Hiding*, 18, 51–54, 69–74). However, Beal never refers to Vashti as also existing in a liminal state.

62. Day, *Esther*, 32; Berlin, *Esther*, 13.

63. For impaired judgment, see Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 349. For irrational behavior, see White Crawford, "Esther," 881.

may also foreshadow that the negotiation of his masculine imperial power is soon to come.<sup>64</sup>

In his intoxicated state, the king tells seven eunuchs, listed by name, “to escort the queen to him in order to proclaim her as queen and to place the diadem on her head, and to have her display her beauty to all the governors and the people of various nations, for she was indeed a beautiful woman” (1:11).<sup>65</sup>

The Persian names of the seven eunuchs seem inconsequential to the storyline, and may have been included to add historical veracity or local color to the narrative.<sup>66</sup> That there are seven of them could indicate a

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64. Conway, *Behold the Man*, 21–34.

65. Levenson comments that an analogous situation to an inebriated king occurs in Dan 5 when a drunken King Belshazzar orders that the treasures of the Jerusalem temple be brought out for display during a feast the king throws for a thousand of his lords. The king, his lords, and their wives even saturate themselves further by drinking from the holy vessels (Dan 5:1–4). Belshazzar uses a grand feast as an opportunity to flaunt his power and wealth by showing off the expensive war plunder ostentatiously. When Belshazzar turns the Jerusalem temple furnishings into objects of his own honor and defiles them by drinking from them, a sacred boundary is crossed as the holy is profaned. Similarly, Artaxerxes wants to use his own palace furnishings to show off his wealth (of which a cup worth thirty thousand talents is mentioned as the prime object of luxury from which the king drank) and when he asks Vashti to come and be on display he desires to turn a (perhaps) honorable queen into a concubine, though he is unsuccessful and the queen is punished for *his* indiscretion. On the other hand, Belshazzar does cross a boundary and because of it a hand appears and writes on a wall to predict his and the Babylonians’ downfall (Dan 5:5–28). So, when Vashti refuses Artaxerxes’s dishonorable request for her to cross a boundary, perhaps she saves him and the Persian Empire to see another day; and maybe her “punishment” of banishment is actually a reward for her appropriateness in that she will never have to appear before the king again. See Levenson, *Esther*, 47.

66. The first of the seven eunuchs listed in 1:10 is *Ἀμάν* (“Haman”). Another character has been introduced in 12:6 by the same name, though his lineage and an obscure marker of his ethnicity/nationality are also included, *Ἀμαδαθου Βουγαῖος* (“son of Hammedatha, a Bougean”). The same Haman who is the Bougean also later becomes the second-in-command in Persia (3:1), and the reader later learns that he has a wife, Zosara (5:10, 14; 6:13) and ten sons (9:10). Therefore, it seems highly unlikely that a Haman, a Persian premier with a wife and children, would be the same Haman referred to here as a eunuch who was sent on an errand by the king.

Another of the seven eunuchs listed is named *θάρρα* (“Tharra”), which is also the name of one of the two plotting eunuchs in 12:1. However, when reading synchronically the same character cannot be insinuated as present here because when Mordecai told the king about the eunuch’s assassination plot, the eunuchs are led away to execu-



particular mode of conveying a message related to a ritual of some sort of which the significance has been lost to us, according to Fox.<sup>67</sup> But more importantly, for seven eunuchs to convey a message on the seventh day would connote “the impressive finale of the king’s display (the ultimate act of hospitable exchange), and that it will conclusively establish his [Artaxerxes’s] secure resting-place on the throne.”<sup>68</sup> Certainly seven eunuchs would not have been necessary to escort one woman, but the seven of them symbolize the extraordinary power that could be exerted by the imperial regime when the king makes a command.<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, Beal observes that the eunuchs function as mediators between the men and the women in this and subsequent episodes in Esther. Since eunuchs have an ambiguous sexual and social identity (socially they do participate in familial structures), they exist in the space between the sexes guaranteeing a separation between male and female. In doing so they function to define the social order, but the role of defining also carries the potential for subversion of the social order.<sup>70</sup> Just as Vashti is both subject and object and has liminal status in the power structures, the eunuchs are both male and female and also exist in a liminal state. Like Vashti, the eunuchs’ liminality gives them a certain measure of access and agency, but also opportunity for subversion, as may be indicated by the assassination plots of the eunuchs (12:1–3; 2:21–23). In Vashti’s story, however, the eunuchs operate in service of the system and so do not challenge its order. They do not assert subject status but carry out the will of the ultimate subject—the king. Interestingly, however, even though the eunuchs are not successful in their task of bringing Vashti before the king,

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tion (12:3). By the time of the parties, the plotting eunuch named *θappa* is dead. In MT Esther, none of the seven eunuchs listed in 1:10 shares an exact name with the plotting eunuchs of 2:21–23, however two of the names are quite similar, *בגתא* (“Bigtha,” 1:10) and *בגתן* (“Bigthan,” 2:21). For the idea of local color, see White Crawford, *Esther*, 882; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 19–20.

67. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 20.

68. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 21.

69. LaCocque writes, “Vashti represents the first movement of resistance to the oppressive imperial regime. The text emphasizes this from the outset by stating she was fetched from her banquet for women by seven eunuchs (1:10). Seven! Why not the whole army?” (*Esther Regina*, 50).

70. Beal, “Esther,” 9–10; *Book of Hiding*, 18, 51–53. Duran also notes the liminal location of the eunuchs but does not expound upon the opportunities of subversion inherent in liminal space (“Who Wants to Marry a Persian King?,” 77).



it is Vashti who is blamed because she, another liminal character, does assert her subjectivity in opposition to the system (discussed later).

The exact task the eunuchs are given is to bring Vashti to the king so that she may be proclaimed as queen and the diadem placed upon her head (1:11). If the king's banquets are wedding feasts, for the queen to be ushered before the people and proclaimed as queen would make sense as the climactic finale.<sup>71</sup> But as mentioned previously, if present, the wedding theme is minimized. Moreover, Vashti could not have been proclaimed queen at this occasion because she already had the title of queen in her first narrative appearance in 1:9.<sup>72</sup> Just as a wedding feast may have been the insignificant backdrop for the chief purpose of Artaxerxes's first banquet—displaying the riches and splendor of his kingdom—so too the wedding and crowning of a queen in 1:11 appear to be a facade for the focal purpose of Vashti's showcase, which was “to display her beauty to all ... for she was indeed a beautiful woman” (1:11). Wedding or no wedding, the exhibition of his glorious possessions is Artaxerxes's purpose for these banquets.

Vashti, the feminine object, is to be displayed for her beauty. But her beauty is not complete without her diadem, a symbol of her royalty.<sup>73</sup> Day contends that for Vashti to appear specifically with this emblem of her position would augment her natural beauty with the appearance of political power. “Vashti's power is an aphrodisiac: it makes her appear more physically attractive.”<sup>74</sup> Vashti is an agent, the subject who gives a banquet, but also an object displayed for her beauty; however, her objectified beauty is derived from her power that is imposed by the king. Then it would seem that if Vashti appeared more beautiful because of her diadem and the power it represented, then she should be ten times as gorgeous once she asserts her agency even more fully through her refusal and willful absence.

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71. Levenson, *Esther*, 46.

72. Kahana, *Esther*, 38.

73. Greek *διάδημα* (“diadem”) is not one of the typical words used to represent the royal crown in the Septuagint (*βασιλείον*, *νεζερ*, and *στέφανος* are more common). According to Kahana, here it seems to indicate a decorative ribbon worn around the crown as a sign of distinction (*Esther*, 37–38). However, Kahana does note that in some of its appearances in the Apocrypha portion of the Septuagint, *διάδημα* does refer to the royal crown itself (e.g., 1 Macc 11:13).

74. Day, *Esther*, 33.

But that is not the case, as her power and beauty are only acceptable if they conform to the masculine political order that she transgresses.

Artaxerxes's primary purpose, then, is for Vashti to serve as another demonstration of his masculine imperial power. Just as physical objects were exhibited to bolster the king's authority in his feasts, this parade of Vashti is another spectacle to showcase Artaxerxes's power. Beal writes,

Just as he was displaying his honor and unequaled greatness in verse 4, so now he intends to display his queen's good looks. Given this close parallel, it is reasonable to understand the king's request here as another public display aimed at consolidating and securing power, this time by securing his subject position as the true patriarch and absolute center of it all. For the king, the narrative parallel suggests, maintenance of male subject power in the royal household economy is integrally related to the maintenance of power in the larger order of things.<sup>75</sup>

Artaxerxes performs hegemonic masculinity in executing the structures and processes of a vast empire (1:1–8). Likewise in his display of Vashti, Artaxerxes also hopes to perform his masculinity by using his wife, the queen, the most powerful woman in Persia, to represent his dominion over all women. The sexual and the political are inextricably intertwined in this display of power to enhance hegemonic masculinity.

#### VASHTI'S NEGOTIATION OF DEFIANCE (1:12A)

But, in a narrative twist, just as Artaxerxes's masculine imperial power is about to be flaunted in its fullness, Vashti refuses to play her part in the performance of power. She defies a royal order and does not agree to be displayed and ogled by the king's boozed party guests (1:12a).

Why Vashti chooses to refuse the king's command has been the subject of much interpretive speculation. Some interpretations have viewed Vashti as less than admirable and thus have dismissed her refusal as a selfish whim or hypothesized that she was simply too busy with her own party to be bothered.<sup>76</sup> Rabbinic commentaries that paint Vashti negatively also offer a variety of conjecture including that the command for her

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<sup>75</sup> Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 20.

<sup>76</sup> For the view that it was a selfish whim, see Paton, *Esther*, 150. That she was too busy is suggested as a possibility in Beal, "Esther," 10.

to be flaunted was punishment for stripping Israelite maidens and making them work on the Sabbath, that her objectification was justified because she was a wicked queen and the granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar, and that she was a leprous, disfigured woman afraid to appear in public.<sup>77</sup>

But other interpreters have assumed Vashti and her motives are respectable in terms of custom and personal integrity. Josephus comments that Persian wives should not be looked upon by strangers, so Vashti was acting out of respect for the custom (*A.J.* 11.191). Berlin states that both the Greek stories and midrashic explanations suggest that if Vashti appears she would be reducing herself to the position of a concubine, who were the only women who would be present at an all-male party. Vashti was in a no-win situation—forced to choose violating Persian custom or disobeying the command of the king.<sup>78</sup> Others have also appeared to comment on Vashti's response out of personal integrity. Whether or not she was summoned to appear in only her royal crown as the rabbis suggest, perhaps some measure of dignity is at play in Vashti's refusal.<sup>79</sup> For example, Bechtel writes, "Given the nature of the festivities to which she has been summoned, however, it seems unnecessary to speculate beyond the obvious. (Would *you* go?)." <sup>80</sup> Indeed, without direct statement from the text to guide us, both custom and integrity (if it is not too presumptuous to impose a twenty-first-century value of personal dignity onto Vashti) may both be operative in understanding Vashti's motives.

Additionally, transgression of boundaries may be active in Vashti's refusal whether her motives were respectable or not. But instead of being forced to violate an honor-shame edifice boundary of masculine/public versus feminine/private space as Klein proposes, it is her liminal position in the narrative construction of circles of power that is at stake.<sup>81</sup> Vashti

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77. For all of these options, see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 164, citing b. Meg. 12b.

78. Berlin, *Esther*, 15.

79. Esther Rab. 3:13 suggests she was to appear only in her royal crown. Cited in Berlin, *Esther*, 14–15; Moore, *Esther*, 13; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 164–65, among others.

80. Bechtel, *Esther*, 24.

81. Klein describes how the king has forced Vashti, a woman, to leave the private/domestic realm and enter into forbidden masculine public space. Vashti is then compelled to choose between violating her honor and defying her husband ("Honor and Shame in Esther," 155). But the boundaries of private and public as they pertain to gender are far more complex than Klein portrays them to be. See Hancock, *Esther and the Politics of Negotiation*, 37–62.

exists in a liminal space between the king's innermost circle of power and those just outside the circle. The queen does not belong in either space—not in the king's coveted power circle, nor with others on the outside of consolidated power. She is both an object in a narrative presented from Artaxerxes's perspective and a subject in being able to throw her own party. She is granted subjectivity as long as it does not defy the masculine imperial order. So if she complies with the king's command to be paraded at the party, she may retain the measure of agency that her liminality affords, but she does so at the expense of being objectified. In submission, she could choose to perform an act of deference in complying with the king's command in order to maintain her position, but the societal or personal cost may be great to violate custom or integrity. On the other hand, if she refuses, she asserts her subjectivity as an agent who can act according to her own will and oppose the very fabric of the masculine imperial order, but in doing so she may forfeit the access and agency her liminal position provides.

Unlike Mordecai's choice in Addition A to act in deference and report the eunuchs' assassination plot to the king (12:1–3), Vashti chooses to act as an agent and oppose the power structure itself like the eunuchs who plot to assassinate Artaxerxes. When Vashti refuses to comply with a command of a king, whose will is normally considered inviolable, her opposition functions as insubordination to power—and that her insubordination was to the very king himself means her refusal defies the imperial order that he represents. Thus, in comparison to Scott's discourse of power negotiation, Vashti's refusal is the negotiation of defiance. "Any public refusal, in the teeth of power, to produce words, gestures, and other signs of normative compliance is typically construed—and typically intended—as an act of defiance."<sup>82</sup>

When reading LXX Esther, this is the first open act of public refusal and resistance to the rulers of the Persian Empire.<sup>83</sup> Though Mordecai had dreamed of power reversal (11:5–11) and the eunuchs quietly plotted (12:1–3) in Addition A, Vashti gives public voice to thoughts of subversion. Scott describes how first open declarations often take the form of a public breaking of an established ritual of subordination—a highly visible gesture that breaks the surface of consent and encourages a con-

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82. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 203.

83. LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 50.

flagration of defiance.<sup>84</sup> Vashti's refusal to appear in a public setting at the command of the king is a highly visible act of insubordination committed before banquet guests who represented Susa as well as the various nations that comprised the far-stretching kingdom.<sup>85</sup> The wide kingdom represented by the eclectic participation at the party means that this first act of public insubordination has the potential of widespread acknowledgement and political electricity as the performance of hegemonic domination is undermined and the king's power is weakened everywhere.

In Scott's framework of the complex means of negotiation, he differentiates between various forms of acts of defiance. Some defiant acts are merely practical failures to comply with the normative order of domination while others are declared refusals to comply. For example, it is the difference between "bumping into someone and openly pushing that person."<sup>86</sup> Since Vashti "refused to obey him [Artaxerxes]" (1:11), her act seems more than a mere practical insubordination; her act seems to be "openly pushing" rather than a mere bump.

Further, Scott distinguishes declared refusals into two designations—"raw" and "cooked" declarations. Raw declarations are relatively unstructured and unplanned acts of vengeance that come from groups that are atomized by the process of domination. A result of atomization is that the only means of communication among subordinates is the explosive realm of public defiance, so a hidden transcript cannot fully develop. With little congruence among subordinates through the hidden transcript, the likelihood of raw acts of defiance having a widespread effect is significantly diminished.<sup>87</sup>

On the other hand, cooked declarations are more likely to resonate with a wider constituency and are not as easily suppressed, since these declarations are more nuanced, elaborate, and emerge when subordinates are less atomized and have the freedom to cultivate a richer shared hidden transcript.<sup>88</sup> Since Vashti's party for the women was separate from

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84. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 215.

85. As mentioned previously, because the king's friends present at the first banquet are still close enough to the king to be asked their opinion when Vashti refuses to appear on the seventh day of the second banquet, we may assume guests described as present at both of Artaxerxes's banquets likely witness Vashti's refusal.

86. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 203–4.

87. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 216–17.

88. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 216.

the men, she likely had plenty of freedom to develop a hidden transcript among the women who were present. This party, with its lack of details, is an ideal setting for off-stage interaction through which a hidden transcript could emerge.<sup>89</sup>

But, one may wonder, if 1:9 is the first appearance of Vashti and she is simply having a party that the king sanctions, would a need for a hidden transcript even exist? Though Vashti's summons and refusal (1:10–12a) are the only account the reader has of any interaction between her and the king, one could imagine other instances of his subjection of her, perhaps even other exhibitions of her over the course of the 180-day banquet for the elite.<sup>90</sup> Vashti may have been paraded and objectified many times before this instance, resulting in the growth of a hidden transcript among her and her most trusted community. The reader may even hear murmurs of that hidden transcript being spoken quietly at Queen Vashti's party for the women. "What would they do if we opposed them? That would be too much to bear! But maybe it is time for us to speak out regardless."

Early readers could have easily perceived the hidden transcripts that existed beneath the surface of Artaxerxes's presentation. Readers in first-century Ptolemaic Egypt and Hasmonean Judea would have been familiar with positive and negative aspects of rule that compelled subordinates privately to confirm and contest their public transcripts of subordination. They likely both feared and loathed their rulers who swiftly acted against those who opposed them, as seen when Euergetes persecuted the Alexandrian Jews because they had supported his rival Philometor (145 BCE), and when Alexander Jannaeus crucified his Pharisaic opponents after slaughtering their wives and children before their eyes (99 BCE).<sup>91</sup> But in addition to fearing their rulers, they also appreciated the benefits of Ptolemaic and Hasmonean rule. The hidden transcripts that were present among these readers likely encouraged subordination both out of fear

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89. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 4.

90. Though some might say this is her wedding feast and so she would not have had time for such subjection, as Kahana states, she is already referred to as Queen Vashti so she has been a part of the royal court at least for some time previous (*Esther*, 38). But also, if the feasts are wedding feasts, then they began at the beginning of the six-month long first feast, and so Vashti has at least been queen for six months.

91. For Philometor, see Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 37–39; Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 121. For Alexander Jannaeus, see Josephus, *A.J.* 13.379–83; Eshel, *Dead Sea Scrolls and the Hasmonean State*, 117–31.

and for the benefits it afforded, as well as contesting the authority of their sometimes malicious rulers. These hidden transcripts of subordinate readers toward their dominant rulers could have easily funded an imagination of the interactions between the subordinates and dominants in LXX Esther. It would have been easy for readers to assume that the complicated backstory that accompanied Vashti's choice to defy the king was not all that dissimilar to their own circumstances.

For Vashti to have made a cooked declaration meant that she had a fully developed hidden transcript that represented a complex relationship with power—one that both confirmed and contested Artaxerxes and the structures of Persian power he represented. So in the moment of her refusal described in 1:12, a breach is created in the public transcript through which the hidden transcript could emerge. As Scott writes, acts of defiance occur in “the moment when the dissent of the hidden transcript crosses the threshold to open resistance.”<sup>92</sup>

Cooked declarations, like Vashti's, are more likely to spark a widespread spirit of resistance if the act of defiance represents similar hidden transcripts that have developed among a large number of subordinates. In this case, the very structures of domination that have subordinated a great number people in similar ways function to delimit the maximum reach of an act of defiance. The more people who find convergence in the hidden transcript represented by the defiant act, the more electric its effect.<sup>93</sup> “It is only when this hidden transcript is openly declared that subordinates can fully recognize the full extent to which their claims, their dreams, their anger is shared by other subordinates with whom they have not been in direct contact.”<sup>94</sup> If the crack in the hegemonic appearance of domination resonates enough with the most far-reaching hidden transcripts, then subordinates begin to question not only whether or not they should also defy their rulers, but also the very legitimacy of the rule under which they exist.<sup>95</sup>

Because Vashti's defiance occurs at a party that includes guests from around the kingdom, news of what she has done could easily be taken back to all the widespread regions of the party guests. Even more so, when the king's officials decide to broadcast her act in a statewide decree (discussed

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92. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 207.

93. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 221–24.

94. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 223.

95. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 215.

subsequently), sufficient means exist for Vashti's negotiation of defiance to be advertised broadly. But whether or not the hidden transcript her refusal represents finds enough resonance to start an "avalanche of defiance" remains to be determined.<sup>96</sup> Regardless, far from a mere whim or refusal to be bothered, one could read Vashti to have acted in a way that was fully cooked and representative of a rich hidden transcript that had developed among her most trusted and gendered community, and that also may have resonated with the hidden transcript of the kingdom at-large.

### CONCLUSION

Artaxerxes is presented in chapter 1 of LXX Esther as the man who represents overlapping networks of imperial power displayed to his retainer classes and subjects through lavish banquets. In his power, he is the model of hegemonic masculinity for the Persian world. But for hegemonic masculine power to exist, there must be consent. When Vashti defies an order of the king, she creates a rupture in the surface of consent as a hidden transcript appears through a breach in the public transcript. Readers of LXX Esther in Hasmonean Judea and Ptolemaic Alexandria may have been able to make various connections with awe-inspiring, yet dissent-provoking displays of imperial power.

The next chapter examines the requisite effects of Vashti's negotiation of defiance and considers the ways in which the king acts to stabilize the masculine imperial order.

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96. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 220.



## Attempts at Stabilizing the Masculine Imperial Order: Responses to Vashti's Defiance (1:12b–2:20)

Most of the time, defence of the patriarchal order does not require an explicit masculinity politics. Given that the heterosexual men socially selected for hegemonic masculinity run the corporations and the state, the routine maintenance of these institutions will normally do the job.... Yet crisis tendencies in the gender order do emerge, and in response to them hegemonic masculinity is likely to be thematized and a “gun lobby” type of politics arises.

—R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*

In response to Vashti's defiance of an imperial order, the king becomes furious (1:12b), consults his advisors (1:13–15), and issues two decrees—one ordering the subjugation of all women (1:16–22), and one initiating a process/contest by which a new queen could be found (2:1–20). In this chapter I argue that each of these actions following Vashti's defiance are performed as imperial responses to the threat that Vashti's defiance has posed to both the hegemonic and complicit masculinities upon which the Persian Empire of the text is built. I contend that the two decrees function as attempts to stabilize complicit and hegemonic masculinities, but also result in opportunities for multivalent imperial negotiation.

### ARTAXERXES'S IMMEDIATE REACTION (1:12B)

The text reports Artaxerxes's initial response: “This offended the king and he became furious” (1:12b). Both Fox and Laniak have argued that the king became offended because Vashti's act was a challenge to his honor. Fox posits that it is the king's honor on display in the banquets, not only

through his extravagant wealth but also in his ability to obtain obedience.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, Laniak states that beyond honor found in descriptions of the king's kingdom, palace, and guests, "the simplest test of a superior's status is the obedience of the vassal, client, wife, child, or slave who is under authority."<sup>2</sup> Vashti's denial, then, makes the king an object of ridicule and contempt.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Laniak asserts that the king's anger is justified since Vashti places her own honor of keeping to gender-customs before the honor of her king whose command should have taken precedence over all else.<sup>4</sup>

Since honor is gendered, the king's masculinity is also challenged by Vashti's refusal. Having active dominion and being able to exercise it is key to the performance of masculinity, consequently Vashti's refusal to comply with the king's authority is a direct attack on Artaxerxes's masculinity.<sup>5</sup> When she does not come to be displayed before the male party guests in her womanly beauty, in effect she turns Artaxerxes into the "beautiful" woman whose feminine weakness, rather than masculine power, is on display.

Moreover, in his anger, Artaxerxes may also be feminized by not acting to control his emotions in masculine fashion.<sup>6</sup> But Aristotle denotes that the nature of anger is complicated and justified anger may be acceptable, especially on the part of a ruler who is disrespected by his subjects. However, a ruler's anger against an insubordinate subject is only acceptable if the ruler is treating the subject well.<sup>7</sup> How Artaxerxes has treated Vashti

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1. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 172.

2. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 40.

3. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 40.

4. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 51–56.

5. Conway, *Behold the Man*, 22; Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 141; Goldingay, "Hosea 1–3, Genesis 1–4," 39.

6. Conway, *Behold the Man*, 26–29. Conway explores the complicated nature of anger as a feminizing trait and how that affected characterizations of the angry gods.

7. Aristotle writes, "One sort of insolence is to rob people of the honour due to them; you certainly slight them thus; for it is the unimportant, for good or evil, that has no honour paid to it. So Achilles says in anger: 'He hath taken my prize for himself and hath done me dishonour, and, Like an alien honoured by none,' meaning that this is why he is angry. A man expects to be specially respected by his inferiors in birth, in capacity, in goodness, and generally in anything in which he is much their superior: as where money is concerned a wealthy man looks for respect from a poor man; where speaking is concerned, the man with a turn for oratory looks for respect from one who

is not explicit but is implied as negative in his usage of her as an object to be displayed, though he has given her some measure of freedom and agency—she *does* get to have her own parties. From his perspective, then, perhaps Artaxerxes finds he has treated her well and his anger is justified. But from Vashti's perspective, perhaps a completely positive assessment of his treatment of her would be unfounded.

But beyond the justification of his anger, the king's personal honor has undoubtedly been offended and his character possibly feminized when his authority is not respected. Thus, the structures of imperial power, which are inextricably linked to masculine honor, are challenged even more so. As Scott describes,

The reproduction of hegemonic appearances ... is vital to the exercise of domination.... The open refusal to comply with a hegemonic performance, is, then, a particularly dangerous form of insubordination. In fact, the term *insubordination* is quite appropriate here because any particular refusal to comply is not merely a tiny breach in a symbolic wall; it necessarily calls into question all other acts that this form of subordination entails.... A single act of successful public insubordination, however, pierces the smooth surface of apparent consent, which itself is a visible reminder of underlying power relations.<sup>8</sup>

Vashti's defiance means the entire edifice upon which the king's status, position, and power are founded is under attack. In the world of the king, his personal honor and masculinity are conjoined with political structures. So while the king takes offense to his personal honor and feminization, additionally, and more importantly, the entire Persian gendered political order of domination and rule is also offended.<sup>9</sup>

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cannot speak; the ruler demands the respect of the ruled, and the man who thinks he ought to be a ruler demands the respect of the man whom he thinks he ought to be ruling. Hence it has been said, 'Great is the wrath of kings, whose father is Zeus almighty, and, Yea, but his rancor abideth long afterward also,' their great resentment being due to their great superiority. Then again a man looks for respect from those who he thinks owe him good treatment, and these are the people whom he has treated or is treating well, or means or has meant to treat well, either himself, or through his friends, or through others at his request" (*Rhet*, 2.1378b–1379a [Roberts]).

8. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 204–5.

9. Several scholars have also commented on the presentation of the Persian Empire in the first chapter of Esther as being rooted in masculine power and that Vashti's act put the entire gendered political order at risk. E.g., Beal, *Book of Hiding*,

The entire legitimacy of the king's honor, masculinity, and rule has been challenged. So rather than his emotion being an illogical result of his drunkenness that causes him to act in haste, the king's anger, likely justified from his perspective, seems to have a sobering effect as he takes seriously Vashti's act of defiance and seeks advice on how best to proceed.<sup>10</sup>

#### CONSULTATION OF THE KING'S ADVISORS (1:13–22)

##### SOBER COUNSEL SOUGHT (1:13–15)

After being offended and becoming furious, the king seeks the counsel of his φίλοις ("friends," 1:13). The reader may assume these are the same friends mentioned initially in the listing of guests at the king's first banquet—people who would have been in the king's innermost circle. The king tells them, "This is how Vashti has answered me. Give therefore your ruling and judgment on this matter" (1:13). So then, "Arkesaeus, Sarsathaeus, and Malesar, the governors of the Persians and Medes who were close to the king and sat in the first seats nearest the king, came to him" (1:14, my translation).<sup>11</sup> Like the names of the seven eunuchs sent to retrieve Vashti, the names of these friends are likely also included to add local color, not for any reason of consequence to the story.<sup>12</sup>

The great and powerful king chooses not to act swiftly and brashly in dealing with this insubordination, but instead he tells his closest advi-

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20–22; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 20–24; and Wyler, "Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen," 117. However, none of them have connected this crack in the power edifice with Scott's discourse on the exertion of domination and its negotiation.

10. The king's drunkenness is a possibility stated by Day, *Esther*, 33.

11. The NRSV translation reads, "Arkesaeus, Sarsathaeus, and Malesear, then the governors of the Persians and Medes who were closest to the king—Arkesaeus, Sarsathaeus, and Malesear, who sat beside him in the chief seats—came to him" (1:14). The repetition of their names does not occur in the Septuagint and the duplication in the English translation complicates the readability of the sentence.

12. White Crawford, *Esther*, 881; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 19–20. While LXX Esther includes only three names, plus Muchaeus as a fourth, MT Esther includes names for seven officials/chancellors of Persia and Media. These seven names may mirror the names of the seven eunuchs (Berlin, *Esther*, 16) or may demonstrate accuracy in representing Persian politics (Moore, *Esther*, xli). While the change from seven to three/four officials may have some significance in a text-critical discussion, the alteration is not substantial to the focus of this study.

sors what has happened and asks them for their opinion on what should be done. Though choosing consultation over immediate action may cause some readers to question the king's autonomous rule, it may also indicate wisdom in choosing counsel over reaction. Day notes the potential wisdom in Artaxerxes's desire for counsel, but because he consistently defers to others throughout the book she finds it leaves the impression that the king is foolish and not an independent ruler.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Fox writes that Artaxerxes (Xerxes) "proceeds carefully, assembling his advisers and inquiring in carefully measured terms what should be done ... which, in this context, means proper established procedure."<sup>14</sup> But, Fox also finds that Artaxerxes's continual compliance with what others tell him to do means he is lazy and does not like to think for himself.<sup>15</sup> What is missing in both Fox's and Day's analyses of the king's utilization of advisors, however, is consideration that the king's motives might be different in each instance of allowing others to influence his decisions throughout the course of the book, since the stability of his masculine imperial power is in flux over the course of the story. Given the gravity and magnitude of Vashti's act of defiance with its implications for imperial politics, taking a moment soberly to seek wise counsel seems a smart move for the king at this critical juncture.<sup>16</sup> As for other occurrences of the king's seeming malleability, those are considered in their context.

The text reports that these three foremost governors "told him [the king] what must be done to Queen Vashti for not obeying the order that the king had sent her by the eunuchs" (1:15). However, the content of how they advised the king to deal with the matter is not included.

#### A RECOMMENDATION FOR SUBMISSION (1:16–22)

After the governors offer some mysterious advice to the king, Muchaeus voices a recommendation and speaks to the king and the governors telling

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13. Day, *Esther*, 34.

14. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 20.

15. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 173–75.

16. Yoram Hazony writes that the king's move to seek the counsel of his assembled nobles is a masterstroke: "At once he turns his personal shame into an issue of state, with himself at the helm of an entire empire that has been insulted, inviting those assembled to join him in doing justice and reestablishing the honor of the king." Yoram Hazony, *The Dawn: Political Teachings in the Book of Esther* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 1995), 18.

them exactly what should be done.<sup>17</sup> Though Muchaeus and his role are not identified in the text, the consonantal and phonetic similarities of his name, Μοθχαιος, to μυχός (“inmost part”) may indicate that Muchaeus is also a part of the king’s closest inner circle.<sup>18</sup>

Muchaeus’s speech and the king’s reaction are as follows.

Then Muchaeus said to the king and the governors, “Queen Vashti has insulted not only the king but also all the king’s governors and officials” (for he had reported to them what the queen had said and how she had defied the king). “And just as she defied King Artaxerxes, so now the other ladies who are wives of the Persian and Median governors, on hearing what she has said to the king, will likewise dare to insult their husbands. If therefore it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree, inscribed in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians so that it may not be altered, that the queen may no longer come into his presence; but let the king give her royal rank to a woman better than she. Let whatever law the king enacts be proclaimed in his kingdom, and thus all women will give honor to their husbands, rich and poor alike.” This speech pleased the king and the governors, and the king did as Muchaeus had recommended. The king sent the decree into all his kingdom, to every province in its own language, so that in every house respect would be shown to every husband. (1:16–22)

Muchaeus worries that Vashti’s defiance will influence other noble wives, who were likely present at Vashti’s party and witnessed (or perhaps even were accomplices in) Vashti’s refusal. He worries that these women will follow in her footsteps by insulting their own husbands, who are the very listeners Muchaeus is addressing (1:18). Thus, he states that the only proper response is to issue a royal decree to banish Vashti and outlaw similar acts of insubordination among women in their homes (1:19–20). The decree Muchaeus proposes is the first of five decrees that will be issued by Artaxerxes in LXX Esther.<sup>19</sup>

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17. In MT Esther the speaker, named Memucan, is listed among the named seven officials (MT Esth 1:14, 16). In AT Esth 1:16 the advisor of the king who speaks is named Βουγαῖος, which influences a confusion of Haman with Memucan (Muchaeus) because Haman is identified as βουγαῖος (“a Bougean”) in AT Esth 3:1 as well as LXX Esther (12:6; 3:1) (Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 198 n. 7).

18. See GELS, s.v. “μυχός.”

19. The first two decrees are in a pair as the first here in 1:22 commands that women respect their husbands and the second is the decree for officials to take beau-

Some scholars have found Muchaeus's speech to be an overreaction to Vashti's disobedience. For example, Fox considers the speech "a hysterical interpretation of a trivial incident," and Berlin says Muchaeus "exaggerates the effect of Vashti's refusal."<sup>20</sup> Others find humor or satire present in the overblown response Muchaeus suggests as he turns strained personal interaction into a statewide decree to regulate the entire social order.<sup>21</sup>

But while the need for such a far-reaching response of the state to one woman's act of defiance may be seen as humorous to some, it is also quite serious when the dimensions of a gendered imperial world are considered.<sup>22</sup> Duran comments on the humor in the story assumed by some interpreters. She writes, "It seems to me to say a great deal about the cultural rootedness of interpretation that any portrayal of men as actively asserting their supremacy is read as humorous. Vashti is a woman with everything to lose by her rebellion.... She risks and loses a great deal by rejecting the authority he claims over her body and her person. What—to ask a stereotypically feminist question—is so damned funny? Surely it is a threat to husbands everywhere when the queen refuses her husband's command."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, like Duran's argument, imperial negotiation performed by an act of defiance has potential for political electricity that the state would need to squash as soon as possible to eliminate the threat of large-scale insurrection. Rather than humor, this story utilizes irony, which may be found in the fact that when Vashti is banished she gets exactly what she wants in never having to come into the presence of the king again.<sup>24</sup> Irony is also present in that the officials broadcast Vashti's

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tiful, virgin girls back to Susa so that they can be considered as Vashti's replacement (2:1–4 does not use the word decree, but it appears as a decree in 2:8). The king's third decree, or command, divides the first pair from the second and is that obedience should be done to Haman (3:2). The second pair of decrees contains the fourth decree which commands the annihilation of the Jews (3:10, full wording of the decree is in Addition B, 13:1–7), and the fifth allows the Jews to defend themselves (8:10, full wording of the decree is in Addition E, 16:1–24).

20. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 168. Berlin, *Esther*, 18.

21. Levenson, *Esther*, 52; and Yehuda T. Radday, "Esther with Humour," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. by Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 297–98.

22. Beal writes, "The response to Vashti's refusal ... is presented as at once both dead serious and comically overblown" ("Esther," 11).

23. Duran, "Who Wants to Marry a Persian King?," 74.

24. Levenson, *Esther*, 52; Linda Day, "Vashti Interpreted: Nineteenth and Twen-

insubordination to the kingdom even though they are worried that news of the event would encourage further rebelliousness.<sup>25</sup> So far from Vashti's refusal being "a phony crisis of little consequence" to which Muchaeus proposes a humorous overreaction, the necessity of a kingdom-wide response to a public act of defiance is no laughing matter.<sup>26</sup> As Duran writes, "Vashti's is a social and political rebellion with the requisite effects of one."<sup>27</sup>

In the same vein, others have suggested that in issuing a statewide decree to force women's subordination Muchaeus and the king have confused the personal with the political, and that the king's personal problems have been inflated into a political crisis.<sup>28</sup> But, several scholars such as Koller, Laniak, and LaCocque have astutely observed that the personal is the political in the book of Esther.<sup>29</sup> When Vashti challenges the king's honor and masculinity, she offends the entire gendered political order of domination and rule. Artaxerxes rules by performing hegemonic masculinity that is exerted through the processes of imperial expansion and domination, so when his masculinity is contested the entire political empire is in jeopardy.

Furthermore, in Greek philosophical thinking, the household was a microcosm of the state.<sup>30</sup> As the basic unit of the state, management of the household needed to reflect and reinforce the management of the state.

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tieth Century Literary Representations of the Book of Esther," *Proceedings, Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Society* 23 (2003): 3.

25. Fox writes, "His [Muchaeus's] advice creates the very hullabaloo he wanted to squelch and prevents Vashti from doing precisely what she refused to do" (*Character and Ideology*, 168).

26. Quotation from Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 25.

27. Duran, "Who Wants to Marry a Persian King?," 74.

28. Levenson, *Esther*, 52; Bechtel, *Esther*, 24.

29. Just as Mordecai and Esther personify the Jews, so too does Artaxerxes personify the Persian Empire and Vashti personifies women. Koller, *Esther in Ancient Thought*, 57–58; Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 158, 174–77; LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 20–22.

30. Warren Carter draws upon a tradition emanating from Aristotle's *Politics* to make this argument. Warren Carter, *Households and Discipleship: A Study of Matthew 19–20*, JSNTSup 103 (Sheffield, JSOT Press, 1994), see, e.g., 72. Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald also refer to this notion when they write, "the old Roman idea that as goes the household, so goes the state." Carolyn Osiek and Margaret Y. MacDonald, *A Woman's Place: House Churches in Earliest Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 4.



Male-dominated states need male-dominated households. So in Vashti's refusal to obey a command of her husband, she threatens the gendered domination of the king's own household and thus the domination of the state as well. If male domination of the state is threatened, then the rule of other men in their own houses is also jeopardized.<sup>31</sup>

These connections between the personal and the political, as well as the rule of the household and the rule of the state, assert constructions of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is the configuration of masculinity that maintains patriarchy's ultimate authority in a social system. Only highly visible figures model hegemonic masculinity and set the normative standard for the system.<sup>32</sup> But, even though very few model hegemonic masculinity, many who perform complicit masculinities reap the benefits of power that hegemonic masculinity provides even though they do not have to be on the frontlines of fighting the battle for hegemonic masculinity themselves.<sup>33</sup> In the case of the social system of the Persian Empire as presented in Esther, the model and normative standard of hegemonic masculinity is Artaxerxes. So when the masculinity of Artaxerxes, the representative of hegemonic masculinity who is on the frontline, is challenged in his household, then those practicing complicit masculinities are threatened as well. Though Vashti's act only resulted in the personal feminizing of one man, when that one man is the representative of hegemonic masculinity within an entire social system, all men and their complicit masculine power are affected. So Muchaeus suggests that the king should use political power to control the personal households of every man. Again, the political is inextricably intertwined with the personal.

Further, in the efforts to sustain the complicit benefits of hegemonic masculinity and uphold the order of the kingdom described here, Vashti and every woman affected by the royal decree find themselves in the colonial contact zone. The decree ordering women to respect their husbands will reach every woman in the kingdom, rich and poor (1:20), both those among the colonizers and those among the colonized in provinces who speak different languages (1:22). The subjugation ordered secures these women as objectified tools in the effort to sustain the gendered political

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31. Beal writes, "Here in 1:20, Memucan [Muchaeus] is effectively linking the honor of every man, as lord of his own little household patriarchy, to the honor of the king, which Vashti's refusal has threatened" ("Esther," 15).

32. Connell, *Masculinities*, 77–78.

33. Connell, *Masculinities*, 79–80.

order upon which the Persian kingdom is built. Undoubtedly, these women exist in different spheres of the social order, some women having power over other women, and some having opportunities to gain power by negotiation, access, and agency. Indeed, Vashti's banishment and the empty throne it leaves creates an opportunity for some of these women, even though possibly subjugated in their households, to move closer to the center of power in the royal beauty contest (discussed subsequently). But for many, the decree is merely a reinscription of the gendered social order in which they already exist; it is another reminder of women's position as subordinated objects in the Persian world.

So Muchaeus says if his proposal pleases the king, "let him issue a royal decree in accordance with the laws of the Medes and Persians so that it may not be altered" (1:19). The concept of irrevocable Persian laws is nowhere attested in Persian or Greek sources, but may be a plot device to introduce a concept important later in the story, or to add dramatic intensity to the decree.<sup>34</sup>

LaCocque perceptively posits that even more than a narrative device, the immutability of Persian laws in Esther serves as a symbol of the absolutism which an empire like the Persian kingdom represents, or perhaps better stated, desires. "Absolutism finds a fitting symbol in the book of Esther in the alleged immutability of the royal edicts, for absolutism consists in reducing all difference to conformity, in order to achieve a totalitarian (but nefarious) unity of the social body."<sup>35</sup> Even though the king is not able to conform to the normative standard of masculinity by having authority over his own wife, in establishing a law that banishes her and makes all households conform to patriarchal subjugation, the decree attempts to produce and reassert as normative an appearance of the very totalitarian unity that Vashti's defiance had shattered.

Additionally, when her insubordination is combined with her identity as a woman, Vashti represents a double threat of difference to the Persian kingdom. As evidenced by the perhaps thousands of men present at the first two banquets of chapter 1, the Persian kingdom is made of men, ruled by men, and exists for the benefit of men. By her mere presence as a woman near the circle of male power, especially as a liminal woman who chooses

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34. For lack of attestation, see Berlin, *Esther*, 18. For its use as a plot device, see White Crawford, "Esther," 883. For its use to heighten dramatic intensity, see Levenson, *Esther*, 52.

35. LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 35.

to assert subjectivity, she represents a difference to the masculine imperial order—and in an imperial system that desires absolutism and issues irrevocable laws, difference is a threat. So not only should Vashti's title be taken, but her very presence of difference is intolerable and she must be banished. Beal writes of Vashti's banishment as making her *abject*, "Vashti has become, quite literally, *abject*: she can be neither subject nor object within the social and symbolic order, and therefore she must be repulsed, pushed outside its boundaries."<sup>36</sup> In the world of the text, Vashti is an agent, one that cannot exist as a subject in proximity to the center of Persian power, but who refuses to be an object. Vashti represents a difference that must be removed to eliminate any threat to the masculine imperial order.

Moreover, difference is also detected in the various provinces to which the decree is sent—colonies that have their own languages and, we may assume, also their own customs involving gender relations and hierarchy. But since difference cannot be tolerated because it may lead to acts of insurrection like Vashti's, all the colonized people across the kingdom are decreed to conform to the standard of household patriarchy in order to protect the Persian imperial, male-dominated, power structures. In the decree, ideological power is wielded through a political means as people across the kingdom are forced to conform to the customs Persian officials have constructed. But, when the very difference between the Persians and those they have colonized is narrowed through forced conformity resulting in hybridization, then the difference upon which colonizer-superiority is built begins to disappear, allowing room for the colonized to claim agency.<sup>37</sup> When power is asserted, resistance is inevitable.<sup>38</sup> So though Muchaeus's recommendation and the king's decree were not an overreaction given the potential for wide-spread impact of Vashti's act of defiance, it is possible that the very wielding of ideological and political power that they chose as a means of imperial response created opportunities for further negotiation and agency, as is seen in the description of the beauty contest below.

#### A NEW QUEEN (2:1–20)

The decree to banish Vashti and subjugate women is not the only direct imperial response to Vashti's act of defiance. Chapter 2 of LXX Esther

36. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 24.

37. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 121–74.

38. Jack M. Barbalet, "Power and Resistance," *BJS* 36 (1985): 531–48.

continues the imperial response to the potential political electricity of Vashti's rebellion and aims to restabilize the king's hegemonic masculinity through an intricate process of finding a new queen, presumably one who will be compliant and not subversive to the masculine imperial order.

#### A QUEEN-FINDING SCHEME (2:1–4, 12–14)

At the beginning of chapter 2, Vashti has vanished from both the king's court and his mind. "After these things, the king's anger abated, and he no longer was concerned about Vashti or remembered what he had said and how he had condemned her" (2:1). The anger that provided a sobering perspective on the seriousness of Vashti's threat to his masculine imperial power has been assuaged, but the consequences of her actions still remain.<sup>39</sup> In her deposal, Vashti left an empty space that was important to the kingdom—that of the king's loyal queen. As the model of hegemonic masculinity in this narrative Persian world, perhaps the king would be more masculine in his womanlessness without Vashti or a queen as Clines suggests.<sup>40</sup> But likely the king also needed a feminine and submissive woman next to him to portray publically his masculine sexuality and authority, as he had hoped Vashti would have functioned when he summoned her to appear before his party guests. The king's servants recognize this and suggest a plan.

Then the king's servants said, "Let beautiful and virtuous girls be sought out for the king. The king shall appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, and they shall select beautiful young virgins to be brought to the harem in Susa, the capital. Let them be entrusted to the king's eunuch who is in charge of the women, and let ointments and whatever else they

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39. MT Esther states: "After these things when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her" (MT Esth 2:1). Rather than LXX Esther's "no longer ... remembered," MT Esther makes this a moment of remembrance. For this reason, several have commented on Vashti's refusal to be banished and forgotten (e.g., Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 26), and Clines has even insinuated that the king had second thoughts that could not be materialized because of the irrevocability of the Persian law (*Esther Scroll*, 11). But LXX Esther seems to focus more on the king finally being able to adequately forget about what transpired and move forward.

40. E.g., Clines, "David the Man," among others.

need be given to them. And the woman who pleases the king shall be queen instead of Vashti.” This pleased the king, and he did so. (2:2–4)

The servants suggest an ingathering of women facilitated by the king and his officers to locate the future queen. The qualifications given for which women should be gathered are age, appearance, and sexuality—the women should be young, pleasing to the male gaze, and sexually pure.<sup>41</sup> Officials in each province of the kingdom will decide which women meet these quite subjective standards. These officials will determine how old is “young,” what constitutes “beauty,” and they will somehow determine (perhaps by the word of the women or, more likely, her male guardian) whether or not the woman is a virgin.

This suggestion pleases the king and so he issues his second decree in the book (2:4b).<sup>42</sup> The king’s second decree has common elements to the first but makes some distinct reversals. The first decree concerns women’s submission to men, as does the second. But while the first decree commands women to submit to patriarchy in their households as a microcosm of the state, the second decree orders the women to be subordinate to the very men who control state power—the retainer classes of officials and, ultimately, the king himself. Additionally, in the first decree the king

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41. Day, *Esther*, 39–40. Both Levenson and Koller note an intertextual echo of the search for a young virgin to keep an aging King David warm (1 Kgs 1:1–4) first proposed by R. Judah ha-Nasi, as quoted in b. Meg. 12b. The rabbi notes that the difference between the two is that parents offered their daughters to David, but parents hid their daughters to avoid them being taken to Xerxes. Levenson comments that this contrast of parental intention is an overreading, writing, “The more likely reason for the difference is that *everything* in Ahasuerus’s realm is absurdly bureaucratized; even the king’s sex life requires commissioners. The personal has become political, and both have become laughable” (*Esther*, 54). But as previously stated, because the performance of masculinity is inherent to imperial power, the personal is always political for the king and the personal and political are inextricably intertwined in LXX Esther. Koller also comments on the parallel between David and the Persian king (*Esther in Ancient Thought*, 62–64). Even though Koller has made the point that there may be an anti-Davidic streak in Esther with Mordecai and Esther having Saulide genealogy, David was still a cultural hero. So in contrast to David in his old age, the same tactic must be employed for Artaxerxes in his prime. Additionally, the contest becomes an opportunity for a power-grab in Esther, the same way the seeking of virgin companions for David was an angling for power by Nathan and Bathsheba.

42. Though the word decree is not included in 2:4, it appears in 2:8 which reads, “So, when the decree of the king was proclaimed.”

consulted his closest governors who create a plan to send a decree *out* from the capital into the kingdom—political power extended from the center to the margins. But in the second decree the king's servants, not his governors, devise a strategy for women to be brought *in* to the capital from the farthest provinces of the kingdom—consolidating submission in the center.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, if the first decree was concerned largely with the threat to complicit masculinities extending from the elite classes to the margins, the second is more focused on the danger Vashti had posed to hegemonic masculinity in the center.

Seeking to stabilize hegemonic masculinity, the second decree initiates a beauty contest of sorts, with women to be gathered from all corners of the Persian world and brought to the king. Even though it is a beauty contest, this gathering of beautiful women is only the first stage in the process of finding a queen. In the first stage, there will not be only one "winner," but rather innumerable women will be identified as meeting the standards and thus be dragged/taken/escorted to Susa.<sup>44</sup>

Told from the servants', king's, and officials' male perspectives, the text does not provide the perspective of the women involved in this process. If read from the women's perspective, would the women have wanted to be chosen and go to the palace? Was it the dream of a lifetime? Or did they have a sense of civic duty and desire to "play their part" in the kingdom?<sup>45</sup> Did the women who weren't chosen take offense or become angry? Or did the women fear being chosen, taken away from their families, being kidnapped and forced into sexual service?<sup>46</sup> The text is silent on the matter. But one thing the reader can identify is that the women were objects in this selection of suitability. In this story, males have the right to determine

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43. That the servants suggest this decree instead of the governors may indicate that their interests are more aligned with the king himself than their own complicit masculinities, but may also serve as a clue to who is involved in creating this scheme—possibly Mordecai himself, as I discuss later.

44. Fox writes, "Though the selection of Esther is commonly thought of as a beauty contest, beauty is the stated criterion only for the first stage of the process, and that stage is not a contest—the desirable girls are simply 'gathered'" (*Character and Ideology*, 27).

45. This seems to be the implication Sidnie White Crawford makes in her defense that Esther is not selling out by participating in the competition for the queenship. Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther," in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and S. H. Ringe, exp. ed. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 1992), 126.

46. Duran suggests kidnapping ("Who Wants to Marry a Persian King?" 77).

women's value to the kingdom. The women have no say in the matter.<sup>47</sup> They will go if asked/forced and they will stay with their families if passed over—their fate is determined by others. But as is the case with objects that are subordinate, ambivalence exists and thus all of the feelings listed above may have existed simultaneously.

Readers who were subordinates in Ptolemaic Egypt and Hasmonean Judea may have been able to identify with complex sentiments toward those in power over them. For example, though Jews served in the Ptolemaic army it is unknown whether they were forced to enroll in service or if they had a choice.<sup>48</sup> In the role these Jewish Ptolemaic soldiers played in the power structures of the Ptolemaic kingdom, they may have experienced various emotions simultaneously. They may have felt pride and loyalty to the Ptolemaic kingdom and even benefited from their military service by being awarded land grants, but they also may have resented and feared the violence they had to perpetrate and experience on behalf of their Ptolemaic rulers.<sup>49</sup>

Likewise, complex responses existed when Antiochus IV forced subordination from Jews in Judea by decreeing that they must give up their religious customs and defile the sacred (1 Macc 1:41–50). Some adhered to the Seleucid king's command (1 Macc 2:23), while others refused. Among those who refused were the women who were executed with their circumcised infants hung around their necks (1 Macc 1:60–61), and the woman who chose torture and martyrdom for herself and her seven sons rather than partaking of swine's flesh (2 Macc 7:1–42).

The other gap left by the text's construction of the contest is how the male husbands/owners/guardians and families of these women responded to their being taken. For some, perhaps a beautiful daughter was a guarantee of a respectable son-in-law that might help their position and status. For others, a female ward or slave may have served the family by taking care of younger children or aiding in domestic or agricultural work. The families of these women who were taken were impacted economically. When the king exerts political power and demands that families relinquish

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47. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 33.

48. Gruen, *Diaspora*, 68.

49. Modrzejewski, *Jews of Egypt*, 83. However, Modrzejewski remarks that the land did not provide the soldier with any personal power since they functioned more as vassals. Over time, though, the land did become transferable and inheritable and the fortunes of the immigrants progressed.



people who function as key resources in the familial economic infrastructure, the families are forced to sacrifice elements of their sustainability in service of a king who already ostentatiously has demonstrated that he has more economic resources than any other person in Persia. Moreover, what of the families that resisted? Was the violence of military power exerted to force cooperation? The possibly violent and assuredly economic personal impact of the structures of imperialism underlie this kingdom-wide snatching of women.

In a massive kingdom with an astounding 127 provinces (1:1), being able to seize innumerable economic and human resources (women) from possibly each family in those 127 provinces (2:3) demonstrates the centrifugal power of an empire to draw resources from the margins to the center. In 1:3–4 the king drew his elite subjects from all corners of the Persian world to display the full extent of his consolidated power in Susa. But the king's ostentatious exhibition of power was thwarted by his not-so-loyal queen and thus his consolidated masculine imperial power was dispersed by her defiance. So now the king again summons people to be gathered/exiled to the center in Susa, but this time it is not for the display of consolidated power. By acquiring vast and significant economic resources from his subjects, the king gathers these people-resources to Susa to reconsolidate his jeopardized power.

But as the king aims to restabilize his power through the multi-“winner” beauty contest, one could even imagine the possibility of the contest serving as an opportunity for subordinate negotiation to gain access to power. With the decree subjugating women and forcing conformity to the Persian-enforced familial order (1:19–22), the gap of difference begins to narrow as colonized people see themselves more like the Persian rulers (i.e. “my wife obeys me just like the Persian rulers’ wives obey them,” or maybe, “my wife doesn’t obey me just like the king’s wife didn’t obey him, maybe we’re not all that different after all”). As difference narrowed, then the beauty contest further diminishes geographical distance as women are to be brought from all the provinces to be turned into Persian queen-candidates, or perhaps, Persian concubines. Thus, an opportunity is born to gain proximity and access to the center of Persian power. Perhaps some of the male subordinates even recognized this opportunity for proximity to result in an increase in power and so devised strategies to have their daughters/sisters/wives/slaves/orphans chosen so they could maneuver to gain the king’s favor. Thus, like the women affected by the first decree, women again are described in the contact zone of masculine



imperial power; they are tools used by their men to gain position. But, doubtless, the women themselves could use the contest as an opportunity to gain access, power, and agency for themselves as well.

Considering that the contest may have been an opportunity for political negotiation, when reading the king's servants' plan in LXX Esther one cannot help but remember that Mordecai has already been identified twice as serving in the court of the king in Addition A (11:3, 12:5). Was Mordecai one of the servants that suggested this queen-finding scheme? Did he create a plan to get Esther into the palace so that he could gain proximity, power, and agency? The text is silent on this matter, and indeed the king had numerous servants, among whom Mordecai was only one, but the text does leave a gap that could be filled with a ruse of political negotiation on Mordecai's part. But negotiating intention from Mordecai, from others who may or may not have angled to have their women chosen, or even from the women themselves, was not necessary for the opportunity to gain agency to exist.

After the officials identify and take the women, they were brought back to Susa and handed over to the king's eunuch, Gai, to prepare the women to "please" the king in order that one might become queen instead of Vashti (2:12–14). Again, as was present in Vashti's story, a eunuch functions as an intermediary between the women and the men. The eunuch exists in the liminal space between the sexes, serves as a keeper-of-the-boundaries, and in this story the liminal eunuch does not attempt subversive transgression.

In the hands of Gai, the women are given ointments and whatever else they need (2:3), which the reader may assume to include food, water, shelter, clothing, and so on. But in this first mention of what the women need, ointments are included first, which demonstrates that the beauty and harem-preparation of these women is more important than even their basic needs for survival. The women are not brought to Susa to be rewarded and live luxuriously as those in power with ample food, drink, and glorious surroundings (as the first banquet of 1:3–8 portrayed men in power to live). Instead, they are brought to Susa to be shaped into a pleasing construction of queenly submission. These beautiful young virgins are even more "pleasing" through their beauty treatments by becoming just as beautiful to look at as Vashti was (1:11), but unlike Vashti they likely would not be privileged to live in luxury as she did. Perhaps in this way, through their indebtedness to such provision, these women would know their subordinate location and would be less likely to assert subjectivity. The women involved in the queen-finding process are presented only as

objects to be gazed upon, defined by, and traded through the hands of men and eunuchs. Thus, the new queen, who would be “instead of Vashti,” would be both like Vashti in beauty, but unlike Vashti in lack of agency. But Esther will prove that her Vashti-like beauty ensures the very proximity and access that she will negotiate to gain agency.

The process of the preparation for the queen-candidates is detailed in 2:12, “Now the period after which a girl was to go to the king was twelve months. During this time the days of beautification are completed—six months while they are anointing themselves with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women.” Though historical and literary connections can be made in attempting to understand the details of this process, the effect of the passage is not in the details, but its exaggeration that further supports a description of the Persians as a bodily overindulgent culture.<sup>50</sup> Like the 180-day banquet, a year-long preparation period over which the Persians have enough myrrh and ointments and spices for innumerable women to perhaps bathe in every day is another ostentatious display of wealth and power.<sup>51</sup> Just like the banquets’ focus on bodily indulgence of wine, in the women’s preparation there is a bodily indulgence of anointing.<sup>52</sup> So as the women are commanded to partake in this process, the display of Persian wealth and power is being inscribed on the women’s bodies.<sup>53</sup> As femininity and masculinity are socially constructed ideas rather than inherent biological traits, here the elite of Persian culture have constructed what ultimate femininity worthy of a queen looks like—an objectified woman whose skin has been

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50. Berlin writes, “Myrrh is used often in Song of Songs and is associated with love-making (see also Prov 7:17.) Anointing the body with oil, after bathing and before dressing is mentioned in the women’s preparations in Ezek 16:9, Ruth 3:3, and Jdt 10:3. Unlike those references, however, our chapter never mentions bathing or dressing.” (*Esther*, 27). Levenson mentions the overindulgent culture (*Esther*, 61).

51. Levenson and Berlin connect the exaggerated length of both of these events in their hyperbolic function (Levenson, *Esther*, 61; Berlin, *Esther*, 27). Berlin states that the emphasis here is on the quantity of fine products, not the preparations themselves (*Esther*, 27).

52. Day, *Esther*, 51.

53. Rather than Persian wealth and power being inscribed on women’s bodies, Beal specifically finds the law written on women’s bodies in this treatment because MT Esther says the treatments are done כִּדְת (“according to regulation, rule, or law”) in the same way Vashti’s banishment is considered כִּדְת in 1:15 (*Book of Hiding*, 36).

persistently penetrated with symbols of Persian power in preparation for being penetrated by the king.<sup>54</sup>

After a year spent being formed into the Persian ideal of femininity, the next step in the queen-finding scheme is not as elongated for the women.<sup>55</sup> “Then she goes in to the king; she is handed to the person appointed, and goes with him from the harem to the king’s palace. In the evening she enters and in the morning she departs to the second harem, where Gai the king’s eunuch is in charge of the women; and she does not go in to the king again unless she is summoned by name” (2:13–14). She is given the opportunity of one night to attempt to please the king in order to become queen instead of Vashti. While some have wondered what may have happened on this one night allotted to please the king (with Day even suggesting the king’s affection may have been won by getting to know the character of the woman), the sexual overtones as the woman “was to go to the king” are obvious.<sup>56</sup> The woman was engendered as a feminine object, to approach the king at night and perform a primary function of her gender

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54. Beal finds the process to be an engendering for a potential relation to the king (*Book of Hiding*, 36–37). Similarly, Duran writes, “According to this book, to be the king’s wife, and by extension to be any man’s wife, requires the rigorous shaping of one’s womanhood into the particular desired configuration” (“Who Wants to Marry a Persian King?,” 78).

55. Anne-Mareieke Wetter reads the year-long process the women undergo to be a *rite de passage* in which the girls are transformed not only in body but in their identity. Following ritual theory, Wetter finds that the women undergo the three stages of *rites de passage*: they are separated from their previous social setting, placed into a liminal space with their peers under the guardianship of a stranger to be subjected to a prolonged set of treatments, and emerge holding a new status of royal concubine. Wetter concludes that by the end of this ritual Esther becomes cutoff from her Jewish background, her previous social identity, but later returns to it through other rituals. Anne-Mareieke Wetter, “In Unexpected Places: Ritual and Religious Belonging in the Book of Esther,” *JSOT* 36 (2012): 322–27. But while Wetter reads MT Esther, Esther in LXX Esther remains connected to her Jewish heritage, as is emphasized in Mordecai’s commendation to her to fear God and keep his commandments immediately following her appointment as the king’s wife. The tension of her identity is held consistently in LXX Esther; she never emerges in an identity that is separated from her ethnoreligious commitments.

56. For speculation on what that one night contained, see, e.g., Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 35–36. Day, *Esther*, 54–55. Day also finds the timing involved in the selection process of LXX Esther to be longer than in MT or AT Esther since in LXX Esther she goes in the δειλῆς (“afternoon”) instead of בערב (“in the evening,” MT Esth 2:14) or ἑσπέρα (“evening,” AT Esth 2:14) and thus she gets to spend more time with the king

as a sexual object so that the king could reestablish his masculinity after Vashti had put it in jeopardy. While the text is silent on the exact details of what occurs between the women and the king, what happens at a sleepover between engendered persons is hardly a mystery.

To reach this night of opportunity, the women were exchanged between the eunuchs, under whose care they were prepared, and the man appointed to transfer them from the first harem to the palace. Then after their night with the king, they were again traded from the king to Gai, the chief eunuch, who then takes the women to the second harem where they wait, perhaps, to be called again (2:14b).<sup>57</sup> The women are objects passed between men and gender-liminal eunuchs with no choice but to go when led or called, and to do what the masculine hierarchy has constructed that they must do. But, Bechtel and Day propose that each woman's night with the king is the woman's opportunity for agency as she becomes a subject of the verb "to go to."<sup>58</sup> Indeed, at this point, the woman is an object, though with an opportunity for agency. Her momentary proximity and access to the king give her prospects of gaining a more permanent position in the concentric circles of power, but she must submit to being a feminine object and to male decision-making in order to benefit.

#### ONE CANDIDATE IN PARTICULAR: ESTHER (2:5–11, 15–20)

The description of the process involved to become queen instead of Vashti is interrupted by the introduction of Esther (2:5). Esther's description begins by detailing the background of Mordecai (for full analysis on Mordecai's description see ch. 2 of this study) who "had a foster child, the daughter of his father's brother, Aminadab, and her name was Esther" (2:7a).<sup>59</sup> More detail is included as the text continues, "When her parents

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(*Three Faces of a Queen*, 38, 42–43). On the sexual overtones, Berlin also suggests comparisons with 2 Sam 11:4 and Ruth 4:13 (*Esther*, 27).

57. Beal finds the extensive ritual of anointing alongside a ritualized passing of the women may portray the king as a sort of deity (however ridiculous) being worshiped in this passage ("Esther," 33; *Book of Hiding*, 37). Certainly sex was commonly a part of deity worship in the ancient world where kings were closely associated with the divine. Additionally, Wetter notes a possible parody to how an almighty God calls the divinely chosen Israel by name in Isa 43:1, versus how a relatively impotent king calls for a woman who arouses him ("In Unexpected Places," 324).

58. Bechtel, *Esther*, 33; Day, *Esther*, 48.

59. LXX Esther does not include the Hebrew name of Esther which MT Esth 2:7

died, he brought her up to womanhood as his own. The girl was beautiful in appearance" (2:7b).

LXX Esther differs in its description of Esther's relationship to Mordecai than in MT Esther. MT Esther 2:7 states, לַקַּחָהּ מִרְדֵּכָי לִבַּת ("Mordecai took her for himself, for a daughter"), while LXX Esth 2:7 reads, ἐπαίδευσεν αὐτὴν ἑαυτῷ εἰς γυναῖκα ("he raised her for himself into/as a woman/wife"). Several scholars comment that LXX Esther specifically indicates that Mordecai raised Esther to become his wife, though the NRSV translates the phrase "he brought her up to womanhood as his own."<sup>60</sup> An ancient Near Eastern practice of adoption-marriage, in which a man adopts a child with the intent of marrying her when she is old enough, has been considered as a solution to the multiple descriptors of Mordecai and Esther's relationship in the various Esther texts.<sup>61</sup> As Mordecai's adopted daughter and wife/soon-to-be wife, Esther would be subject to Mordecai's rule and be forced to give him honor per the king's first decree (1:20).<sup>62</sup> As Mordecai has a larger role in LXX Esther (especially in that his dream and its fulfillment frames the book), Esther's being subject to him as a current or future husband seems to fit the thematic thrust of the book. However, that does not mean Esther's own agency in LXX Esther is discounted. Like Vashti she will find ways to negotiate the powers in her life, though, unlike Vashti, Esther's negotiation will be less overt and more disguised.

But whether Esther is Mordecai's wife or his adopted/foster daughter, nothing changes in her position. Either way, Esther is still an object that

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states as הַדַּסָּה ("Hadassah"). Kahana proposes that the Hebrew name may have been a later addition to MT Esther (*Esther*, 83).

60. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 275; Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 36; Berlin, *Esther*, 26; Levenson, *Esther*, 58; Moore, *Additions*, 186. B. Meg. 13a says this is a play on לִבַּת ("for a daughter") and לְבֵית ("for a house"), which is an epithet for wife. Fox postulates that this change may have been made in LXX Esther to eliminate any possible impropriety of Mordecai taking an unmarried girl into his house, but that would also make Esther's relationship with the king adultery (*Character and Ideology*, 276). Perhaps the NRSV's translation tries to downplay the apparent adultery inherent in Esther being Mordecai's wife by translating γυναῖκα as "womanhood" instead of "wife."

61. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 276.

62. We may assume that because the officials were looking for virgins that Esther was likely his soon-to-be wife rather than already existing in a marriage with him. However, Miller argues there is no reason to exclude Esther as eligible for the beauty contest even though she may have already been married to Mordecai (*Three Versions of Esther*, 189–94).

belongs to Mordecai. As a wife or daughter, Mordecai can choose to give her over to the officials in the first stage of the beauty contest, perhaps lie about her virginity, he can tell her what to do, and he can use her as a way to climb the hierarchy of power.

In addition to gender, whether she is a wife or a daughter, Esther's ethnicity is also significant. Esther is a Jew because she is Mordecai's niece and Mordecai's Jewish ethnicity has been amply demonstrated. As a Jewish object, specifically a Jewish woman, presented with no agency (at least at this point), Jews under the Ptolemies and Hasmoneans, who also may have felt they had no or limited agency, could have found identification with Esther as a Jewish object. Frymer-Kensky has argued that biblical stories about women were "paradigms for individuals, groups, and nations who find themselves in such disadvantaged situations" and specifically biblical stories about women were metaphors for Israel, a nation that was subordinate, marginalized, and vulnerable.<sup>63</sup> Among the Ptolemaic Jews, though they may have had some measure of political agency in perhaps having their own administration, they were still subordinate objects of the Ptolemaic kingdom.<sup>64</sup> In Hasmonean Judea, though an Israelite nation had been restored to some extent, those funding its restoration through taxation, confiscation, military service, and other means were also vulnerable objects.<sup>65</sup> For both these groups an objectified Jewish woman who is conscripted into the service of imperial structures through her (forced?) participation in the beauty contest would resonate with their circumstances. These readers would have found it easy to cheer for Esther to find a mode of negotiating power, and maybe even hoped for her to have a Vashti-like moment.

The other characteristic emphasized in Esther's description is that she was "beautiful in appearance" (καλὸν τῷ εἶδει, 2:7). The adjective καλός ("beautiful") has been used two other times previously in the narrative, first to describe Vashti (1:11) and second to depict a characteristic of the girls sought out for the king (2:2). Describing Esther with this same word immediately links her with Vashti and the kind of girl the king's decree seeks. Therefore, beauty, as in the case of Vashti and the many "winners"

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63. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible: A New Interpretation of Their Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), xx–xxii, quotation on xx.

64. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 43; Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 55.

65. Gruen, "Jews and Greeks," 268.

of the beauty contest, is both a blessing and a curse. Beauty allows opportunity, but also can be the cause of great pain. Mordecai's beautiful object, Esther, will become an embodiment of that ambivalence of opportunity and pain.

As suspected when her beauty is mentioned, Esther is chosen for the contest and taken by Gai (2:8) with all the (unspecified) complex feelings, emotions, and personal impacts of imperial power that it would have meant. Just as Mordecai had been taken as a captive or exile from Jerusalem to Babylon by the power of King Nebuchadnezzar (2:6), so too Esther is also taken as a captive or exile from her home with Mordecai to the queen-candidate holding cell by the power of King Artaxerxes. But unlike Mordecai, Esther is doubly conscripted as an object, an article of transfer, already taken from two houses.<sup>66</sup> Esther was taken by Mordecai from her home of birth when her parents died, and now she also taken by Gai for the king's harem.

However, when Esther is taken by Gai she gains special favor from him, the result of which is that she receives ointments and portions of food first, and also is given a choice of seven maids who also receive special favor from Gai in the harem (2:9). Levenson comments, "This woman exerts a mysterious charm; things tend to go her way."<sup>67</sup> While things in the course of Esther's doubly objectified life have definitely not unilaterally gone her way, indeed somehow she has obtained special treatment that provides her with additional opportunity to obtain agency even in the midst of her subordinate position.

After learning that even a gender-liminal eunuch has subjectivity over Esther to decide what she should or should not be given based on his/her pleasure with her, Esther's object status is further reinforced by a parenthetical note that Mordecai has not relinquished his authority over her as well.<sup>68</sup> Mordecai commands her to not reveal her people or country (τὸ γένος αὐτῆς οὐδὲ τὴν πατρίδα, 2:10), a command that she follows.<sup>69</sup>

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66. Beal, "Esther," 30. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 36.

67. Levenson, *Esther*, 62.

68. For the observation that even a gender-liminal eunuch can control her, see Beal, "Esther," 30–31.

69. *GELS* defines γένος as "society of individuals with common beliefs and ancestry," and πατρίς as "one's place of origin" (*GELS*, s.v. "γένος"; s.v. "πατρίς"). Both of these words seem to indicate an emphasis on Esther's Jewish ancestry and thus her ethnic identity.



Why Mordecai finds it good strategy for Esther to not disclose Jewish ethnic identity is not made explicit. Certainly, the narrative has not revealed any anti-Jewish sentiments previously present in the Persian Empire since Mordecai, readily identified as a Jew, has been able to serve in a prominent position in the court of the king. Perhaps Mordecai wishes Esther's Jewish ethnicity to be hidden so that she is not associated with him, the only other person identified as a Jew in the narrative this far.<sup>70</sup> Maybe Mordecai did hatch the plan for the beauty contest, and he does not want the king or officials to know Esther belongs to him so they do not think he manipulated them. Or possibly Mordecai just does not want Esther to be identified with a servant in the court of the king since her presence might be construed as favoritism. Whatever the motivation, Mordecai's repeated directive (reiterated in 2:20) shows Esther's continued tension of living liminally between two households of authority—that of Mordecai and of Artaxerxes under Gai's guardianship.<sup>71</sup> Further, the secrecy of Esther's ethnicity also functions as a narrative device of irony in which the readers know something of which certain characters in the story are unaware.<sup>72</sup>

Before leaving the gaze upon Esther to return to a broader narration of the beautification process for all women, the last detail the reader learns is, "And every day Mordecai walked in the courtyard of the harem, to see what would happen to Esther" (2:11). Mordecai's apparent concern for Esther could be construed in two ways—he was worried about what would happen to her because he found the whole contest and life in the harem to be frightening, or he was hopeful that she would be chosen as Vashti's replacement so that he could gain power through her proximity.<sup>73</sup> Either

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70. Beal infers that perhaps both an identification as a Jew and an association with Mordecai may be valid reasons for concealment given the upcoming conflict between Mordecai and Haman that also has implications for Jewish people ("Esther," 32).

71. Beal, "Esther," 31–32. Vashti's location, along with that of the eunuchs, has been termed as liminal in relation to power—she exists between the king's innermost circle and those just outside. Esther's liminal location referred to here is in reference to her position between two households.

72. Day, *Esther*, 57–58.

73. For the view that Mordecai found it frightening, see Duran, "Who Wants to Marry a Persian King?," 77. Reading MT Esther, Beal observes that Esther is Mordecai's link with central Persian politics, so he is dependent on her in order to rise in power. At the same time, he also says Mordecai's subjectivity is at risk because Esther, his object, is moving out of his control (*Book of Hiding*, 36). But, Mordecai already has position in the court of the king in LXX Esther, and so perhaps his connection



way, again, Esther's double-object status and the tensions inherent are at the forefront.

After the final stage in the queen-selection process is explained, Mordecai's Esther has her turn with the king. "When the time was fulfilled for Esther daughter of Aminadab, the brother of Mordecai's father, to go into the king" (2:15a). Finally arriving at her turn to approach the king at some point in a procession of the innumerable "winners" of the beauty contest, this is Esther's moment. But, even so, she is not the star of the moment as her double loyalties to her family and to the king she approaches are highlighted in her description as daughter of Mordecai's brother Aminadab.<sup>74</sup> Still, she does all that Gai has told her to do showing either that she is simply quite obedient—to Gai, to Mordecai, and to the system at-large—or that she is diligently trying to win the king's favor.<sup>75</sup> Just as has been the case thus far, the eyes of all who gaze upon Esther are pleased with this beautiful object (2:15).

But not only did she please those who saw her, the king was especially pleased. "So Esther went in to King Artaxerxes in the twelfth month, which is Adar, in the seventh year of his reign."<sup>76</sup> And the king loved Esther and she found favor beyond all the other virgins" (2:16–17a). Unlike MT Esther which states that Esther was *taken* into the king (ותלקה אסתר, MT Esth 2:16), but like the description of the process in which the women *went* into the king (2:14), LXX Esther makes Esther the subject of this action, perhaps conveying that she went according to her own will.<sup>77</sup> Though still an object, as are the other women passed through this moment by the will

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to power is not as dependent on her. However, I would concur with Beal that even in LXX Esther, Mordecai's subject status is vulnerable as Esther's move into the king's world provides her opportunity to become her own subject and claim her own measure of agency.

74. Joshua Berman, "Hadassah bat Abihail: The Evolution from Object to Subject in the Character of Esther," *JBL* 120 (2001): 650.

75. For the view that she is simply obedient, see Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 43.

76. MT Esther places this interaction in the tenth month, of Tebeth. Perhaps LXX Esther places this day in Adar to connect it to other important days in the book. The day all Jews will be annihilated (3:13; 13:6) and then later are allowed to defend themselves (8:12; 16:20), and additionally the day Purim is celebrated to commemorate this (9:20–22) are also in Adar. That Esther's night with the king would also be in Adar shows that the whole sequence of events is connected to Esther's infiltration/invitation into the king's world of power.

77. Kahana, *Esther*, 110.

of others, Esther has an opportunity to gain some measure of agency. But unlike any of the other women Artaxerxes may have encountered at this point, Esther somehow, either through her sexual wiles or, as Day may suggest, her integrity of character that Artaxerxes was able to come to know, wins the love and favor of the king.<sup>78</sup>

Though it is not clearly stated, Esther then becomes queen instead of Vashti. "So he put on her the queen's diadem. Then the king gave a banquet lasting seven days for all his Friends and the officers to celebrate his marriage to Esther; and he granted a remission of taxes to those who were under his rule" (2:17b–18). The same diadem that Vashti refused to have placed on her head (1:11–12) is the one Esther receives. Further, a party, a display of the king's power and wealth under the guise of a marriage celebration (1:3–5), the same kind of party Vashti declined to attend, is now held in honor of Esther. So while Vashti refused to appear before the king on the seventh day of a drinking party, Esther seems to appear willingly before the king in the seventh year of his reign.<sup>79</sup> Doing all that Vashti has refused, Esther restores the "gender trouble" brought about by Vashti.<sup>80</sup> The threat to Artaxerxes's masculinity is obviated and masculine imperial power is restabilized.

Or is it? Indeed, the performance of Artaxerxes's masculinity appears restored, but if people across the kingdom had found resonance with the eruption of Vashti's hidden transcript into the public transcript, then lingering effects of a first public act of defiance may remain. If the decree forcing subordination of women in their households gave an opportunity for connection with Vashti's hidden transcript, then the decree forcing men to relinquish their women to the king's power could have also generated hidden transcripts of discontent that found correlation with Vashti's defiance. With these widespread hidden transcripts developing, Vashti's public defiance could fuel and empower attempts at gaining agency in negotiating position in Artaxerxes's imperial world. So while on the surface Esther appears to replace Vashti in complete compliance with imperial power and to validate its rule, the performance of Esther's deference cannot be underestimated. Hints of agency appear in Esther's apparent willingness to go before Artaxerxes, but even more so, in Mordecai's possible manipulation of the entire situation. The same Mordecai,

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78. Day, *Esther*, 56–57.

79. Beal, "Esther," 36.

80. Beal, "Esther," 36.

who may have been present to witness Vashti's refusal and all of its consequences, may have resonated with Vashti's hidden transcript, and also may have been inspired toward a different path of negotiation in hope that his fate would be different than Vashti's. So though the appearance of Artaxerxes's masculine imperial power seems to be restored, the echoing effects of Vashti's defiance are not erased.

Additionally, Esther's deference under Mordecai's guidance not only has the appearance of positive effects for the king's masculine power, but also provides benefits for subordinates throughout the kingdom as a remission of taxes is granted in light of this grand celebration of a new queen (2:18). While some commentators are concerned with whether or not Esther has committed adultery or transgressed Jewish prohibitions against intermarriage when she spends the night with the king and becomes queen, these are not the concerns of the text.<sup>81</sup> Esther's "successful" night with the king results in a positive outcome. Disguised political negotiation pays off ... literally! There is even some positive benefit and compensation for the people throughout the kingdom who suffered personal economic impacts on account of the queen-finding scheme.

The final note the text provides about Esther's move to the palace is a reiteration that Esther follows Mordecai's instructions about keeping her country secret; after all, following Mordecai's instructions was tantamount to fearing God and keeping God's laws (2:20).<sup>82</sup> Even though she is a Persian queen married to a Persian king, when Esther obeys Mordecai she obeys God and continues in a religiously/theologically appropriate mode of life and thus holds the loyalties of her identity in tension.<sup>83</sup> As LXX

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81. See, e.g., Moore, *Esther*, 28; Levenson, *Esther*, 62; Esther Fuchs, "Intermarriage, Gender, and Nation in the Hebrew Bible," in *The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 82–86; Barry D. Walfish, "Kosher Adultery? The Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus Triangle in Talmudic, Medieval, and Sixteenth-Century Exegesis," in White Crawford, *Book of Esther in Modern Research*, 111–36.

82. Only *πατρίδα αὐτῆς* ("her country") is included here in 2:20, but seems to indicate both her people and her country, which are stated in 2:10 to represent her ethnic identity. Day comments on the equation of following Mordecai and keeping God's laws (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 43).

83. Marien A. Halvorson-Taylor traces the theme of secrecy in MT, AT, and LXX Esther. Because of the addition of this statement, that not only does Mordecai command Esther to keep her identity secret, but adds that she is to continue to fear God and keep God's laws, LXX Esther develops the secrecy motif specifically in terms

Esther moves the setting from the cosmic to the earthly in chapters 1 and 2, a reminder exists that even though Esther seems obedient and pleasing to Gai, Artaxerxes, and everyone else who sees her, her final obedience is to Mordecai and the cosmically ruling God. So if Mordecai and perhaps Esther have found agency in the episode through disguised political negotiation, then their agency reflects the final and ultimate, yet mostly invisible, agent in LXX Esther's story—God.

#### READING AN ACT OF DEFIANCE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Readers in Hasmonean Judea and Ptolemaic Egypt may have easily made connections with what an open act of defiance like Vashti's looked like. The collective memory of Mattathias's refusal to the order of the Seleucid officials to offer sacrifice in Modein (1 Macc 2:15) was likely vivid in Judea as it sparked events which led to moderate Hasmonean independence.<sup>84</sup> Since the aftermath of this defiance caused some people to flee Judea to Alexandria, memory of the event likely also existed among Jews in Ptolemaic Egypt.<sup>85</sup>

But more than the memory of the refusal, recollection of the imperial response to the refusal and its subsequent revolt would probably have persisted as well. Post-167 BCE Judea was a tumultuous place. Antiochus IV and his general Apollonius tried to reestablish their position in the region, and civil disputes emerged between Jews and Syrians who supported the Seleucids and those revolting. Amid this turmoil, Jews in Judea also suffered as the Maccabean revolters scoured resources to procure means of support.<sup>86</sup> With Seleucid military intervention, civil conflicts, and inhabitants being ransacked for support, Judea was a bloody and unhealthy place to live. Property was destroyed, resources plundered,

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of piety. "In the LXX, the secrecy motif is thus used to assert the deceptiveness of appearance: Esther's surface suppression of her identity signals her secret but constant faithfulness to the commandments." Marien A. Halvorson-Taylor, "Secrets and Lies: Secrecy Notices (Esther 2:10, 20) and Diasporic Identity in the Book of Esther," *JBL* 131 (2012): 484.

84. Though Mattathias's refusal was not the first act of rebellion, it was the act of defiance that apparently resonated firmly enough to spark widespread revolt. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, 206.

85. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 35; Modrzejewski, *Jews of Egypt*, 73.

86. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, 204–34.

men, women, and children harmed, raped, and slaughtered.<sup>87</sup> Imperial powers must respond to insubordination and when they do, the lives of all subordinates are affected.

But in the case of the Maccabean revolt, those who endured the imperial response were able to reclaim Jerusalem and the temple and ultimately find some measure of independence. Likewise, in LXX Esther, the negotiation of deference, proximity, access, and agency finds opportunity despite, and perhaps even because of, the imperial response. As Mordecai and Esther have begun to capitalize on this opportunity in chapter 2 of LXX Esther, they will continue to do so as the narrative unfolds. Though national independence may not be the final ending for LXX Esther, God's absolute masculine power, on behalf of which Mordecai and Esther act, will be established by the end of the book—and perhaps an iteration of God's power may even provide hope to readers for whom Hasmonean independence was the not the glorious happy-ending of their stories.

#### CONCLUSION

Because Vashti's negotiation of defiance created a rupture in the surface of consent, a need for an appropriate imperial response was ignited in order that the masculine imperial order could be reestablished by stabilizing complicit and hegemonic masculinities. However, the decrees ordering women's submission and commanding the in-gathering of queen candidates created opportunities for negotiation, specifically by Mordecai and Esther. Readers of LXX Esther in Ptolemaic Alexandria and Hasmonean Judea may have made connections to the aftermath of Vashti's defiance by remembering the devastating consequences and opportunities that resulted from negotiations of defiance such as the Maccabean revolt.

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87. As is the case in war-zones; see Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, 25–26; Brown-miller, *Against Our Will*, 31–113. Second Maccabees 8:8–11 portrays an immediate reaction, and thus a consequence, to Judas's revolt in which Nicanor, appointed by the governor of Coelesyria and Phoenicia, began selling captured Jews into slavery. Tcherikover elaborates on the time just after the Maccabean revolt began, writing, "It is to be assumed that large numbers of people all over the land of Judah had suffered severely from the war.... Life on the countryside was unsafe and many of the peasants had left their former abodes and had sought secret asylum in the mountains or had sent their families thither; others had been driven from their lands by the Syrian forces, and perhaps also by the insurgents. These masses ... were bearing the brunt of the suffering" (*Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, 217).

The following chapter of this study moves to examine another act of defiance and its subsequent consequences—Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman.

Mordecai's Defiance:  
Another Challenge to Artaxerxes's Hegemonic  
Masculinity and the Severe Imperial Response  
(2:21–3:13; 13:1–7; 3:14)

Then two great dragons came forward, both ready to fight, and they roared terribly. At their roaring every nation prepared for war, to fight against the righteous nation. It was a day of darkness and gloom, of tribulation and distress, affliction and great tumult on the earth!

—LXX Esther 11:6–8

After Esther has become the Persian queen (2:17) and the tensions of her identity are iterated (2:20), attention returns to Mordecai. Mordecai again finds himself in the precarious position of learning about an assassination plot against Artaxerxes (2:21). He takes advantage of Esther's new position, and together they avert potential regicide (2:22–23). Sometime later, though, Mordecai's relationship with Persian power changes as he refuses to bow to the new premier Haman in an act of defiance (3:1–4). Mordecai's refusal has terrible consequences, as the imperial response is to issue an edict decreeing the extermination of all Persian Jews (3:5–13; 13:1–7, 3:14).

In this chapter I argue that Haman and Mordecai face off as representatives for their gods (Artaxerxes and God, respectively) in the contest for hegemonic masculinity that was prefigured in Mordecai's dream (11:2–11). By refusing to bow to Haman, Mordecai rejects the imperial metanarrative of superiority and sets the hegemonic masculinity of his God in conflict with that of the "god" of the Persians, Artaxerxes. Haman's and Artaxerxes's response to this defiance is to eliminate the difference that may have caused Mordecai's defiance by exterminating his entire race (3:7) and thus anyone who may have similar motives to Mordecai. I proceed by

first exploring Mordecai's performance of an additional act of negotiation in the form of deference (2:21–23). Then, I consider the shift in Mordecai's negotiation to public defiance (3:1–4). Finally, I examine the imperial response evoked by Mordecai's defiance, including the issuance of an edict decreeing the annihilation of Jewish people in order to maintain imperial power by eliminating difference (3:5–13; 13:1–7; 3:14).

MORDECAI AND THE EUNUCHS, ROUND TWO:  
A NEGOTIATION OF DEFERENCE (2:21–2:23)

Despite the textual-critical implications of the potential doubling of the assassination-plotting-eunuchs episode in Addition A (12:1–6) and 2:21–23 in LXX Esther, this synchronic reading acknowledges that the two episodes in LXX Esther have significant differences.<sup>1</sup> The episode in 2:21–23 has a distinct narrative function to demonstrate escalating threats to Artaxerxes, to reinforce Mordecai's ambivalence, and to reveal the progressing agency of Esther.

In 2:21–23, the perpetrators with intentions to assassinate Artaxerxes are two unnamed eunuchs who serve as the king's chief bodyguards. The first assassination plot involved two eunuchs, Gabatha and Tharra, who kept watch in the courtyard and were preparing to lay hands on the king (12:1–2). Differently here in this second assassination attempt, as the king's bodyguards, the unnamed eunuchs in 2:21–23 exist in closer proximity to the king and would have greater opportunity to commit regicide. The threat posed by the king's eunuch bodyguards, then, is much greater since the danger has moved from outside the palace walls into the king's most intimate quarters, which only were entered by his most trusted servants, such as bodyguards.

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1. Frolov examines the sparse scholarship on textual-critical implications of comparing the four versions of the narrative of botched regicide in MT Esth 2:21–23, AT Esther Addition A 16–18, and the two versions of the episode in LXX Esther ("Two Eunuchs, Two Conspiracies, and One Loyal Jew," 304–25). Frolov's own conclusion is that the LXX author/translator had both MT Esther and a Hebrew *Vorlage* of AT Esther as sources and sought to preserve both traditions in which MT Esther had the episode at 2:21–23 and the Hebrew *Vorlage* of AT Esther placed it in Addition A. Frolov finds that the differences in the two versions of the story in LXX Esther demonstrate that the author intentionally creates the impression of two different conspiracies (311).



Two statements are made about the king's eunuch bodyguards: (1) they are angry because of Mordecai's advancement; and (2) they were plotting to kill King Artaxerxes (2:21).<sup>2</sup> The advancement of Mordecai referred to may be the appointment of Mordecai's adopted daughter-wife as queen which gives him greater access and potentially more power (2:18), or possibly Mordecai's reward and appointment to court service resulting from his initial foil of an assassination plot by other eunuchs (12:5). If the eunuchs' plot was connected to their anger toward Mordecai, perhaps the king's eunuch bodyguards were frustrated that Mordecai had received the honor and position they felt they were due. Or the king's bodyguard-eunuchs could have been in cahoots with Haman and courtyard-eunuchs who plotted to kill Artaxerxes in 12:1–2; *and* like the surviving party of that incident, Haman (12:6), they hated Mordecai. But all of these scenarios are only conjecture. The eunuchs' plotting to kill Artaxerxes is not necessarily connected to their anger toward Mordecai. Verse 21 joins the two statements without indicating cause. They were angry about Mordecai's advancement *and* (καί) they were plotting to kill Artaxerxes.

The statement of the eunuchs' anger toward Mordecai reinforces Mordecai's ambivalence. Mordecai served in the courtyard of the king and reported assassination plots. In that way, Mordecai perhaps appeared a loyal Persian subject. But Mordecai also had enemies who served in the Persian court like him. Mordecai is liked and disliked; he is loyal to Persia, yet his participation in the competition for royal favor and power also angers "Persian" officials.

Another key difference in the two episodes of assassination-plotting-eunuchs in LXX Esther is that the foil to the plot in 2:21–23 is not only Mordecai, but Mordecai in conjunction with Esther. Mordecai warns Esther who reveals the plot to the king (2:22) instead of Mordecai informing the king directly as he had done previously (12:2).<sup>3</sup> This reveals a shift

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2. There is no parallel statement to the eunuch's anger concerning Mordecai in MT Esth 2:21.

3. Two obvious difficulties exist here. First, Mordecai is able to relay the information to Esther without a eunuch-mediator, though in ch. 4 Esther and Mordecai can only communicate through the eunuchs (Day, *Esther*, 64; Beal, "Esther," 41; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 40; Levenson, *Esther*, 64). Perhaps because the communication involves the plot of unnamed eunuchs, Mordecai feels he cannot trust any eunuchs to relay the message to Esther and so he risks telling her himself. Second, Esther is able to directly report the plot to the king but later worries about approaching the king on behalf of her people without being called (4:9–11). Perhaps when the matter of con-

in proximity and agency since Mordecai seemed to have a direct line to the king in the first episode. Now Esther has closer proximity to the king than Mordecai, and perhaps he even perceives that her word with the king is more valuable than his. Esther's value to the king is foregrounded as her agency in the story continues to progress.<sup>4</sup> Certainly, Esther is still a woman with two masters (2:20, maybe three masters if God is counted separately from Mordecai). But like the agency she claims in being a subject who goes to the king (2:14) rather than being taken to him, Esther becomes a mediator who helps save the life of the king. Even though Mordecai is given credit for saving the king in the memorandum deposited in the royal library (2:23), Esther has created additional avenues for her own agency in the midst of a story about Mordecai performing another act of negotiating deference. Chapter 6 of this study takes up the subject of Esther's progressing agency.

#### MORDECAI'S NEGOTIATION OF DEFIANCE (3:1–4)

##### HAMAN'S ELEVATION (3:1)

With Mordecai's good deed reported and left to be forgotten in the royal library, "After these events, King Artaxerxes promoted Haman son of Hammedatha, a Bougean, advancing him and granting him precedence over all the king's Friends" (Μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα ἐδόξασεν ὁ βασιλεὺς Ἀρταξέρξης Ἀμαν Ἀμαδαθοῦ Βουγαῖον καὶ ὕψωσεν αὐτόν, καὶ ἐπρωτοβάθρει πάντων τῶν φίλων αὐτοῦ, 3:1). Haman is elevated to a position of preeminence even over "the king's Friends" who formerly gave rulings and judgments on matters of concern and sat in the seats closest to the king (1:13–14). Haman's new position is as second in power over all of Persia, even a "second father" (13:6) to Artaxerxes, the primary Persian parent. As second-in-command, Haman becomes the principal recipient of complicit masculinity and is able to exercise the power of Artaxerxes's hegemonic masculinity as his

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cern is the king's very life, Esther assumes the danger of approaching the king will be muted by the severity of the matter to him. In ch. 4, the matter of concern is Esther's and Persian Jews' lives, thus more reservation is warranted.

4. Levenson argues that this story reveals shared agency between Mordecai and Esther, and "foreshadows the more momentous story of their jointly foiling an infinitely larger assassination plot—Haman's attempted genocide of the Jewish people" (*Esther*, 64).

proxy.<sup>5</sup> Even though Haman's apparent association with the assassination-plotting eunuchs of Addition A (12:6) seems to portray him as an enemy of Artaxerxes, in ambivalence, even if he is Artaxerxes's enemy Haman can still be complicit with and benefit from the patriarchal dividend of the hegemonic masculinity performed by Artaxerxes whom Haman represents as second-in-command.

Some interpreters view Haman's promotion as an intentional slight to Mordecai since it immediately follows Mordecai's act of faithfulness to the king.<sup>6</sup> Others have also noted that perhaps in light of the escalating threats to Artaxerxes in the form of another assassination plot, Artaxerxes decided to restructure his government to obviate any insurrection.<sup>7</sup> But perhaps the two events are unrelated. After some amount of time has passed in the temporal sequence (μετὰ ταῦτα, "after these things"), Haman is promoted. A similar phrase is used in 1:1, Καὶ ἐγένετο μετὰ τοὺς λόγους τούτους ("And after these things had happened"). At some point after Mordecai was rewarded and ordered to serve in the king's court for thwarting the first assassination plot (12:5), Artaxerxes threw a banquet (1:1). The banquet Artaxerxes threw was not because of Mordecai, but occurred after those events, though without dismissing their significance. In the same way, Artaxerxes's promotion of Haman occurs after Mordecai spoiled another assassination plot, not because of it, but that also does not dismiss the importance of the event.

Further, no direct connection between Mordecai and Esther's foil of the assassination plot in 2:21–23 is required for tension between Mordecai and Haman to be heightened by Haman's elevation.<sup>8</sup> In LXX Esther,

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5. Connell, *Masculinities*, 79–80.

6. Beal, "Esther," 44; *Book of Hiding*, 53; Moore, *Esther*, 35.

7. Beal, "Esther," 44–45. Hazony also proposes Haman's elevation is a complete retooling of Persia's governing structures (*Dawn*, 48–59). Whereas the king formerly accepted counsel from many sources, as was seen in the aftermath of Vashti's defiance (1:13–22), now the king would only listen to one voice—that of Haman. The king's paranoia after the eunuchs' plot influences him to silence a diverse politics of the court and instead only listens to one totalitarian advisor. Hazony claims that what causes foreign states to be tolerable to Jews is their openness to various perspectives, which is essential to rational judgment. Thus, when Persia moves away from a multivoice process, it loses its ability to govern well.

8. Reading MT Esther, Beal finds that Haman's promotion after Mordecai's good deed is the initial factor in setting up the tension between Haman and Mordecai (*Book of Hiding*, 53).

the tension between Haman and Mordecai is already present since Haman has previously been identified as one who was held in great honor with the king and who was determined to injure Mordecai because of the two eunuchs in the first ruined assassination plot (12:6). With his promotion, now Haman will have a platform to make his determinations a reality. So while the reason for Haman's advancement is not explicitly stated, the reader does not need justification for the promotion to identify quickly that this is not good news for Mordecai.

#### MORDECAI'S REFUSAL TO BOW (3:2–4)

In light of Haman's new position, the king issues his third command in the book, that obeisance should be done to the new premier, Haman, a practice followed by all those in the court (3:2).<sup>9</sup> According to Herodotus, "When one man meets another on the road ... if the difference in rank is small, the cheek is kissed; if it is great, the humbler bows and does obeisance to the other" (*Hist.* 1.134 [Godley]).<sup>10</sup> Since Haman was the second-in-command in all of Persia, the difference in rank between him and any other person (besides Artaxerxes) would be substantial. So in addition to the direction of the king's command, custom would also dictate that honor should be paid the king's new second-in-command by obeisance.

Then, as simply as 1:12 stated that Vashti refused to obey the king's order to appear (καὶ οὐκ εἰσήκουσεν αὐτοῦ Αστιν ἢ βασίλισσα), 3:2b reports Mordecai's refusal to obey a command of the king as well, "But Mordecai did not bow to him [Haman]" (ὁ δὲ Μαρδοχαῖος οὐ προσεκύνει αὐτῷ). In fact, in their refusals, Vashti and Mordecai have much in common: they both perform an act of negotiation through public defiance, they are both liminal figures, and the imperial responses to their defiant negotiation (discussed later) also have similarities.

Mordecai's refusal is another act of imperial negotiation through defiance like Vashti's refusal to appear at Artaxerxes's banquet. Mordecai fails to produce a gesture or sign of normative compliance to the dominant power.<sup>11</sup> His refusal is not a practical failure of compliance, merely "bumping into

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9. The king προσέταξεν ("commanded") obeisance to Haman (3:2) which is the same verb that Muchaeus uses to encourage the king to issue a royal decree concerning the subordination of women in 1:19.

10. Also cited in Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 70.

11. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 203.

someone.” It is a declared public refusal to comply.<sup>12</sup> Day after day the king’s courtiers speak to Mordecai about his refusal to obey the king, but he does not listen (3:3–4a).<sup>13</sup> Mordecai demonstrates a repeated resolve to disobey willfully and defy an order of the king. I take up the question of Mordecai’s possible motivation for his act of defiance shortly.

Also, like Vashti, Mordecai performs negotiation through an act of defiance as a liminal figure. Vashti exists as an object under the king’s authority, but also as a subject who has freedom to either uphold the boundaries of the masculine imperial order or to subvert it. Similarly, Mordecai, occupying his regular post in the palace courtyard (11:3; 12:1; 2:11, 19), exists neither inside the palace nor outside, but always lurking on the edges. Moreover, like the eunuchs, Mordecai is further marginalized since he does not have a wife or family because the king has taken Esther from him.<sup>14</sup>

Without a wife, Mordecai does not conform to the norms established by the hegemonic masculinity of Artaxerxes—that women should give honor to their husbands (1:20). Thus, Mordecai is not able to reap the full benefits of complicit masculinities, since he does not have a woman who gives honor only to him (Esther simultaneously exists under the authority of Artaxerxes and Mordecai, 2:17–20). In this way Mordecai’s masculinity is marginalized. Marginalized masculinities are developed among marginalized groups within whom race, class, and gender interplay to define the masculinity of their group as relative to the authorization of the hegemonic group (present day examples include black masculinities, working-class masculinities, gay masculinities, etc.).<sup>15</sup> Mordecai does not conform to hegemonic masculine standards, and is a part of a group, Jews, which are converse to the group of the hegemonic male, the Persian Artaxerxes. Furthermore, Mordecai refuses to recognize Haman and the hegemonic masculinity Haman represents on behalf of the king.

Existing at the boundaries as a liminal figure with marginalized masculinity, Mordecai can uphold the masculine imperial order, allowing Artaxerxes full authority over Esther while also keeping some residual

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12. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 203–4.

13. Berlin finds an allusion to Joseph in Mordecai’s repeated refusals as Joseph also refuses Potiphar’s wife though she spoke to him day after day (Gen 39:10). Both Joseph and Mordecai suffer intensely for their refusals (*Esther*, 36).

14. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 51–54.

15. Connell, *Masculinities*, 80–81.

authority and agency, which he does through his negotiation of deference (2:21–23). Or Mordecai can choose to subvert the boundaries and defy the masculine imperial order, which is exactly what he does by not honoring Haman (3:2). Vashti's negotiation of defiance was the first open declaration of insubordination in LXX Esther, which broke the surface of consent to the domination of Persian imperial power. Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman, then, further widened the crack Vashti created within the appearance of hegemony.

But unlike Vashti, whom the text only shows performing one act of negotiation in LXX Esther, Mordecai has been negotiating imperial power, and Artaxerxes specifically, through largely disguised forms of negotiation up to this point in the text. Mordecai has an ambivalent identity as both a captive Jew, but also as someone who has gained proximity to power (11:2–4a). The ambivalent Mordecai has a dream of power-reversal, which serves as a means of negotiation in that it gives voice to a hidden transcript of discontent with power and a desire for subversion (11:4b–12). Then, immediately following the dream, Mordecai performs an act of deference by reporting the assassination plot of Gabatha and Tharra to the king and is rewarded to serve in the court (12:1–6). Sometime later, Mordecai, as a servant or friend of the king or even if only as an inhabitant of Susa, may have been a guest at the king's lavish banquets (1:1–8) possibly watching and learning as Vashti committed a public act of defiance by refusing to appear before the king and his male guests (1:12). Vashti's defiance was the kind of subversion about which he had only dreamed and the eunuchs were never able to realize. Further, Mordecai may have also played a part in creating the queen-finding scheme (2:1–4), or, at the very least, was able to negotiate an injurious seizing of his resources by turning it into an opportunity for agency through Esther's appointment as queen (2:10–11, 19–20). Then, after Esther's appointment as queen, Mordecai emerges from the background and returns to the visible business of negotiation as he did in Addition A by reporting a second assassination plot of the king's eunuchs in an act of deference (2:21–23).

But now, faced with an order to bow to Haman, Mordecai alters his more disguised political negotiation to open defiance. Mordecai could have continued his disguised negotiation of deference by bowing to Artaxerxes's new premier, but instead he refused. The question of Mordecai's motivation for open defiance has been the subject of speculation for interpreters of MT Esther since no explicit reasoning is provided. Scholars of MT Esther list possible reasons for Mordecai's refusal including Mordecai's

arrogance, historical tribal enmity between Benjaminites (Saul—Mordecai) and Amalekites (Agag—Haman), Mordecai's anger that he didn't receive Haman's new post, and that bowing to Haman would have violated monotheism and comprised idolatry.<sup>16</sup> But while MT Esther is silent on the matter of Mordecai's motivations, LXX Esther directly reveals the source of Mordecai's reasoning for refusing to bow to Haman in his prayer (a hidden transcript that is discussed in further detail in ch. 6 of this study) located in Addition C. Mordecai declares that he will not bow to Haman so that human glory will not be elevated above the glory of God, and because he refuses to bow to anyone except the Lord (13:12–14).

Mordecai's refusal to bow before anyone except God might seem odd since the Hebrew Bible attests instances in which those following the Hebrew God willingly bowed before both Israelite and non-Israelite high-ranking officials. For example, Abraham bows (προσεκύνησεν) to the Hittites (LXX Gen 23:7), and David bows before Saul and does obeisance (προσεκύνησεν, LXX 1 Sam 24:9 [MT 24:8]).<sup>17</sup> Indeed, even Esther does not hesitate to fall at the feet of Artaxerxes (προέπεσεν, 8:3).<sup>18</sup>

But Mordecai makes clear that bowing to Haman was different, bowing to Haman was a matter of religious integrity. By specifically praying that he “will not bow down [προσκυνεῖν] to anyone but you, who are my Lord” (13:14), Mordecai invokes the second commandment from the Decalogue, “You shall not bow down [προσκυνήσεις] to them [idols] or worship them;

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16. For Mordecai's arrogance, see Paton, *Esther*, 197, 213. For historical tribal enmity, see, e.g., Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 44–46. But in LXX Esther, tribal enmity is not possible since Haman is not an Agagite. For anger that he didn't receive the post, see, e.g., Day, *Esther*, 66. For seeing it as a violation of monotheism, see, e.g., Hazony, *Dawn*, 60–68 including his discussion of the targumim. Though no direct evidence of idolatry as a motivation appears in MT Esther, it will be discussed as a part of LXX Esther's considerations.

17. Laniak cites other examples of Hebrew-Israelite people bowing before both Israelite and non-Israelite leaders including Gen 27:29 in which Isaac blesses Jacob, though thinking he is Esau, and says that peoples will serve Jacob and nations will bow down to him; Gen 33:3 in which Jacob bows before Esau during their reconciliation; 2 Sam 14:4 when the woman of Tekoa bowed before David; and 1 Kgs 1:16 as Bathsheba also bowed and did obeisance before the aging King David (*Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 70 n. 7). See also Moore, *Additions*, 204; Levenson, *Esther*, 67.

18. Day, *Esther*, 66. Though a different verb is used for Esther's act of “falling” before Artaxerxes, ch. 8 of this study discusses the implication of Esther's falls before Artaxerxes (15:7, 15; 8:3) as associated with obeisance, and also posits the gendered implications of variations on the root πίπτω and προσκυνέω.



for I the Lord your God am a jealous God” (LXX Exod 20:5a). Mordecai states that bowing to Haman would be tantamount to idolatry. Levenson writes, “This [Mordecai’s statement in the prayer] puts Mordecai’s actions into the praiseworthy category of resistance to idolatry, a pressing issue in late Second Temple literature (cf., for example, Dan 3, esp. vv. 17–18, and Dan 4, esp. vv. 22–24) and always a problem for Jews living under an alien religious order.”<sup>19</sup>

But while Levenson emphasizes the religious concerns of idolatry, in both Daniel and Esther bowing is also a matter of political power. For instance, in the example Levenson mentions from Daniel, when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego will not bow down before Nebuchadnezzar’s golden statue, they are not only resisting idolatry, they are resisting the king who ordered them to bow, Nebuchadnezzar, as well as the empire the king represents, Babylon. Therefore, like the three furnace-survivors, in refusing to bow Mordecai resists more than idolatry. He resists the one who has ordered him to bow and the empire he represents.

In further support of this notion, according to Gerhard Kittel, “glory of God” (δόξα θεοῦ) is not something that humans can give to God, rather, it only affirms the divine nature, notably the power and presence of God.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, when Mordecai compares God’s glory to the glory that would be given to Haman by bowing to him, Mordecai states that he will not allow human glory, meaning the political power of Haman and the Persian Empire he represents, to usurp the preeminence of the divine nature and God’s power.

Laniak also supplements the notion of Mordecai’s refusal as resistance to power by writing about the elevation of human glory above God’s glory (13:14) in terms of honor and shame. When Mordecai refuses to bow before Haman, he diminishes the honor that Haman is due on account of his promotion and political position. In a world where honor is a limited commodity, when Mordecai withholds honor from Haman, Mordecai reserves the honor due Haman for himself, or, perhaps rather, for the God whom he represents.<sup>21</sup>

With a similar emphasis, Seeman describes how Mordecai’s refusal to bow to Haman is foreshadowed in the agonistic contest for honor between the two dragons of Mordecai’s dream in Addition A (11:6–7). The dream

19. Levenson, *Esther*, 84.

20. Gerhard Kittel, “δόξα,” *TDNT* 2:244.

21. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 78–80.



describes the dragons to *παλαίειν*, which tends to be translated as “fight.” But Seeman argues that this word is more often translated in the broader Greek world as the “wrestling” of a Greek athletic contest, instead of the fighting of warfare. Thus, according to Seeman, the dragons of Mordecai’s dream prefigure a wrestling match between Mordecai and Haman that is undertaken to acquire honor and status.<sup>22</sup> Then, as the dream-related cosmic wrestling match then plays out in the earthly event of Mordecai’s refusal to bow before Haman, the connection is that Mordecai is refusing to accept loss to Haman. Seeman argues that for Mordecai to have taken the bodily posture of “falling to the knee,” which resembles bowing or performing obeisance, Mordecai would have accepted shame and granted Haman the victory of honor and status.<sup>23</sup>

So while honor and shame are certainly at play in Mordecai’s refusal to bow, what has been neglected is that the two are contending not only for honor, but for masculine honor. The main axis in the structure of gender is masculine power, having active dominion and being able to exercise it.<sup>24</sup> When Mordecai refuses to honor Haman’s active power and submit to the exercise of dominion of one whom he was under jurisdiction, Mordecai issues a direct attack on not only Haman’s honor, but also on Haman’s masculinity. Likewise, if Mordecai were to prostrate himself before another servant of the king, who presumably was an equal of sorts to Mordecai before his promotion even though also a sworn enemy, his bowing may have constituted a feminization of himself by relinquishing his own power and giving it to Haman.<sup>25</sup>

But as Mordecai declares in his prayer, he does not withhold masculine honor for his own account or because of his own pride, but on behalf

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22. Seeman, “Enter the Dragon,” 7–10.

23. Seeman, “Enter the Dragon,” 11.

24. Connell, *Masculinities*, 74. Conway, *Behold the Man*, 22; Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 141; Goldingay, “Hosea 1–3, Genesis 1–4,” 39.

25. While men do prostrate themselves before other men in deference to authority (e.g., Gen 23:7), one must wonder if there are any sexual overtones in the act of bowing before another man. In the same way that Danna Fewell and David Gunn read Siser’s prostrate posture between Jael’s legs as a feminizing sexual act in which he loses virility, so too Mordecai may have also forfeited his own masculinity if he bowed at the feet of Haman. Such would especially be true since “feet” is a euphemism for genitals. Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, “The Book of Ruth,” *NIB* 2:926. See also Danna Nolan Fewell and David Gunn, “Controlling Perspectives: Women, Men, and the Authority of Violence in Judges 4–5,” *JAAR* 58 (1990): 404.

of the glory and power of God. In this vein, Laniak observes that Mordecai and Haman are not only in conflict with one another, but they are individual representatives for the corporate personalities of their groups, and thus even for their gods.<sup>26</sup> Mordecai and Haman compete not just for their own honor and masculinities, but for those to whom they are complicit for power and masculinity. Connell describes how those who perform complicit masculinities are those who benefit from the patriarchal dividend achieved by the ones who publicly demonstrate the ideal of masculinity for that society—those who hold hegemonic masculinity.<sup>27</sup>

When Mordecai tells the courtiers that he is a Jew (3:4b), Mordecai makes a key statement that acknowledges his identity as complicit with God's power and authority. Even though Mordecai admonishes Esther to keep her people and country hidden (2:10, 20), Mordecai's ethnic identity had not been a secret, since he is also identified as a Jew in both 11:3 and 2:5. Mordecai demonstrates what being a Jew meant when he tells Esther not to disclose her country, but to continue to fear God and keep God's laws (2:20). To Mordecai, being a Jew means continued respect for and obedience to God's commandments, not obedience to the orders of the Persian king, which would wind up including a command about doing obeisance to Haman (3:2). So instead of an identity revelation, Mordecai's statement to the courtiers that he is a Jew sets his loyalties and complicity with God and thus against any loyalty that bowing to Haman would represent.

In a strictly narrative read of LXX Esther, the only "god" of Haman and of all Persia is the one and only Artaxerxes, who rules over no less than 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia (1:1), and who even is declared to be the master of the whole world (13:2). Artaxerxes, then, is the embodiment of human glory against whom Mordecai sets God's glory. Since Haman's god, Artaxerxes, is the model of hegemonic masculinity on earth, Mordecai sets the masculinity of the God he fears in competition for the claim to hegemonic masculinity. Mordecai's negotiation of defiance asserts the marginalized masculinities he represents as a liminal Jew against the hegemonic masculinity that Haman represents on behalf of Artaxerxes, whose hegemonic masculinity has already been established (1:1–8).<sup>28</sup>

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26. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 75–78.

27. Connell, *Masculinities*, 76–80.

28. Connell describes how the social struggle for dominance results in violence exerted by the privileged group to maintain dominance, and violence used as a means

Thus, in addition to being motivated by resisting the idolatry of praising human power over God's power, Mordecai may have chosen to shift his mode of disguised negotiation to open defiance at this point because, in Haman, Mordecai may have found an appropriate match that he can contest. Now that Haman has received an elevated position, Mordecai has found his corresponding dragon from Addition A's dream and a representative he can challenge. From watching Vashti's act of defiance unfold, we might suppose, Mordecai learned that a direct challenge to Artaxerxes himself resulted in banishment and decrees of subordination. So Mordecai's act of defiance is an indirect challenge to Artaxerxes in the form of opposition to Haman, a suitable opponent. Thus, Mordecai and Haman's conflict is on behalf of the "gods" they represent, a contest for hegemonic power and masculinity to determine the fate of the righteous nation in the cosmos (11:5–11). Though Mordecai's dream predicts the success of this representative conflict on behalf of God and Artaxerxes (specifically through the actions of a river, Esther, 11:10–11; 10:6), whether or not Mordecai calculated the cost of the noises, tumult, earthquakes, distress, affliction, tribulation, and preparation for war is not apparent (11:5–8). As was the case with Vashti's act of defiance, when the structures of imperial power are threatened, the empire must strike back.

#### READING MORDECAI'S ACTS OF NEGOTIATION

Readers in Ptolemaic Alexandria may have identified with Mordecai's shifting means of negotiation. In the last phase of Ptolemaic rule in Alexandria (180–30 BCE) during which there was a Judean influx, Jewish groups oscillated between receiving favor as supporters of the Ptolemies, and being persecuted, considered suspect, or antagonized for being on the losing side of a dynastic dispute or for aligning with their homeland.<sup>29</sup> Under Onias's leadership during Ptolemy Philopater's reign (180–145 BCE), Alexandrian Jews found favor and support. But then when they chose to support Philopater's widow in a dispute for the throne with Euergetes, they picked the wrong side and were persecuted by Euergetes. But, once the crisis passed, again they were able to continue serving in the military and granted governmental posts. Later, though, they may have

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of drawing boundaries among men (e.g., inner-city youth gang violence as an assertion of marginalized masculinities against other men) (*Masculinities*, 82–83).

29. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 35–41.

experienced another episode of persecution under Lathyrus in 88 BCE, and suspicion grew about their loyalties in light of their lobbying for the Hasmoneans and support of Rome.<sup>30</sup> Deference and moderate measures of defiance were interspersed throughout these 150 years. Thus, Mordecai's oscillation between deference and defiance may have resonated with their situation. Still, readers likely had ambivalent responses to Mordecai as, inevitably, there were groups who thought their community should negotiate more in deference or more in defiance.

In addition to the continued resonance among Hasmonean Judean readers due to the similarities between Mordecai's refusal and the defiance that sparked the Maccabean revolt (1 Macc 2:15), one must also wonder how readers in Hasmonean Judea read Mordecai's association with Vashti through their various similarities portrayed in the text. Beal writes of their equation, "Thus Mordecai is identified with Vashti, an insubordinate non-Jewish woman. This and other textual details suggest a kind of 'feminization' of Mordecai.... Given the gynophobic-xenophobic male dread attached to foreign women elsewhere in biblical literature ... this is an extraordinary identification."<sup>31</sup> Under Alexander Jannaeus, the Hasmonean state expanded into Greek cities in Judea forcing their inhabitants to "Judaize."<sup>32</sup> Though this "dehellenization" was politically and not culturally motivated, in other such instances of establishing Jewish identity in the Hebrew Bible, foreign, or "strange" women were often defeated in order to establish "right" identity such as in Num 25, Judg 14–16, and Ezra-Nehemiah.<sup>33</sup> In light of Mordecai's association with Vashti, would readers have equated Mordecai with these other strange women? Would readers have thought his act of defiance as a strange woman necessitated defeat of him? Would Mordecai have represented the Judean Greek cities that the Hasmonean state needed to conquer in order to establish its political identity?<sup>34</sup> Or would readers, who perhaps detested the Hasmo-

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30. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 35–41.

31. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 47, citing Fewell and Gunn who call foreign women "that most disturbing of Others." Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First History* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 167.

32. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 246–47.

33. The Hasmonean rulers adopted the practices of Hellenistic rulers. Any Judaizing was only a tool for political expansion. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 247–53; Gruen, "Jews and Greeks," 269–70. For the Hebrew Bible, see Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy*; see 323–44 for her conclusions.

34. Taking this reading in the direction of Camp's strange woman arguments,

nean dynasty, willingly align themselves with a hero who was equated to a foreign or strange woman? Perhaps both readings existed simultaneously as ambivalence to the Hasmonean state was pervasive.

#### IMPERIAL RESPONSE TO MORDECAI'S DEFIANCE (3:5–13; 13:1–7; 3:14)

While similarities can be found in Vashti's and Mordecai's negotiation performed as an act of defiance, resemblances also exist in the imperial responses to their public acts of insubordination. Both acts elicit anger and widespread state decrees. Like Artaxerxes's response to Vashti, Haman's response to Mordecai also illuminates how the personal and the political are inextricably linked in the institution of masculine state power.<sup>35</sup>

#### HAMAN'S ANGER AND PLOT (3:5–7)

Upon learning of Mordecai's defiance, Haman reacts similarly to Artaxerxes's initial response to Vashti's refusal—he becomes angry.<sup>36</sup> But Haman's anger is more intense than Artaxerxes's fury. While Artaxerxes "became furious" (ὠργίσθη, 1:12), Haman "became very/exceedingly angry" (ἐθυμώθη σφόδρα, 3:5). Certainly Haman's anger may seem justified since Haman's honor and masculinity have been challenged by Mordecai and, by proxy, so too have the honor and masculinity of the king and the

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could Esther be the male-Jew with right-lineage who is set in opposition to Mordecai and Vashti and thus must place herself in opposition to all of their actions? Perhaps, but it would be difficult to reconcile the fact that even though Vashti is "defeated," Mordecai is not. Instead, he also reaches an advanced status by the end of the book.

35. Day and Levenson both point out that for Haman, like Artaxerxes in response to Vashti, the personal becomes a corporate political matter of the state (Day, *Esther*, 69; Levenson, *Esther*, 68). But in LXX Esther and in all matters of power, the personal is always political as the performance of masculinity is tied to state power (Connell, *Masculinities*, 73).

36. 3:5 reads, "So when Haman learned that Mordecai was not doing obeisance to him," a refusal of which Haman was previously unaware (Day, *Esther*, 67). Since Mordecai has been refusing to bow for days, if the bowing happened directly before Haman it would seem Haman would have already been cognizant of Mordecai's refusal. That he had to be informed of it seems to indicate that Mordecai was rejecting either a corporate, public ritual in which his refusal would not have stood out, or that people would bow to some object that represented Haman's presence (i.e., an idol) and thus Haman would not have been present for the refusals.

Persian state. Haman's anger, even more intense than Artaxerxes's, may be due to the fact that in Mordecai's defiance the Vashti-made-fragile state of masculine imperial rule is further damaged. In Haman's case, if the very fabric upon which the Persian state is built is disputed, then any complicit power or masculinity he gains from his role in the state is placed in jeopardy. So while Haman is angry from this insult to his honor (and likely also still harboring resentment from Mordecai's foil to the eunuchs' plan in 12:1–6), Haman is also even more angry on behalf of the continued instability of the entire gendered political order of domination and rule.<sup>37</sup>

Artaxerxes's anger with Vashti's refusal had a sobering effect that motivated him to seriously seek advice on how best to proceed (1:13). Haman's intensified anger, on the other hand, leads him directly to a course of action as he "plotted to destroy all the Jews under Artaxerxes's rule" (3:6). After this trajectory is set, Haman seeks advice from an outside source. But instead of consulting sages or advisors to determine a course of action in the manner of Artaxerxes, Haman casts lots to decide on a day to carry out his plot (3:7). While Haman's actions may seem a rash and irascible reaction to Mordecai's personal affront to him, perhaps Haman's proposal to Artaxerxes to destroy the race of Mordecai is a slow-cooked plot that, under the advisement of the lots, has now found a moment for enactment that coincides with the need for an extreme measure to restabilize the Persian imperial order that Mordecai has threatened.<sup>38</sup> After all, Haman had first become determined to injure Mordecai in the second year of Artaxerxes's reign (11:2, if the events of 12:1–6 are read to have happened immediately following Mordecai's dream); but now, in the twelfth year of Artaxerxes reign, some ten years later, Haman decides to cast lots to determine when this injury will finally happen (3:7).<sup>39</sup>

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37. Beal writes that Haman's recommendation (to exterminate the Jews) made in response to Mordecai's refusal will both calm his own rage and establish a more stable national identity in the same way that Memuchan's [Muchaeus's] recommendation to Artaxerxes calmed his anger and established sexual politics of patriarchy in the kingdom (1:16–22) ("Esther," 55).

38. For the view that Haman's actions are a rash reaction to Mordecai, see Levenson, *Esther*, 58; Day, *Esther*, 68; David J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 295.

39. LXX Esth 3:7 places the date determined by lots as the fourteenth of the month of Adar, which is also the date mentioned in the edict (13:6). However, the date the Jews need to defend themselves changes to the thirteenth of Adar later in the

Certainly, I am not suggesting that the terror of genocide should be taken as a reasonable response to a threat to imperial power. The all too real terrors of the twentieth-century Holocaust haunt this text. But from Haman's perspective, a long-held personal vendetta finds accord with the need to maintain imperial order in light of escalating threats. Haman likely had other options and plots available to him, though they were probably equally as appalling in their display of the power of domination. But Haman's plan mirrors and intensifies Muchaeus's plan to respond to Vashti's threat by banishing her and punishing all women since the perpetrator was a woman. Haman's program for reestablishing imperial order will be the permanent elimination of the offending party and anyone who might have similar motives for defiant negotiation as Mordecai did on behalf of his God. The anti-Jewish sentiments present in Haman's plot "to destroy the whole race of Mordecai" (3:7), then, are a tool Haman uses both to settle a personal feud and to restore balance to Persian imperial power threatened through Mordecai's indirect challenge to Artaxerxes's honor and hegemonic masculinity.<sup>40</sup> Even though empires often use non-benign tools to secure their domination, Haman's choice of instrument is indeed horrifically heinous.

#### HAMAN'S RECOMMENDATION TO ARTAXERXES (3:8–11)

So Haman sets out to convince Artaxerxes of the merit of this plot to destroy the Jews. In his recommendation, Haman utilizes a discourse of difference and of defiance. By painting the Jews as different, even exceptionally different in a diverse kingdom, Haman employs and emphasizes

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book (8:12, 16:20, 9:1). MT Esth 3:7 lacks the date in its text, but AT Esth 4:7 reads "the thirteenth" (Levenson, *Esther*, 70; Moore, *Additions*, 189).

40. Fox writes, "It was not because of his [Haman's] spite for the Jews that Haman set out to eliminate them. Rather, he makes antisemitism an *instrument* for achieving perfect personal revenge" (*Character and Ideology*, 181, emphasis original). While I would agree with Fox, I believe more is at stake for Haman in his representation of Artaxerxes and investment in the imperial order. So anti-Semitism is a tool for both personal and imperial ends. Beal has another perspective. He argues that Mordecai's Jewish identity intensifies the personal conflict between them, thus Haman has anti-Semitic sentiments even before this encounter with Mordecai. "That is, if Mordecai had not been Jewish, his refusal to bow would not have been so aggravating" ("Esther," 47).



the already fragile state of Persian imperial power, and thus the need to eliminate any difference that leads to defiance.

Then Haman said to Artaxerxes, “There is a certain nation scattered among the other nations in all your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other nation, and they do not keep the laws of the king. It is not expedient for the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let it be decreed that they are to be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the king’s treasury.” (3:8–9)

Haman’s pitch to Artaxerxes begins by calling attention to the existence of an unnamed nation (Υπάρχει ἔθνος, 3:8). Haman leaves the details of the nation or people to which he is referring elusive. Perhaps when left unnamed this people would be a mysterious and even more terrifying threat to Artaxerxes. Or, as Fox and Day suggest, to have named the people would have called attention to individual Jewish people the king may have known and experienced positively (like Mordecai).<sup>41</sup> In either case, Haman impersonalizes the group he desires to be destroyed, “for it is much easier to destroy a faceless, anonymous group.”<sup>42</sup>

The threat of this dehumanized group is indeed imminent because they are “scattered among the other nations in all your kingdom” (δισπαρμένον ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν ἐν πάσῃ τῇ βασιλείᾳ σου, 3:8).<sup>43</sup> Whatever charge Haman makes against this nation, the threat they pose is universal, not localized, because they are scattered throughout the kingdom.<sup>44</sup> In other words, any hidden transcript they may have against the king or Persian imperial order is not atomized, but capable of widespread resonance that would pose a significant threat to the maintenance of domination by the Persian government.<sup>45</sup>

Haman, then, calls attention to the difference and defiance of this scattered nation. They have their own laws, which are different from Persian

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41. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 48; Day, *Esther*, 70–71.

42. Day, *Esther*, 71.

43. In MT Esth 3:8, the nation is described as מפוזר ומפּרד (“scattered and separate”). The second participle describing Jews as separate has been shown to be a half-lie of sorts about Jews since Mordecai serves at the palace gate and so has not separated himself from Persian life, even though Jews may separate themselves in terms of any social interactions that might interfere with their religious commitments (i.e., dietary laws) (Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 48–49).

44. Davidson, “Diversity, Difference, and Access to Power,” 282.

45. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 221–24.



laws, and they do not keep the laws that the king imposes. The inference made by many scholars is that the individual laws of this scattered people refer to religious Jewish laws, the torah, which Haman constructs as in conflict with Persian laws.<sup>46</sup> In a narrative read of LXX Esther, the laws of Jewish people are mentioned in Mordecai's commendation to Esther to fear God and keep his commandments (2:20). To what these commandments refer is not explicit, but there exists a tension for Esther in living under Artaxerxes's authority but also under Mordecai/God's commands. Different laws exist for her, but their existence does not imply a need to abandon Persian laws for God's commands. However, one Persian law has been violated by a Jew at this point in Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman (3:2). In his case, the second law of the Jewish Decalogue forbidding bowing down to or worshipping idols (13:14) is in conflict with a Persian law (3:2). Other than this, however, Mordecai has followed Persian laws, even turning his adopted-daughter/wife over to the king's harem (2:8). So, Haman's statement is half-lie and half-truth in regard to Mordecai.<sup>47</sup> But Haman takes this half-truth about Mordecai and escalates it from being about one person and one, albeit significant, law, to claiming general disobedience to Persian law by an entire people, the whole race of Mordecai (3:7). "They do not keep the laws of the king" (3:8).

Fox finds that Haman's manipulative rhetoric clouds the lack of a true danger to Persia by escalating the threat from one person's insubordination onto that of an entire people.<sup>48</sup> But, on the contrary, however true or untrue his statement is, Haman does highlight a significant threat to the Persian Empire—that of difference and defiance. The totalitarian unity of an imperial society depends on reducing difference and increasing compliance as was evident when Vashti's threat of double difference and act of defiance endangered the masculine imperial order previously.<sup>49</sup> But the ambivalent nature of difference is that while it endangers imperial power, difference is also necessary for colonizer-superiority to be substantiated.<sup>50</sup> Drawing on the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio

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46. E.g., Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 49; Levenson, *Esther*, 70–71; Day, *Esther*, 70; Berlin, *Esther*, 39–40; Moore, *Additions*, 192.

47. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 47–49.

48. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 50.

49. LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 35.

50. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 121–74.

Negri, Davidson differentiates between diversity and difference in imperial systems of domination.<sup>51</sup>

The distinction between diversity and difference lies in the forms of resistance to overarching homogenizing tendencies. “Diversity” is constituted by differences in ethnicities, languages, cultures, and religious expressions—the variations that empires anticipate and use to justify their existence. Diversity serves to constitute the Other against which the imperial Self makes sense, exists, and engages in empire building. Precisely because the imperial Self views itself as the paradigm of humanity, it requires diversity for its rule and, therefore, employs mechanisms to manage diversity. As long as diversity buys into the larger imperial narrative, accepts its overarching forms of rule, and keeps its place on the periphery, then stability is ensured in the empire.... “Difference,” on the other hand, resists the binary construction that secures imperial power. Difference opts out of the imperial narratives, discards the predetermined identities, and claims its unique subjectivity. Difference, even in its smallest numbers, threatens imperial power. In the book of Esther, Haman paints the Jews as different and, therefore, potentially destabilizing of imperial rule.<sup>52</sup>

Diversity has been present in descriptions of the Persian Empire throughout LXX Esther with Artaxerxes ruling over 127 provinces extending from India to Ethiopia (1:1), with governors and peoples of these various nations gathering together for a banquet (1:1–8), a royal decree issued to every province in its own language, and women from all the provinces being brought to the royal harem (2:3).<sup>53</sup> LXX Esther’s Persia is not a homogenous place. After all, Haman himself is also a person of a different nation as a Bougaen!<sup>54</sup> But despite Persia’s plurality, Haman constructs the

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51. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

52. Davidson, “Diversity, Difference, and Access to Power,” 284–85.

53. Davidson, “Diversity, Difference, and Access to Power,” 284; Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 56.

54. Perhaps the difference that Haman constructs for Mordecai is a mirror of Haman’s own insecurity in his identity ambivalence, since, like Mordecai, he is a non-Persian, an outsider who has negotiated his own agency and access in the Persian world. Beal, “Esther,” 52; Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 58; Jonathan Magonet, “The Liberal and the Lady: Esther Revisited,” *Judaism* 29 (1980): 175.

Jews as an exceptional or singular "other" against all peoples of the Persian Empire.<sup>55</sup> "Their laws are different from those of every other nation" (3:8).

Beal finds that Haman specifically constructs Jews as different and a threat to maintainable imperial diversity based on their ethnicity. Beal understands the two oppressing decrees, one concerning the subordination of women (1:19–22) and the one Haman will propose to destroy Jews, as "the establishment and shoring up of a larger identity-political ordering of power (one based on sexual identity and one based on ethnic identity)."<sup>56</sup> But Vashti's threat was about more than just her sexual identity as a woman, which in itself was not a threatening identity in a diverse kingdom, it was about being a woman who chose to defy and disrupt the masculine imperial order. Thus, she was a double threat of difference. Likewise, ethnic difference is not the only disruption at stake in Haman's proposal. Rather, in Mordecai's negotiation of defiance to Haman, Mordecai has rejected the ideological imperial metanarrative of superiority, and placed the superiority and hegemonic masculinity of the God of the Jews in conflict with the god of the Persians, Artaxerxes.<sup>57</sup> So like Vashti, Mordecai represents a double threat of difference. In itself, being a Jew is not a threatening identity in a diverse kingdom, but being a Jew who disrupts the masculine imperial order is. In the same, yet horrifically amplified, way that all women in the Persian Empire were forced into compliance with the masculine imperial order through the decree of subordination and the queen-finding scheme to eliminate the double threat of difference, all Jews will suffer on account of Mordecai's double difference.

But as is the case with the ambivalence of difference, it is not only a threat, but diversity is also necessary for colonizers to maintain dominance. When the opposition of the "other" is eliminated, or projected as eliminated, then what remains is a measure of sameness, the reduction of the diversity necessary for superiority.<sup>58</sup> As was the case when women were forced to conform to patriarchy (1:16–22) and move to the center of power as they were brought into the king's harem (2:1–4), the narrowing of difference created opportunities for agency. Such is also the case in the

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55. Beal, "Esther," 51.

56. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 58.

57. Mann, *Sources of Social Power*, 19–24; Perdue and Carter, *Israel and Empire*, 30–31.

58. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 56–57.

further negotiation exhibited by Mordecai and Esther discussed in subsequent chapters.

#### ARTAXERXES ACCEPTS HAMAN'S PROPOSAL (3:10–11)

Haman's argument for the elimination of difference and defiance proves successful with the king. Even without knowing Mordecai's actions, or actually any details of what has provoked Haman to make this proposal, the king readily accepts (3:10–11). Establishing stability is Artaxerxes's primary concern since he is worried about the chain of dissent that can be ignited by undermining imperial rule.<sup>59</sup> So even though Haman offers the king an exorbitant amount of money to enact this decree (3:9), the king does not need to be paid by Haman but is happy to absorb any cost involved in destroying a threatening nation.<sup>60</sup> Surely a king who can pay for a 180-day banquet and who has a military that can conquer and maintain 127 provinces has enough economic and military resources to manage genocide.<sup>61</sup> Artaxerxes even gives Haman the signet ring off his finger to seal the decree himself, and gives Haman *carte blanche* to do whatever he wants with the different and defiant nation (3:11b).<sup>62</sup> If Haman had not been considered a direct extension or representative of Artaxerxes before

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59. Davidson, "Diversity, Difference, and Access to Power," 283–84.

60. Based on the estimate of the total revenue of the Persian Empire by Herodotus (*Hist.* 3.95), Paton calculates that Haman offers two-thirds of the annual income of the state (*Esther*, 205–6). Moore suggests that *Τὸ μὲν ἀργύριον ἔχε* ("Keep the money," 3:11) should literally be translated "the silver is given to you" (*Additions*, 189). Thus the king is not really refusing Haman's offer but engaging in Near Eastern bargaining.

61. Was the king's army going to carry out this pogrom, or were the Persian people supposed to be involved? The edict is not clear, but only says Jews will be utterly destroyed by "the swords of their enemies." Day imagines that the Susaites who are thrown into confusion in 3:15 are would-be assassins (*Esther*, 74). But even though the edict is posted throughout the kingdom (3:12–13; 13:1; 3:14), it could be so that military officials know or to warn Jews, not only to enlist assassins. In either case, the wording is unclear and so, given the excessively powerful portrait of Artaxerxes, it seems acceptable to assume that he would undertake this massacre on his own resources.

62. Both Fox and Levenson find an echo of Gen 41:42 in this passage as Pharaoh also removes a signet ring from his hand and puts it on Joseph's finger to appoint him as a proxy ruler. But where Joseph's elevation works for the deliverance of the Israelites, Haman's will bring violence and determination to end the lives of all Jews (Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 52; Levenson *Esther*, 72).

this instance, his role as the king's proxy in any matter of politics, honor, or masculinity is now evident.

THE EDICT OF EXTERMINATION (3:12–13; ADDITION B 13:1–7; 3:14)

“So on the thirteenth day of the first month the king's secretaries were summoned” (3:12). The secretaries convene to pen a decree in the first month of the year, Nisan, which is also the month in which Mordecai's dream took place (11:2) and the month when Passover is observed (Exod 12). Levenson, Beal, and Day have commented on the relation of Passover to the events in MT Esther. Though the edict LXX Esther depicts as written in Nisan is of annihilation for Jews, the ritual celebrated in Passover is of redemption from an overwhelming power—the same kind of redemption needed in Esther. In both cases, a liminal figure, Moses and Esther, stand toe-to-toe with a foreign leader, Pharaoh and Artaxerxes, in order to bring about deliverance. The difference between the two, though, is that Moses represents God's action and interests and in MT Esther God is absent.<sup>63</sup> But in LXX Esther God's presence and determination of events have been established since the outset of the book in Mordecai's dream (11:12), so Esther's and Mordecai's actions seem to be in accordance with God's determination and thus they can act on behalf of God just as Moses did.

However, when Moses is evoked by the mention of Nisan, mass murder is alluded to as well as deliverance. Pharaoh orders the destruction of all Hebrew baby boys (Exod 1:15–22), which Moses escapes just as Esther escapes the extermination of the Jews ordered by Artaxerxes. But more than a Hebrew genocide that the hero escapes, Moses's story also involves an Egyptian mass murder as God passes through Egypt and kills every firstborn Egyptian son (Exod 11:4–7; 12:29), and delivers the Hebrews through the ritual of the lamb (Exod 12:1–13). Just as God's deliverance and a threat of mass murder for Jews is evoked in the allusion to Moses and Passover, so too might the deliverance enacted by the reverse destruction of the Jewish enemy, the Persians (9:1–16), be foreshadowed by the allusion.

The decree the secretaries are summoned to write in the month of Nisan both explains and orders the annihilation of Persian Jews on the fourteenth day of the twelfth month of Adar (3:13; 13:6) some eleven

63. Levenson, *Esther*, 70; Beal, “Esther,” 49; Day, *Esther*, 76–77.

months later. Day conveys how the delay of the edict's enforcement can be read ambivalently. On one hand, perhaps the delay is a measure of generosity provided so that Jews might escape Persia or make preparations to hide. But on the other hand, it may cause intense psychological damage as Jews are forced to live in an extended period of terror and frightful anticipation.<sup>64</sup>

The same kind of ambivalence of the decree's delay, which paints Artaxerxes and Persia as both magnanimous and terrifying, is also emphasized in the text of the edict found in Addition B. The first matter to be discussed concerning the edict is whether or not Artaxerxes should be implicated in the decreed annihilation of the Jews. Scholars have tended to release Artaxerxes from being incriminated since the edict is Haman's idea and is written "in accordance with Haman's instructions" (3:12) and even "by Haman" (13:6).<sup>65</sup> Interpreters state that Artaxerxes comes off looking more foolish, lazy, or malleable, than malevolent.<sup>66</sup> Others even suggest that since Artaxerxes did not know the name of the people doomed to extinction he has a loophole from implication.<sup>67</sup> But even though 3:12 and 13:6 claim that the secretaries wrote in accordance with Haman, Artaxerxes is the one who gives carte blanche blessing to Haman to do whatever he wishes with the nation (3:11). Further, the secretaries who penned the edict "wrote in the name of King Artaxerxes" (3:12), and the edict claims Artaxerxes's authority for the edict specifically saying, "This is a copy of the letter: 'The Great King, Artaxerxes, writes to the following governors'" (13:1). Additionally, the edict claims Artaxerxes's own responsibility in justifying the pogrom (13:1–4). So even if it were common practice for someone else to pen a decree on behalf of the king, the edict itself paints the commands as the king's own words. Haman is merely carrying out the political power of the center that he maintains and exercises under the blessing of Artaxerxes.<sup>68</sup> The buck stops with the king and so it is

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64. Day, *Esther*, 73–74.

65. Moore, *Additions*, 192–93.

66. Day, *Esther*, 73; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 174–76 (though Fox does find Artaxerxes's indolence terrifying).

67. Levenson, *Esther*, 71.

68. Beal writes, "The king has put all power into Haman's hands. It does not, however, indicate that the king is in any sense 'off the hook' with regard to responsibility. On the contrary, the king is vesting his power in Haman (foreshadowing a later vesting of Mordecai, much to Haman's chagrin, in chapter 6)" ("Esther," 55).

Artaxerxes and the fullness of Persian power, even if manipulated, that perpetrates this crime of genocide.

But ordering a massacre is a precarious undertaking if a king desires to maintain the respect and admiration of his people. The edict wields ideological power to demonstrate Artaxerxes's "superiority" in an effort to mask his destructive power and to legitimate his actions as "for" his subordinates' benefit. The edict proclaims that Artaxerxes is great, he is ruler over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia (13:1), and as ruler of many nations he is even the master of the whole world (13:2)! But even though he is apparently master of the whole world, he is portrayed as "not elated with presumption of authority but always acting reasonably and with kindness" (13:2a). Further, the king's actions are painted and legitimated as benevolence: "I have determined to settle the lives of my subjects in lasting tranquility and, in order to make my kingdom peaceable and open to travel throughout its extent, to restore the peace desired by all people" (13:2b). Claims of accomplishing peace mask the violent means. Exertions of imperial power, like the genocide the edict is about to describe, are falsely portrayed as being done for the subordinates' benefit in an attempt to legitimate and somehow soften the unbearable force of maintaining imperial power.

The first two verses of the edict depict Artaxerxes as the model of hegemonic masculinity. Conquering foreign lands (13:1), ruling over all the world (13:2a), Artaxerxes is the epitome of male domination and *virtus* on earth.<sup>69</sup> The edict also attempts to convince readers that Artaxerxes is wise, self-controlled, reasonable, modest, and most generous to maintain peaceable order in his kingdom (13:2).<sup>70</sup> The first to reap the "patriarchal dividend" of complicit masculinities to Artaxerxes's hegemonic masculinity is Haman, the second in the kingdom, even the second father (13:6), who is also painted as wise, kind, and loyal (13:3).<sup>71</sup> With this portrait of the supposedly superior, benevolent masculinity performed by both the hegemonic male and his complicit second-in-command, the mask of benevolence disguises the violence being ordered in the horrendous annihilation of an entire people group.

Artaxerxes's decree, then, describes that Haman has made an apparently astute observation of a threat that exists to the harmony of the

69. Connell, *Masculinities*, 185; Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 135.

70. Conway, *Behold the Man*, 21–34.

71. For the phrase "patriarchal dividend," see Connell, *Masculinities*, 79.

kingdom, its way of life, and all the good that Persia is working toward (13:4b–5). Thus a threat exists to Artaxerxes and the hegemonic masculinity upon which the masculine imperial institution is built. The threat is that “there is scattered a certain hostile people” (13:4), presumably Persian Jews to whom Haman has referred previously (3:6–7). The edict adds a descriptor of *δυσμενῆ* (“hostile”), not present in 3:8, which elevates the threat that these people pose, since they are not just different or disobedient, but antagonistic. Additionally, “scattered” again appears as a descriptor for the offending people similarly to how Haman portrays Persian Jews in his initial recommendation to Artaxerxes (3:8), though a different word is used in the edict (13:4).<sup>72</sup> Like Haman’s initial reference to the scatteredness of Persian Jews, the universality of their threat is again emphasized.<sup>73</sup> Three mentions that the decree must be copied and delivered to all 127 provinces provides ample evidence that Jews are universally present throughout the Persian Empire (3:12–13; 13:1; 13:14). Further, Haman reemphasizes the difference and defiance of these people as their laws are not only “different” (*ἐξάλλοι*, 3:8), but also “opposed” (*ἀντίθετον*, 13:4) to those of every nation so that they disregard the laws of the kings (13:4).<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the description of the threat is escalating again. First, Haman progressed the threat from Mordecai disobeying one Persian law to his entire race having different laws and not keeping any of the Persian laws (3:8). Now, Jews not only disobey Persian laws, but their own laws are opposed to the laws of all nations and kings ... presumably of the entire world. Thus, their elimination will not just be because the king should not tolerate difference (3:8), but because these people are characterized as singularly different and hostilely opposed to the fabric of Persian society (13:5), and perhaps even the fabric of the entire world.

Thus, as magnanimous and benevolent as Artaxerxes and Persia are depicted to be, Artaxerxes will execute a measure that is equally terrifying. The decree declares that “all—wives and children included—be utterly destroyed by the swords of their enemies without pity or restraint ... so that those who have long been hostile and remain so may in a single day go down in violence to Hades, and leave our government completely secure

72. 3:8 calls them *διεσπαρμένον*, while 13:4 calls them *ἀναμεμείχθαι*.

73. Davidson, “Diversity, Difference, and Access to Power in Diaspora,” 282.

74. The word *ἀντίθετος* (“opposition”) can be a military metaphor. See 1 Macc 13:20. Moore, *Additions*, 192.



and untroubled hereafter" (13:6–7).<sup>75</sup> Indeed, this is not only mass murder, with men, women, and children destroyed together with the entire root (ἀπολέσαι ὀλορριζει, when translated literally), this is an atrocious plan for ethnic cleansing.<sup>76</sup> Koller remarks that this decree of the king (like the king's other decrees) becomes an all-powerful weapon that targets innocents and is a far cry from being the defense of a just society.<sup>77</sup> But, rather than Artaxerxes being either a just-society-defender or an innocent-targeter, the decree constructs the ambivalent king as simultaneously both.

In addition to the ideological power utilized to concoct a narrative that legitimizes the superiority and benevolence of Artaxerxes and Persia through the atrocious extermination of Jews, all Persia's networks of power are on display in the execution of this edict. Artaxerxes possesses the political power to issue a decree from the center to as many as 127 provinces, the military power and might necessary to slaughter countless Jews in the Persian kingdom, and the superfluous economic resources necessary to provide for its enactment, so much so that he does not even need Haman's extravagant bribe.<sup>78</sup>

#### READING ARTAXERXES'S PERSECUTING EDICT OF EXTERMINATION

Given the intermittent harassment they faced from their rulers, readers among Jews in Ptolemaic Alexandria may have found resonance with the terrors of an edict for persecution and/or annihilation.<sup>79</sup> That persecution was a reality faced by Jews in Ptolemaic Alexandria may be attested by the existence of 3 Maccabees, a Jewish text from Alexandria in similar time frame that is also a story of persecution, deliverance, allowance of

75. The mention of Hades may be indicative of the Greek origin of the letter (White Crawford, "Esther," 953). In Greek mythology Hades was both the god of the underworld and the underworld itself. Hades was commonly used by Jews writing in Greek to refer to Sheol. Richard Bauckham, "Hades," *ABD* 3:14.

76. Greek γυναιξι (13:6), as a form of γυνή, can be translated as wife or woman; see *GELS*, s.v. "γυνή." For ἀπολέσαι ὀλορριζει, see *GELS*, s.v. "ὀλορριζει." Moore literally translates the phrase as "to destroy, with root and branch" (*Additions*, 192). For ethnic cleansing, see Beal, "Esther," 55.

77. Koller, *Esther in Ancient Thought*, 61.

78. Or if the Persians themselves will be expected to enact the genocide, then surely military power would still be necessary to force Persians into following the decree.

79. On the intermittent harassment of the Jews, see Barclay, *Jews in Mediterranean Diaspora*, 35–41, 202.

revenge, and the establishment of a celebration to commemorate the occasion.<sup>80</sup> Many scholars have noted the similarities between 3 Maccabees and LXX Esther, including their numerous feasts, prayers of the people for deliverance, and even the presence of royal edicts. Like the one found in Addition B, 3 Maccabees also contains an edict decreeing the annihilation of Jews, men, women, and children on behalf of the “good” order of the state (3 Macc 3:12–30).<sup>81</sup> But rather than being set in a Persian kingdom, the historical fiction of 3 Maccabees is set in Alexandria during the reign of Ptolemy Philopater (221–204 BCE), and may recall specifically the persecution of Euergetes.<sup>82</sup> The memory of the persecution of Euergetes haunts readers of both LXX Esther and 3 Maccabees as they sought to determine how to negotiate their situations under imperial power and were reminded that there were dangerous consequences associated with negotiations of defiance.

But reminiscences of persecution that warned of the cost of defiance were not unknown to readers in Hasmonean Judea either. Fox finds the

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80. Questions of the date of 3 Maccabees are not completely resolved. Possible dates range from the last century of Ptolemaic rule (100–30 BCE) or in the early decades of Roman rule of Alexandria and Egypt (30 BCE–70 CE). For a summary of arguments, see Sara R. Johnson, “3 Maccabees,” in *The T&T Clark Companion to the Septuagint*, ed. by James K. Aitken (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 294–96. Likewise, questions of dependence between LXX Esther and 3 Maccabees have not been definitely answered. See Noah Hacham, “3 Maccabees and Esther: Parallels, Intertextuality, and Diaspora Identity,” *JBL* 126 (2007): 765–67 for previous arguments, and 767–85 for Hacham’s own conclusion, which does not determine the direction of dependence but gives specific textual evidence for its existence.

81. E.g., Hacham, “3 Maccabees and Esther,” 765–785; Phillip S. Alexander, “3 Maccabees, Hanukkah, and Purim,” in *Biblical Hebrew, Biblical Texts: Essays in Memory of Michael P. Weitzman*, ed. by Ada Rapoport-Albert and Gillian Greenberg, JSOTSup 333 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 321–39; Harrington, *Invitation to the Apocrypha*, 175; Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 122; Moore, *Additions*, 195–99.

82. Johnson, “3 Maccabees,” 294. Another key difference is that the “revenge” of the Jews is to only kill three hundred other Jews who betray loyalty to God (3 Macc 7:14–15) rather than killing the non-Jews who sought to kill them in Esther (9:1–16). Noah Hacham, “3 Maccabees: An Anti-Dionysian Polemic,” in *Ancient Fiction: The Matrix of Early Christian and Jewish Narrative*, ed. Jo-Ann A. Brant, Charles W. Hedrick, and Chris Shea, SemeiaSt 32 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 179. Collins notes that historical reminiscence of Euergetes may be reflected here, but suggests that persecution under the Roman emperor Caligula in 38–41 CE may also be reflected (Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 122–31).

charge that the laws of the Jews are opposed to those of the king to be similar to the cultural uniformity dictated by Antiochus IV and tracts of anti-Judaism in the Hellenistic and Roman period.<sup>83</sup> In the same way that Alexandrian Jews were haunted by the persecution of Euergetes (mid-second century BCE), Jews in Hasmonean Judea were plagued with memories of the terror Antiochus IV inflicted on Judea. In 167 BCE Antiochus IV sent Apollonius, one of his military commanders, to conduct widespread terror at the threat of killing all Jewish men and selling all the women and children into slavery. Though not all were killed since Jews continued to inhabit the city subsequently, numerous innocent citizens were murdered, the city was ransacked, and parts were set on fire. Then, later that year Antiochus IV issued his most extreme measure, outlawing the practice of Jewish religion in series of decrees.<sup>84</sup> Rather than keeping the Sabbath and other holy days, practicing circumcision of children, and offering sacrifices to YHWH, the Jewish people were now required to assert their allegiance only to Antiochus IV and his gods to whom the Jerusalem temple was rededicated and defiled with the sacrifices of pigs (Josephus, *A.J.* 12.168). Disobedience to Antiochus IV's decrees was the equivalent of suicide.<sup>85</sup>

While Artaxerxes's edict for annihilation in Addition B is not an exact replica of Antiochus IV's barbarism against Jews, the tormenting recollection of his widespread oppression could certainly be connected with Artaxerxes's pogrom. As Artaxerxes utilized the elimination of difference and defiance to maintain imperial power, so also is Antiochus IV portrayed as enacting terror on Judea to preserve power. "Then the king wrote to his whole kingdom that all should be one people, and that all should give up their particular customs" (1 Macc 1:41–42). Moreover, just as Mordecai chose to loyally participate in Persian society and then later chose not to bow to Haman, Judean Jews living under the terror-filled reign of Antiochus IV were forced to choose if they would worship as the king

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83. Fox references the work of J. N. Sevenster who traces Hellenistic anti-Semitism in Diodorus, Josephus's *Against Apion*, Pompeius Trogus, Tacitus, Apollonius Molon, and others. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 49, referencing J. N. Sevenster, *The Roots of Pagan Anti-Semitism in the Ancient World*, NovTSup 41 (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 89–144.

84. Erich S. Gruen, "Hellenism and Persecution: Antiochus IV and the Jews," in *Hellenistic History and Culture*, ed. Peter Green, Hellenistic Culture and Society 9 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 247–49.

85. Gruen, "Hellenism and Persecution," 193–210.

commanded, and to decide which acts and requirements might cross the line of their religious integrity.

But perhaps even the forced conversions and circumcisions of John Hyrcanus I could also be imagined in line with Artaxerxes's edict of extermination. Josephus (*A.J.* 13.257–258) reports that when Hyrcanus conquered Ituraea, he forced the Itureans to convert to Judaism and be circumcised or else they would be expelled from the land. The forced circumcisions surely inflicted terror as male Ituraeans would have feared their reproductive organs being “destroyed” by the swords of their enemies in a similar way that Persian Jews feared their entire selves and even the root of their race being destroyed by the sword (13:6). Moreover, Hyrcanus's successor, Alexandar Jannaeus was also not afraid to destroy his enemies, even when they were Pharisaic Jews (Josephus, *A.J.* 13.379–383).<sup>86</sup> The same heinous, violent, and ghastly means of keeping order in a kingdom were not only used by non-Jewish kingdoms in which Jews lived, but also by the Hasmonean rulers.

In the edict of Artaxerxes, readers in Ptolemaic Alexandria and Hasmonean Judea would have heard echoes of the methods of not only their foreign rulers, but Jewish rulers as well. Thus, they would have been reminded that any power, whether Jewish or non-Jewish, can take the form of horrendous oppression, and so it is in need of constant negotiation and assessment of consequences.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter explored Mordecai's continuing negotiation with Artaxerxes and Haman, which shifted from deference to defiance. Mordecai's challenge to Haman and their ensuing conflict was demonstrated to reflect a contest for hegemonic masculinity on behalf of the “gods” the rivals represent. In his response to Mordecai's defiance, Haman utilizes an ideological discourse of difference and defiance, othering Jews, in order to make the case for genocide. Artaxerxes agrees and issues the edict in which all Persia's networks of power are on display. Readers in Ptolemaic Egypt may have found resonance with Mordecai's shifting means of negotiation. Different forms of negotiation may have been necessary in Ptolemaic Alexandria, since the Ptolemaic rulers sometimes supported the Alexandrian

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86. Eshel, *Dead Sea Scrolls and the Hasmonean State*, 117–31.

Jewish community, and at other times antagonized and persecuted them. Memories of that persecution may have also allowed Ptolemaic readers to identify, unfortunately, with the terrors of Artaxerxes's edict of extermination. The same also would have been true for readers in Hasmonean Judea who had distant, as well as recent, memories of the extreme methods of maintaining a kingdom as evidenced by the persecution of the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV and the executions and forced circumcisions enforced by Alexander Jannaeus and John Hyrcanus I respectively.

The next chapter turns to examine the subordinate transcripts, both public and hidden, that are recorded by LXX Esther in response to the imperial decree of annihilation.



6

Subordinate Transcripts of Negotiation and  
Esther's Progression to Become God's Representative  
(3:15–4:17; 13:8–14:19)

And the whole righteous nation was troubled; they feared the evils that threatened them, and were ready to perish.

—LXX Esther 11:9

Power relations imply acceptance on the part of those subject to them. They also imply resistance.

—J. M. Barbalet, "Power and Resistance"

Artaxerxes's edict of Jewish extermination provokes public responses by the Susaites (3:15b), Mordecai (4:1–2), and Persian Jews (4:3). After the public responses, the private conversation of Mordecai and Esther is reported (4:4–17), as are the prayers of Mordecai (13:8–17) and Esther (14:1–19). In this chapter I argue that each of these responses should be analyzed as subordinate transcripts of negotiation. Scott describes the public and private "performances" (words, behaviors, actions, interactions, etc.) between people involved in dominant power groups and those who are subjected by those powers. Of these performances, Scott differentiates between public transcripts, which constitute the open interactions between subordinates and dominants, and hidden transcripts, which comprise discourse occurring "offstage," outside of the direct observation of the opposing group.<sup>1</sup> Upon examination of the public and hidden transcripts of response to the decree of annihilation, I argue that the differing negotiation methodologies of Mordecai and Esther are demonstrated and Esther progresses in agency to negotiate as God's representative.

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1. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 1–16.

## PUBLIC TRANSCRIPTS OF SUBORDINATE NEGOTIATION (3:15–4:3)

## THE PUBLIC TRANSCRIPT OF THE SUSAITES' TUMULT (3:15)

When word of the king's decree for Jewish annihilation is expedited throughout Susa, "the city was thrown into confusion" (ἐταράσσετο δὲ ἡ πόλις, 3:15). The verb *ταράσσω*, which can mean "to stir or set in motion physically as in an earthquake, to stir or trouble one's mental state, to confuse, or to destabilize," is the verb from which the noun *τάραχος* ("tumult") is derived.<sup>2</sup> The noun form appeared twice in Addition A's description of Mordecai's dream to predict tumult on the earth (*τάραχος ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς*, 11:5), and even great tumult on the earth (*τάραχος μέγας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς*, 11:8). As the physical and mental consequences of the predicted wrestling dragons unfolds in Mordecai and Haman's conflict, it seems fitting that a measure of tumult would appear in Susa.

But why is the entire city destabilized as if an emotional earthquake has happened? Kahana posits that it may be assumed that only Jews living in Susa were the ones thrown into a state of fear as they learn about the edict.<sup>3</sup> But no such delineation is made. Berlin recognizes that all the inhabitants of Susa are "dumbfounded" (her translation of MT Esther) but says the Susaites should be read as a kind of musical chorus who reinforce the decree and show the reader how to react.<sup>4</sup> But Day emphasizes the distress of the Susaites themselves and suggests that perhaps not all Susaites despised the Jews as Haman does and so they feel forlorn over what is to come.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Jews may not have been easily discernible in a crowd, as has been evidenced by Esther's ability to keep her "people" or "country" secret (2:10, 20) and Mordecai's need to tell the king's courtiers he is a Jew (3:4).<sup>6</sup> So perhaps the emotional distress of the Susaites is that they think they will be mistaken as Jews and be utterly destroyed as well.

Whatever the cause of the tumult in Susa, its presence indicates a public transcript of distress over the actions of the Persian government. Rather than submissively presenting a surface of consent to the decree, the

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2. GELS, s.v. "ταράσσω."

3. Kahana, *Esther*, 169–70.

4. Berlin, *Esther*, 43. She finds the same chorus-like effect of the Susaites in MT Esth 8:15.

5. Day, *Esther*, 74.

6. Day, *Esther*, 75–76.



Susaites have let a feeling that appears to contest the public transcript of the dominants move from a hidden realm into the public sphere, another potential rupture between the hidden and public transcript.<sup>7</sup> Though the upheaval in Susa is not presented as an overt challenge or a negotiation of defiance to the king, it seems to place the Susaites indirectly in opposition to the king and Persia itself. While the Susaites are in turmoil, the king and Haman are carousing together (3:15). Like the banquet of chapter 1 (1:1–8), the king and Haman feast together as a display of power. After exercising ideological, military, economic, and political power through writing and disseminating the decree of extermination, Artaxerxes's and Haman's carousing banquet functions as a celebration of their supposedly insurmountable power. But if their banquet took place in the palace as the previous banquets did, then the disorder of the Susaites occurring just outside the palace gates stands in stark contrast. No longer are the Susaites invited into the banquet to partake of the display of power as they were before, now they sit on the outside perhaps contemplating the destructiveness that lies beneath Persia's and Artaxerxes's mask of superiority and benevolence. Further, the Susaites' tumult stands in stark contrast to the peace and tranquility envisioned by the king's "benevolent" actions of annihilation (13:2b). Perhaps an avalanche of defiance is building. The crack in the surface of consent to hegemony begun by Vashti and widened by Mordecai continues to expand.

#### THE PUBLIC TRANSCRIPT OF MORDECAI'S PROTEST (4:1–2)

Attention moves from the city's response to the edict back to Mordecai, the very culprit whose defiance caused the decree in the first place.

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth, and sprinkled himself with ashes; then he rushed through the street of the city, shouting loudly: "An innocent nation is being destroyed!" He got as far as the city gate, and there he was stopped, because no one was allowed to enter the courtyard in sackcloth and ashes. (4:1–2)

Why exactly Mordecai tore his clothes and adorned himself in sackcloth and ashes has been amply considered by scholars. He may have performed

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7. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 19.

these actions as a religious act to mourn the mass death anticipated, as repentance for the fact that he had caused this calamity which awaited Persian Jews, to avert the divine wrath which may have been presumed to be the cause of the edict or even to get Esther's attention by shocking her into action with his extreme religious act.<sup>8</sup>

But sackcloth and ashes are not limited to Jewish religious practices. The king of Nineveh puts on the attire of sackcloth and ashes to proclaim a decree (Jonah 3:6–7).<sup>9</sup> So too do the servants of Ben-hadad array themselves in similar fashion to convey a protest with the king of Israel to save Ben-hadad's life (1 Kgs 20:31–32).<sup>10</sup> Garbing oneself in sackcloth and ashes was not necessarily a religious practice, but also a means of political proclamation or protest. Mordecai dons the sackcloth and ashes for that very reason, to register publicly his protest and opposition to the decree.<sup>11</sup>

Mordecai moves through the city publicly announcing opposition to the state. He ends his citywide ranting at the gate to the courtyard, a place where he has previously been stationed and his voice is well known (11:3; 12:1; 2:11, 19; 3:2–4). At the gate he can scream his challenge directly at the palace, the center from which political power issued the decree. The first report of Mordecai's direct speech in LXX Esther ("An innocent nation is being destroyed," 4:1) continues his negotiation of defiance with a public transcript that directly contests the ideological narrative Artaxerxes peddles—Jews are not dangerous to Persia's welfare and superiority, but innocent.

#### THE PUBLIC TRANSCRIPT OF PERSIAN JEWS (4:3)

But participation in a public transcript of protest is not limited to Mordecai alone. "And in every province where the king's proclamation had been posted there was a loud cry of mourning and lamentation among the Jews,

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8. As a religious act of mourning is mentioned as a possibility by, e.g., Day, *Esther*, 79. As repentance is mentioned as a possibility by, e.g., Moore, *Esther*, 47. As an attempt to divert divine wrath is mentioned as a possibility by, e.g., Paton, *Esther*, 214. As an attempt to get Esther's attention is mentioned as a possibility by, e.g., Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 57.

9. Berlin, *Esther*, 45.

10. Beal, "Esther," 59.

11. Hazony, *Dawn*, 115–22; Berlin, *Esther*, 45; and mentioned as a possibility by Beal, "Esther," 59.

and they put on sackcloth and ashes" (4:3). Like the emotional tumult of the Susaites, the terror of what is to come has reached the farthest provinces and upheaval has resulted. Again, the opposite of the peace and tranquility Artaxerxes is supposedly working toward (13:2b) has occurred. Persian Jews were in mourning and lamenting their fate (4:3), as would be expected in response to the frightful decree against them. But, the text does not state that they put on sackcloth and ashes specifically for the purpose of mourning. Rather, they wore this clothing in addition to their cries of lamentation. Their collective mighty cries are even reiterated after Mordecai's prayer in Addition C (13:18). This may signify that Persian Jews experienced emotional distress (cries of mourning and lamentation) *and* that they also joined Mordecai by participating in a public protest (put on sackcloth and ashes). The emotional trouble of the Susaites and the public protest of Mordecai are combined in the response of Persian Jews.

Though we can only assume previous hidden transcripts of dissent were elicited by the edict dictating women's patriarchal subordination (1:16–22) and the decree commanding families to relinquish valuable daughters and economic resources (2:1–4), a public transcript of opposition spreading throughout the provinces is explicit in the public cries and protests of Persian Jews.<sup>12</sup> Widespread resonance of contention against the exertion of Persia's networks of imperial power continues as the apparent charm of hegemony has been ruptured.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, LXX Esther also now turns to reveal the hidden transcripts of subordinates, which divulge the off-stage conversations and loyalties of Mordecai and Esther.<sup>14</sup>

#### HIDDEN TRANSCRIPTS OF SUBORDINATE NEGOTIATION

(4:4–17; 13:8–17; 14:1–19)

When Vashti negotiated with Artaxerxes in defiance, the reader never heard her voice, her thoughts, or her motivations. She did not speak even a word of dialogue. Neither did the reader have the opportunity to hear how the women and families oppressed by the two decrees of submission (1:16–22) and queen candidate in-gathering (2:1–4) negotiated the power exerted upon them. But, LXX Esther provides the reader with hidden

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12. Because when power is asserted, resistance is inevitable (Barbalet, "Power and Resistance").

13. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 224–27.

14. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 225.

transcripts performed in negotiation of Artaxerxes's and Haman's edict against the Jews. These hidden transcripts allow the reader to fill in the gaps of tension between the public actions and transcripts of Mordecai and Esther and the attitudes behind their performances. This section first considers Mordecai's and Esther's conversation through Hachratheus, her eunuch (4:4–17), and then turns attention to the prayers of Mordecai (13:8–17) and Esther (14:1–19).

#### MORDECAI AND ESTHER'S HIDDEN CONVERSATION OF NEGOTIATION (4:4–17)

Following the pattern of the Susaites, when Esther learns from her maids and eunuchs what is going on, she is “deeply troubled by what she heard had happened” (ἐταράχθη ἀκούσασα τὸ γεγονός, 4:4a). Again, the tumult (τάραχος) of Mordecai's dream appears. If the Susaites' confusion (ἐταράσσεται, 3:15) represented the first occurrence of tumult upon the earth in Mordecai's dream (11:5), then perhaps Esther's trouble is the great tumult upon the earth that appears later in the dream (11:8). Indeed, Esther's personal upheaval will spark her actions as the river whose abundant water causes the exaltation of the lowly and the devouring of those held in honor (11:10–11; 10:6).

In response to her turmoil, Esther first sends clothes for Mordecai to put on instead of sackcloth (4:4b). Esther's motivation for sending clothes has been deduced as wanting to make his appearance acceptable so that they can talk face to face in the palace where such clothing is prohibited (4:2) and also disparaged as personal preservation, not wanting Mordecai to get her in trouble.<sup>15</sup> But more specifically, though perhaps with some intent toward personal preservation, Esther is trying to get Mordecai to end his public protest. Esther is personally a victim (and beneficiary) of the consequences of Vashti's public protest and negotiation of defiance (that is, assuming she doesn't already know of Mordecai's own defiance that resulted in these troubling circumstances). Consistently throughout their conversation in 4:5–16, Esther advocates for disguised negotiation and describes the limits of public transcripts of defiance. Mordecai's method of negotiation, on the other hand, has

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15. For the face-to-face opinion, see Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 51. For personal preservation, see Beal, “Esther,” 60.

shifted and is now characterized by public defiance. Since his second act of deference in reporting the eunuchs' plot, he has defied Haman, registered a public protest at the gates to the palace courtyard, and now, in refusing the clothes Esther offers him (4:4b), he will even defy the queen to maintain his public protest.

Before proceeding to discuss the content of their conversations, it must first be noted that Esther and Mordecai only communicate through Hachratheus, Esther's eunuch, in this episode. Esther and Mordecai are separated in three ways: first, by space as Esther is in the palace and Mordecai is at the courtyard gate; second, by status since Esther is the Persian queen and Mordecai seems to have traded his position as a servant in the king's court for the role of a publicly protesting Jew opposing the king's edict and who is marked for death; and, third, by gender.<sup>16</sup> Like the eunuchs who request Vashti's presence on behalf of the queen, and Gai who runs the king's harem, Hachratheus is a liminal eunuch who chooses to uphold these three boundaries of separation and is able to move between spaces.<sup>17</sup> But, like the assassination-plotting eunuchs, Hachratheus, existing at the boundaries, also has an opportunity for subversion. If Hachratheus didn't know before, then Esther's identity as a Jew has been revealed. Hachratheus is privileged to access information that could be the undoing of the queen. But as the eunuch who attends the queen (4:5), trust has apparently been established between Esther and Hachratheus.<sup>18</sup> Whether it was known before or now, when Esther's secret is kept, Hachratheus becomes another subversive eunuch, even one who participates in a plot to defy the king, though not by means of assassination, which is good since the fate of assassination-plotting eunuchs has been shown to be dismal.

Esther begins her mediated discourse with Mordecai by sending Hachratheus to ask for accurate information (4:5). While some have suggested her request implies that she did not know what was happening outside of the palace in MT Esther, in LXX Esther her description as having the same emotions as the Susaites who learn of the decree seems to indicate she does know of the troubling events (ἐταράχθη of Esther in 4:4; ἐταράσσεται of the

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16. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 71.

17. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 71.

18. In MT Esther, Hathach is one of the king's eunuchs (MT Esth 4:5), which places the eunuch in an even more subversive role to defy the king by keeping Esther's secret (Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 52).

Susaites in 3:15).<sup>19</sup> Rather, if she is trying to persuade Mordecai toward a more disguised negotiation, she first wants him to explain exactly what has happened from his vantage point so she can better understand and persuade him.

Mordecai's response to Esther's request for "accurate" information is threefold and functions as a plot summary: he tells Hachratheus what has happened (4:7a), describes Haman's role in the edict (4:7b), and he provides a copy of the edict itself (4:8a). What exactly Mordecai reports has happened is not explicit, but definitely both the description of Haman's role and the copy of the edict are helpful information for Esther. Knowing that Haman inspired Artaxerxes into issuing the edict will determine the course of her negotiation with Artaxerxes later, as will having knowledge of the ideological shape of the edict, that is, presuming she is literate and intelligent enough to understand the decree—an assumption implied by the text.<sup>20</sup> Any additional information Mordecai provided in his description of what happened, perhaps even his own role in refusing Haman, would also not have hurt Esther's later endeavors.

After providing details, Mordecai issues an unsolicited charge to Esther (4:8b). Mordecai is a still-present authority figure in Esther's life since he was able to command her concerning following God's commandments after she became queen (2:20). Now he again acts out of that authority and orders her (ἐντείλασθαι αὐτῇ, 4:8) to negotiate with Artaxerxes concerning the edict.<sup>21</sup> His order is for Esther to "to go and entreat the king and to beg him on behalf of her people" (εἰσελθούσῃ παραιτησασθαι τὸν βασιλέα καὶ ἀξιώσαι αὐτὸν περὶ τοῦ λαοῦ, 4:8).<sup>22</sup> The verb εἰσελθούσῃ recalls how Esther εἰσῆλθεν ("went into," likely a euphemism for sexual intercourse) the

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19. Commenting on MT Esther, see, e.g., Levenson, *Esther*, 78–79; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 58; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 300.

20. That Esther is literate in LXX Esther is an inference made by Fox, who says women in the Hellenistic world were often literate, and Day, who notices that LXX Esther is the only text where a copy of the edict is brought to Esther and the eunuch is not commanded to explain it to her as in MT Esth 4:8 (Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 60; Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 53).

21. The verb ἐντείλασθαι is from ἐντέλλομαι; when this verb is used with a dative it means "to issue an order or instruction, to enjoin" (GELS, s.v. "ἐντέλλομαι").

22. This is Jobes translation in the New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS). While the NRSV translates ἀξιώσαι αὐτόν as "for his favor," I agree with Jobes's translation, which translates it as an infinitive that is correlative to the first infinitive παραιτησασθαι. Thus, presuming that εἰσελθούσῃ is an imperatival participle in light of

king on her night of opportunity (2:16). When Esther “went into” or had intercourse with the king the first time, she was able to find favor, receive the royal diadem, and, most importantly, generate a remission of taxes (2:17–18). By claiming the agency of going into the king, her negotiation of agency positively impacted people who were oppressed by the economic power of Persia through taxes. Now Mordecai wants Esther to “go into the king” to make a request on behalf of their own people, and attempts to manipulate her to do so through the nostalgia of remembering her days as an ordinary person brought up under his care (4:8). But the difference between what Esther did in 2:16 and what Mordecai is asking her to do in 4:8 is that he tells her to entreat and beg the king directly on behalf of the people. During her first night with the king she did not directly ask the king for the benefits of tax remission. She performed a disguised negotiation of agency that happened to pay off, literally. What Mordecai is asking for now is that she change her mode of negotiation from disguised to overt. Mordecai even tries to persuade her to embrace overt negotiation by continuing his emotional manipulation of her. He emphasizes that Haman “demands our death,” and if Esther will just, “Call upon the Lord,” then God will tell her that Mordecai’s mode of negotiation is the right one (4:8b).

Esther’s response to Mordecai’s command is a long way of saying no.<sup>23</sup> She relays to Mordecai that people cannot go to the king in his inner court without being called or else they will be executed unless the king extends the golden scepter to them (4:10–11).<sup>24</sup> Based on her previous performances of obedience to Mordecai, the officers in her province who selected her in the queen-finding-scheme, Gai, and Artaxerxes, Beal says the reader should expect deference from Esther and a positive response to Mordecai’s command instead of an excuse of why she will not/cannot do as he commanded.<sup>25</sup> But a reading that presumes Esther’s deference in her previous actions is too monolithic and assumes her performances of obedience match her motivations. Indeed, her motivations may have

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the command function of the verb that precedes it, the participle and two infinitives comprise the substance of the command.

23. Beal, “Esther,” 64.

24. A contradiction is inherent in that Esther is able to approach the king without being summoned in 2:22 when she reveals the second assassination plot of eunuchs to the king. A simple resolution would be to assume that Esther passed word along to the king through palace servants, though such is not explicitly stated in the text.

25. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 71.

matched her deference, but they also may have been more ambivalent, sometimes yielding to the authorities in her life and sometimes contesting them. Telling Mordecai “no,” then, may not denote a change in Esther from obedient to disobedient, but, instead, may reveal her firm commitment to disguised negotiation with the king.

As is the case with Mordecai’s initial communication to Esther (4:7–8), Esther’s explication of her “no” to Mordecai supplies information critical for her later negotiation of Artaxerxes. “All the nations of the empire know if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is no escape for that person. Only the one to whom the king stretches out the golden scepter is safe—and it is now thirty days since I was called to go to the king” (4:11). Even if Esther did want to follow Mordecai’s command, a court custom known to the entire empire stands in her way.<sup>26</sup> The consequence of breaking that custom, going before the king without being called, is quite grim: “there is no salvation for him” (οὐκ ἔστιν αὐτῷ σωτηρία, 4:11).<sup>27</sup> Esther claims that the very thing Mordecai is looking for, salvation, is impossible if the negotiation Mordecai suggests were to be performed in exactly the manner he commands. Just in case he responds, “Well, wait until the next time you are called in for a slumber party to make the direct entreaty,” Esther also informs him that she is not summoned “to go to the king” regularly anymore.

Mordecai, however, is not deterred and so his pressure continues and elaborates the possible consequences with a threat. He says, “Esther, do not say to yourself that you alone among all the Jews will escape alive. For if you refuse to listen at such a time as this, help and protection will come to the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father’s family will perish” (4:13–14).<sup>28</sup> This threat has been read as either: (1) Mordecai

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26. Fox cites Herodotus (*Hist.* 3.72, 77, 84, 118, 140) as forbidding an unrequested approach to the king, though Herodotus does remark that it was possible to request an audience (*Character and Ideology*, 62). However, no such provision exists in the narrative world of Esther.

27. Literal translation. NRSV reads, “there is no escape for that person.”

28. “For if you refuse to listen”: author’s translation of παραχούσης from παρακούω (GELS, s.v. “παρακούω”) meaning “refuse to listen.” Though both the NRSV (“keep quiet”) and NETS (“keep silent”) maintain emphasis on Esther’s failure to speak, a more literal translation that indicates her refusal to obey Mordecai emphasizes his insistence on her compliance with his mode of negotiation. Day also notes that LXX Esther has a distinct emphasis on Mordecai’s insistence that Esther obey him because of this verb (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 56).



says Esther will not be able to pass as non-Jewish and be saved from the decreed annihilation, or (2) Mordecai says that if she does not help them then when help does arrive from another quarter, maybe even via divine providence, then Esther and her family will be taken out by either Jews or God's punishment for her failure to act.<sup>29</sup> But the focus of Mordecai's statement is not the details of how Esther and her family will perish, but on Esther's obedience to Mordecai and her adoption of his means of overt negotiation. If Esther does not do as Mordecai commands, he insists that the consequences for her and her family will be death.

One of LXX Esther's most cherished quotes, "Yet, who knows whether it was not for such a time as this that you were made queen?" (4:14), then takes on a dubious meaning as a part of Mordecai's threat that Esther must obey him or else she will die. "Who knows" is a phrase from other passages in the Hebrew Bible that "preface a guarded hope that penitential practice may induce God to relent from his harsh decree, granting deliverance where destruction had been expected (cf. 2 Sam 12:22; Joel 2:14; Jonah 3:9)."<sup>30</sup> So since obeying Mordecai is tantamount to obeying God (2:20), Mordecai further threatens that Esther must do as Mordecai says or else God will not prevent the decree from reaching fruition and grant deliverance (that Esther thinks God has handed them over to be destroyed in light of their sin is demonstrated in 14:6).<sup>31</sup>

Esther's response to Mordecai's threats is a command back to him, which he follows, and a statement that she will do what he has ordered. Esther says, "Go and gather all the Jews who are in Susa and fast on my behalf; for three days and nights do not eat or drink, and my maids and I will also go without food. After that I will go to the king, contrary to the law, even if I must die. So Mordecai went away and did what Esther had told him to do" (4:16–17).

The command Esther makes, and which Mordecai follows, is to begin a three-day fast on her behalf. Though religious overtones exist in the practice of fasting to intercede to God, like donning oneself in sackcloth and ashes, fasting also has political implications.<sup>32</sup> A fast, three days without

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29. Beal, "Esther," 64–65; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 62; Levenson, *Esther*, 80–81; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 301–2.

30. Levenson, *Esther*, 81.

31. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 43.

32. For the religious overtones, see Moore, *Esther*, 51; Levenson, *Esther*, 81; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 302.

food or drink, stands in stark contrast to the abundance of food and drink present in the many festivals in Esther.<sup>33</sup> Anne-Marieke Wetter writes of the fasting Esther prescribes in 4:16,

Reversely [from the overabundant feasting of the Persians], the fast of the Jews fulfills the function of a carnivalesque counter-movement. In *Esther*, the carnivalesque critique of the status quo and the abuse of power is not accomplished by a Bakhtinian “banquet for all the world,” but by its opposite: a fast and rites of mourning designed not only to express individual horror, but also to form a silent and condemning counterpart to the “brimming-over abundance” that characterizes the lifestyle of the elite.<sup>34</sup>

The fast Esther prescribes, then, is another form of disguised negotiation of Artaxerxes and Persian power. Esther, herself, along with her maids in the palace, join in this fast and the disguised negotiation she prescribes for Mordecai and all Jews in Susa.<sup>35</sup> Like Vashti’s banquet among the women (1:9), we might imagine the hidden transcripts that develop in such an off-stage gathering in which Esther and her maids are secretly fasting together. Did they discuss what Esther should do next? Should she follow Mordecai’s command? If she does approach Artaxerxes, how should she go about doing it in a more disguised manner than Mordecai orders her? Day comments of Esther’s community with these women, “Does Esther find this group a nascent feminist solidarity? Perhaps she recognizes the potential of a collaborative women’s community in which her female servants no longer merely cater to her but are also her allies. This previously male-oriented young girl is finding strength from the support of a group of women.”<sup>36</sup>

But Esther’s fast with her maids also contrasts Vashti’s feasting with the women since Esther and her maids will have a reverse-feast by

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33. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 63.

34. Wetter, “In Unexpected Places,” 330. For her reference, Wetter cites Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 19. Wetter finds that the lack of religious references in MT Esther feed this notion for MT Esther, but LXX Esther seems to affirm the purpose of the fast as penitence and supplication. However, I would argue that the presence of religious affirmations and activity in LXX Esther does not undercut political negotiation for events, but places God in contest with Artaxerxes for hegemony.

35. That Esther fasts together with Mordecai and Jews in Susa shows her solidarity with her people (Berman, “Hadassah Bat Abihail,” 655–56).

36. Day, *Esther*, 90.

refraining from food and drink. As the “queen instead of Vashti” (2:4), Esther is Vashti’s opposite. And since Mordecai has been equated with Vashti, the feminine “other,” Esther will also go about the business of negotiating with Artaxerxes differently from Mordecai’s and Vashti’s forms of negotiation.

But if Esther is set in opposition to all that Vashti and Mordecai represent, then why does she say that she will “go to the king, contrary to the law, even if I must die” and seemingly follow Mordecai’s command? Day reads the exchange between Esther and Mordecai as emphasizing Esther’s obedience. Mordecai urges her to approach Artaxerxes, to follow his command, and that is what she does.<sup>37</sup> Others, while also acknowledging that Esther does end up following Mordecai’s exhortation, have read this exchange as emphasizing more than just Esther’s obedience. Esther now is the one who issues her own string of imperative commands to Mordecai (4:16), just as Mordecai had issued orders to her; and Mordecai even does what Esther says (4:17).<sup>38</sup> Thus, some scholars state that this is the turning point when Esther transforms and claims her agency.<sup>39</sup> Levenson writes that Esther transforms from “beauty queen to a heroic savior.”<sup>40</sup> White Crawford states that in this transformation, “The powerless has become the powerful.”<sup>41</sup>

But to say that Esther had no agency, was only a beauty queen, or was powerless before this moment would be an erroneous and monolithic reading. Esther Menn correctly writes of the complicated nature of Esther’s character: “Her [Esther’s] timidity and eagerness to please appear to mark her identity at the court. The remainder of the book [after Esther and Mordecai’s exchange in ch. 4] will proceed to unravel this portrayal of Esther as compliant subject and therefore to critique the assumptions that it is based upon, depicting a much more complicated negotiation of power structures and hierarchical relationships.”<sup>42</sup> Just because Esther has *appeared* obedient and powerless before issuing these commands to Mordecai does not mean that she has not had agency in manipulating the performance of her

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37. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 61.

38. Beal, “Esther,” 67. Like Mordecai’s command to Esther (4:8) this includes a string of verbs, the first of which, βαδίσας, is an imperatival participle (4:16) and a verb of movement (“go”) like εἰσελεύσῃ (4:8).

39. Berg, *Esther*, 110–11; Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 73–74; White Crawford, *Esther*, 905.

40. Levenson, *Esther*, 80.

41. White [Crawford], “Esther: A Feminine Model,” 170.

42. Menn, “Prayer of the Queen,” 78.

obedience and deference. Esther has been operating with disguised negotiation from her introduction and thus has had agency.

Therefore, her report that she will go to the king may also be an act of deference to Mordecai, one of her authority figures. When the report that she will go to the king follows her action in commanding Mordecai and telling him to practice disguised negotiation in the form of a fast, why would she then choose to obey Mordecai and perform open negotiation? No, she placates Mordecai; and she will actually do what he says, only she will do it her way. First, she will call upon the Lord as Mordecai instructed her (4:8), but she will also pray as her own version of following Mordecai's command to "go in to the king." Though Mordecai commands her to go to Artaxerxes, king of Persia (4:8), she will first approach a different king, God, who "only is our king" (14:3) and who is "the king of the gods" (14:12) as she says in her prayer.<sup>43</sup> Additionally, when she does finally approach Artaxerxes, she does not simply enter and make her plea on behalf of the Jewish people as Mordecai commanded. Esther's mode of negotiating with Artaxerxes will be much more complex than the direct entreaty Mordecai has ordered her to make.<sup>44</sup>

As their exchange comes to a close, the text moves to include the individual hidden transcripts of Mordecai and Esther alone. Each reveals the character's motivations for their negotiation. Mordecai's prayer demonstrates the contest between God and Artaxerxes for hegemonic masculinity, and Esther's prayer affirms the existence of the contest. Her prayer also explains how her role is changing from aligning with God through obeying Mordecai to becoming God's representative on her own.

#### MORDECAI'S PRAYER (ADDITION C 13:8–17)

After hearing Mordecai and Esther's interaction and the tension between their negotiation methods, the text provides the reader access to Mordecai's

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43. Menn, "Prayer of the Queen," 82.

44. Day writes, "Even though she [Esther] follows Mordecai's general advice to entreat Ahasuerus [Artaxerxes], she decides exactly *how* she will do it. Esther is savvy. Knowing how Mordecai's strategies are similar to those of Vashti gives the reader the sense that Mordecai, if he had advised Esther as to how she should proceed, would not be any more successful than Vashti was in dealing with the king" (*Esther*, 99, *emphasis original*). Fox also comments that Esther doesn't follow Mordecai's instructions exactly (*Character and Ideology*, 71).

internal dialogue. These thoughts of Mordecai come in the form of a prayer that has three elements: praise (13:9–11), a defense of his refusal to bow to Haman (13:12–14), and a petition for divine intervention to save those sentenced to death (13:15–17).<sup>45</sup>

In Mordecai's praise he describes who he perceives the God of Israel to be. "O Lord, you rule as King over all things, for the universe is in your power and there is no one who can oppose you when it is your will to save Israel, for you have made heaven and earth and every wonderful thing under heaven. You are Lord of all, and there is no one who can resist you, the Lord" (13:9–11). In this exaltation of praise, Mordecai's God is placed in direct opposition to Artaxerxes.<sup>46</sup> Mordecai refers to God as *κύριος* ("Lord") eight times (13:9 [2x], 11 [2x], 12, 14, 15, 17) in the prayer (four of those eight are in the praise section) and uses *θεός* ("God") twice (13:15 [2x]). When speaking about God, Mordecai uses *θεός*, but when speaking to God he utilizes the relational *κύριος*, which is the Septuagint's rendering of יהוה, the holy divine name of the God of Israel.<sup>47</sup> But *κύριος* also had political connotations in the Hellenistic context as well.<sup>48</sup> Mordecai attributes political sovereignty to God by calling God *κύριος*; and in doing so, he highlights the tension between the God of Israel, the Lord, and Artaxerxes, the Persian lord.

Further, Mordecai's Lord is "king of all authorities since everything is under your power" (*βασιλεὺ πάντων κρατῶν, ὅτι ἐν ἐξουσίᾳ σου τὸ πᾶν ἐστίν*, 13:9).<sup>49</sup> Throughout LXX Esther, the most common referent of *βασιλεύς* has been Artaxerxes; for example, in Addition A *βασιλεύς* appears eleven times and nine of those occurrences refer to Artaxerxes.<sup>50</sup> Moreover,

45. Levenson, *Esther*, 83; Moore, *Additions*, 205.

46. Menn, "Prayer of the Queen," 73.

47. Moore, *Additions*, 205.

48. Menn, "Prayer of the Queen," 73. Adolf Deissmann, *Light from the East*, 4th ed., trans. Lionel R. M. Strachan (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 351–53. Deissmann presents examples in which *κύριος* appeared as a title for Ptolemaic rulers in Egypt including Ptolemy IV (221–205 BCE), Ptolemy V (205–181 BCE), and dated inscriptions referencing Ptolemy XIII (62 BCE), and Ptolemy XIV (52 BCE). Deissmann's examples point out that Werner Foerster was in error when he wrote that *κύριος* was not used for gods or rulers prior to the first century BCE. See Werner Foerster, "κύριος," *TDNT* 3:1049–50.

49. Literal translation. NRSV translates this phrase, "King over all things, for the universe is in your power."

50. In Addition A, *βασιλεύς* refers to Artaxerxes in 11:3; 12:1, 2 (2x), 3, 4, 5, 6 (2x).

Artaxerxes is the king over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia, which surely must include all authorities and make everything exist under his power (13:1). In his prayer, Mordecai does not refute the assumption of Artaxerxes's power, but emphasizes that the power of the God of Israel surpasses that of Artaxerxes. The God of Israel is the all-powerful king who rules over everything, not just 127 provinces (13:9). With one-up-*man*-ship, Mordecai's God not only rules over everything, but actually created all things including the earth and everything in it, as well as even the heavens or the skies themselves (13:10). The descriptions of Artaxerxes's dominion have never included the skies. How could Artaxerxes possibly top that?

In the contest for masculinities to this point in LXX Esther, Artaxerxes has appeared as the victor and paradigm of hegemonic masculinity on earth. But, yet, Mordecai still chose to challenge his masculinity through a direct negotiation of defiance to Artaxerxes's representative, Haman. Now the reader can begin to understand why Mordecai might think a challenge to Artaxerxes's hegemonic masculinity might be successful—he thinks his God of marginalized masculinities exceeds and surpasses Artaxerxes's masculinity both on earth and throughout the entire cosmos. Mordecai's God is constructed in terms of supreme and universal hegemonic masculinity.

Mixed in this exaltation in direct opposition to Artaxerxes, Mordecai states that no one can oppose God when God's will is to save Israel (13:9). Even though Mordecai declares God's universal power, Mordecai establishes a condition ("when God's will is to save Israel") to anyone being able to oppose God. In light of Israel's and Judah's histories, it may have appeared to some that the Assyrians and Babylonians were able to oppose God as they had defeated Israel and Judah, God's chosen people. But each of those instances of defeat was on account of the unfaithfulness of God's people in which God used Assyria and Babylon as tools for punishment (e.g., Isa 7:1–10:11; Jer 25:1–11) and their imperial rule did not last. When it is God's will to save God's people, rather than punish them, God is unstoppable and redeems God's people even from punishment (Exod 3:7–12; Isa 10:12–23; Jer 25:12–14).

In light of this condition comprising God's unopposable nature, Mordecai commences his defense of himself (13:12–14) so that God does not

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βασιλεύς appears in reference to Nebuchadnezzar and Jeconiah respectively in its two occurrences in 11:4.

use Artaxerxes and the Persians as a means of punishment for God's people. Mordecai appeals to God's omniscience to know that he has not refused Haman out of arrogance or pride; he would have been willing to perform the ultimate act of deference in the Persian court—kissing Haman's feet—to save Israel (13:12).<sup>51</sup> He affirms that it is not his honor and masculinity for which he negotiated in defiance, but, instead, it was to avoid idolatry and to act on behalf of the glory, honor, and masculinity of God (13:14).<sup>52</sup> Mordecai asserts his innocence and, in doing so, insists on God acting as the unstoppably saving, rather than punishing, God.<sup>53</sup>

Since Mordecai is innocent and God's wrath is not necessary, Mordecai takes up his petition by addressing God as Lord and King and reminding God of God's own faithfulness to God's people who represent God on earth. Mordecai encourages God not to forget the promise to Abraham in which Israel becomes God's inheritance, God's portion (13:15), the very reason God delivered the Israelites from Egypt (13:16) (see Gen 12:1–3; 15, 16; Deut 32:8–9).<sup>54</sup> With a similar performance to how Mordecai pressured/manipulated Esther by elaborating the consequences of her not acting according to his orders, Mordecai demands that God not neglect God's inheritance or else they will be completely removed from existence.

Mordecai asks that God turn "our mourning" (τὸ πένθος ἡμῶν, 13:17), perhaps the same mourning of Persian Jews mentioned previously (κραυγὴ καὶ κοπετὸς καὶ πένθος μέγα, 4:3), into feasting so that in the face of destruction, they may live to praise God (13:17). To this point in LXX Esther, feasting has been enjoyed at the occasions of Artaxerxes—by the king, all his friends, and Susaites on numerous occasions (1:1–8; 2:18),

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51. White Crawford, "Esther," 956. In Ruth, Naomi's plan, which Ruth carried out, was that Ruth should uncover the "feet" of Boaz late at night at the threshing floor (3:4, 7). "Feet" was commonly used as a euphemism for "private parts" or "lower body" (Farmer, "Book of Ruth," 926). Perhaps Mordecai's reference to kissing Haman's "feet," may have been a euphemism to say that Mordecai was even willing to perform a feminizing sexual act to save Israel.

52. For a more detailed explanation of the self-defense of Mordecai's motivations for his refusal to bow, see ch. 5 of this study.

53. Mordecai's assertion of innocence does warrant a question. If Mordecai were willing to even kiss Haman's feet to save Israel, which presumably would involve an action similar to bowing down, then why didn't he just bow to Haman in the first place to avoid the conflict that resulted in the decree of extermination? The question is left in tension and one can only imagine Mordecai's justification.

54. White Crawford, "Esther," 956.



even privately with Haman in the wake of the decree of annihilation being issued (3:15). Even though the fasting of Mordecai, Jews in Susa, Esther and her maids is a disguised negotiation of Artaxerxes, Mordecai wishes that he and all Jews will become like Artaxerxes himself and be able to feast publicly. The mimicry evident in the reversal of power prophesied by Mordecai's dream (11:11) is palpable in Mordecai's request. As Fanon observes, subordinate peoples often yearn for the power that is exercised over them.<sup>55</sup> Likewise, Mordecai's negotiation of defiance is done so that Mordecai, Mordecai's God, and all the people whose lips praise Mordecai's God might take their rightful position of dominance and act just as those in Persian power do. Like Artaxerxes and Haman, Mordecai wishes to carouse with his friends in the wake of Persian destruction.

Mordecai's prayer is followed by a statement that "all Israel cried out mightily for their death was before their eyes" (13:18). This statement separates Mordecai's prayer from Esther's prayer and reminds the reader that, like Mordecai, all Israel was in despair as their deaths would have meant the death of God's chosen people.

#### ESTHER'S PRAYER (ADDITION C 14:1–19)

After Mordecai's prayer and the reiteration of the Persian Jews' continued cries, Esther's hidden transcript begins. Esther's prayer in chapter 14 includes six elements: (1) a description of how Esther approaches God (14:1–2); (2) praise of God out of a direct relationship (14:3–5); (3) Esther's understanding of the tribulations Persian Jews are facing (14:6–10); (4) a petition on behalf of all Persian Jews and herself (14:11–14); (5) an iteration of her loyalty to God despite her deference to Artaxerxes (14:15–18); and (6) her concluding plea (14:19).

#### Esther's Approach of God (14:1–2)

"Then Queen Esther, seized with deadly anxiety, fled to the Lord" (14:1). Following Mordecai's threats that if Esther does not obey him and perform negotiation as he orders then she and her family will die, fear seems a merited emotion for Esther. The fact that she does not display any of this emotion to Mordecai may imply that her exchange with Mordecai was

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55. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 52–54.



a performance of sorts. So Esther flees to the Lord where she can, perhaps, shed the need for manipulation and reveal her true self.<sup>56</sup> But, since Esther's hidden transcript may also be a negotiation with another power in her life, God, pretense cannot be monolithically dismissed as present in her prayer.

Before approaching God, Esther takes off "the clothes of her glory" (τὰ ἱμάτια τῆς δόξης αὐτῆς, 14:2).<sup>57</sup> Day notes that Esther's glory is her position or attitude, and the use of the personal pronoun more closely connects her with the honor associated with her position.<sup>58</sup> But given Mordecai's insistence on the competition between human glory and God's glory (13:14), in her approach to God's own self, Esther is leaving behind any identity that is associated with the human glory of Artaxerxes and being his wife and subject.

Instead of the garments of human glory, Esther clothes herself in "the garments of distress and mourning, and instead of costly perfumes, she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she utterly humbled her body; every part that she loved to adorn she covered with her tangled hair" (14:2). By donning the garb of mourning, Esther has joined Mordecai and Persian Jews not only in their fast, but also in their protest of Persian power. The protest of Mordecai and the Jews was in an acceptable public location since they were outside the palace courtyard. But Esther's protest will be performed privately in a location where sackcloth and ashes are not allowed (4:2). Menn writes, "Esther's change of attire within the palace penetrates that cloistered guard and forms a link with those who mourn and fast outside."<sup>59</sup> Joining the protest, Esther may appear to enlist in the open negotiation of challenging the king. Indeed her protest even

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56. White Crawford writes that since Esther is completely reliant on others, when she is in distress about what Mordecai has commanded her to do, she flees to the Lord, someone else on whom she can be reliant ("Esther," 958).

57. Literal translation. NRSV translates the phrase "her splendid apparel."

58. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 67.

59. Menn, "Prayer of the Queen," 83. Contrary to Menn's argument or mine, Philip Nolte and Pierre J. Jordaan argue that Esther's debasement happens in order to bring her in line with the patriarchy (strict father morality), which she has rejected by marrying a gentile. Philip Nolte and Pierre J. Jordaan, "Esther's Prayer in Additions to Esther: Addition C to LXX Esther—An Embodied Cognition Approach," *APB* 20 (2009): 293–309. Her physical transformation is the acknowledgement of her transgression, which restores the natural order. Esther remains subservient to father-morality by doing what Mordecai says.

penetrates the palace gates, but, in true Esther fashion, her challenge is hidden and disguised in a private location.

Menn argues that even more than Esther's physical debasement in joining the protest in disguise, Esther's change in appearance also locates her body as "the contested site for human allegiance in a fundamental conflict between two competing kingdoms, those ruled by pagan gods and royalty and that ruled by the one God."<sup>60</sup> LXX Esther presents preparation of the body as an important element in going before a king. Vashti had to wear the crown to approach Artaxerxes (1:11), Esther and all the women in the royal harem had to undergo a twelve-month-long beauty treatment extravaganza in order to be paraded into Artaxerxes (2:12–14), and Esther has to reclothe herself in splendid attire to approach Artaxerxes after this prayer (15:1). Though all these examples describe preparation in going before Artaxerxes, in contrast, the king Esther approaches in her prayer is God whom she prays to as "O my Lord, you only are our king" (14:3). She still requires physical preparation to approach God, her king, but it is a different kind of preparation. She must scorn the glory associated with her Persian position and so adorn herself to the opposite extreme.<sup>61</sup> In order to approach Artaxerxes initially she had a twelve-month-long perfume bath so that Persian power penetrated her skin making her apparently smell attractive (2:12). Now, in her approach before God, Esther will undergo the opposite by enveloping her head in excrement with its bacteria penetrating her hair follicles so that the pleasant aroma of Persian power is replaced by a foul stench. Through the odor penetration of Esther's very body, the competition for hegemonic masculinity is waged. Esther is a woman in the contact zone as she suffers the consequences of masculine acts of domination, but, claiming her agency, she is able to negotiate to gain some measure of power through proximity and access both to God and to Artaxerxes.<sup>62</sup>

#### Esther's Praise of God and Claim to Agency (14:3–4)

As Esther begins her prayer, she first claims her own agency to relate to God apart from Mordecai. Following Mordecai's commands has been tantamount to following God for Esther (2:20). But, in the previous episode

60. Menn, "Prayer of the Queen," 83.

61. Menn, "Prayer of the Queen," 78–84.

62. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 20, 81–82.

the commanding action shifts from Mordecai to Esther. Now, in the prayer, Esther further claims her own agency and access to God.

Esther begins her prayer, “My Lord, our King, you are alone/only” (Κύριέ μου ὁ βασιλεὺς ἡμῶν, σὺ εἶ μόνος, 14:3).<sup>63</sup> Esther’s initial epithet for God is “my Lord.” The use of a singular personal possessive pronoun implies a direct relationship between Esther and God that does not involve Mordecai.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, Esther can address God directly as “you,” implying unmediated communication between Esther and God is possible without Mordecai’s intervention. But Esther also calls God “our king” (βασιλεὺς ἡμῶν) and reclaims her communal identity as a Jew in solidarity with all her people, not just Mordecai. Esther shows her personal and communal allegiance to God who is both her Lord (κύριος) and the king of her people, Israel (βασιλεύς), appellations that are also used to describe Artaxerxes.<sup>65</sup> From the beginning she states which contestant for hegemonic masculinity she is siding with, her Lord and her people’s king.

I would also argue that an allusion to Deut 6:4, the Shema, is present in Esther’s initial address of God underscoring, at least in part, her loyalty to the God and king of Jews. The Septuagint renders the first line of the Shema, Ἄκουε Ἰσραὴλ κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστίν (“Hear Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one,” Deut 6:4). Esther’s prayer has many similarities to this paradigmatic prayer but a few key differences. Instead of the Shema’s ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν, Esther calls God ὁ βασιλεὺς ἡμῶν to again emphasize that God is king instead of Artaxerxes. Second, rather than praying the Shema’s κύριος εἷς ἐστίν (“the Lord is one”), Esther prays σὺ εἶ μόνος (literally translated, “you are alone”).<sup>66</sup> By stating that God is μόνος instead of εἷς, Esther equates God’s μόνος to her own μόνη since in the next phrase she says, “Help me, who am alone and have no helper but you” (βοήθησόν μοι τῇ μόνη καὶ μὴ ἐχούσῃ βοηθὸν εἰ μὴ σέ, 14:3). Esther is just like God, she is alone.<sup>67</sup> So even though Esther is clearly not alone in the book since she is

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63. Literal translation. NRSV translates the phrase, “O my Lord, you only are our king.”

64. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 69.

65. Artaxerxes is referred to as βασιλεύς throughout the book, and Esther calls Artaxerxes “lord” (κύριε) in 15:13, 14.

66. The NRSV reads μόνος as an adjective for king, thus their translation is “you only are our king” (14:3, NRSV). Closer to a literal translation, Day translates the phrase “there is only you,” but Day does not translate εἶ as second-person, but instead chooses third-person (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 65).

67. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 69.

able to have conversations with Mordecai through Hachratheus (4:4–16), she fasts with her maids (4:16), shares the bed of Artaxerxes (14:15), and is invited to the table of Haman (14:17), Esther's aloneness is stated to place her in solidarity with God.

In addition to placing herself in association with God and her people, Esther's aloneness also demonstrates her individuation and separation from Mordecai. Esther no longer needs Mordecai as an intermediary between her and God. Indeed, Mordecai's command for her to keep her people and country a secret (2:10, 20) may even have functioned to keep Mordecai between Esther and God. Now, in her prayer, Esther willingly claims God as her own Lord and states her direct solidarity with her people by calling God "our king" (14:3). So while Mordecai has been God's representative in the contest of hegemony, now Esther claims her agency to be a representative for God on her own apart from Mordecai. She will negotiate with Artaxerxes in her own manner, differently from the way Mordecai does—and, perhaps, she even will be more successful.

#### Esther's Penitential Prayer (14:5–12a)

As Esther continues her negotiation to gain access and become a representative for God, Esther offers a penitential prayer. Esther's prayer shares aspects of other penitential prayers offered in the Second Temple period in response to arrogant non-Jewish rulers including acknowledgement of God's saving deeds and righteousness, confession of corporate sin, and a petition that God would not allow the excessive punishment of the non-Jewish ruler to threaten the sovereignty of God.<sup>68</sup>

Differently than Mordecai, who understands the edict to be a result of Artaxerxes's and Haman's commitment to human glory or gentile hubris (13:14–15), Esther understands the proposed pogrom to be the result of a Deuteronomic schema of sin and punishment. In God's history with Israel, which she claims to have learned from her family, Esther knows that God

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68. Rodney Werline includes Esther's prayer in his consideration of commonalities between penitential prayers in the late Second Temple period (e.g., Tob 3:1–6; Prayer of Azariah; 2 Macc 7; T. Mos. 9; 3 Macc 2:1–20; and Psalms of Solomon). Rodney Werline, *Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism: The Development of a Religious Institution*, EJL 13 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 161–89, treatment of Esther's prayer on 183–85.

has chosen Israel for an everlasting inheritance (14:5) and that God is a righteous God (14:7) who demands faithfulness from the chosen people.<sup>69</sup>

But while God is a saving God who lives up to God's promises, at times God also suspends the promises because of unfaithfulness (e.g., Isa 7:1–10:11; Jer 25:1–11). So while Mordecai defends his personal faithfulness and points the finger at the glory-seeking Persian rulers, Esther instead accepts the basic premise that God's people have sinned and are in need of punishment, and thus she confesses. Esther's confession is a collective one on behalf of all Persian Jews that includes the admission that "we have sinned" (ἡμάρτομεν, 14:6) and "glorified their gods" (ἐδοξάσαμεν τοὺς θεοὺς αὐτῶν, 14:7). Though some have seen this as an admission of idolatry on the part of Persian Jews even though nothing of the sort is stated in the text, the only Persian "god" in LXX Esther is Artaxerxes and his representative Haman.<sup>70</sup> Since Esther includes herself in the first-person plural verbs, Esther confesses to sinning in any way in which she and Persian Jews have submitted to the will of the Persian king. Even though Esther's submission to Artaxerxes is a negotiation of deference (as she explains in 14:15–18), she still confesses it as a sin worthy of punishment. So perhaps the ashes with which Esther covers her head (14:2) are not only the headgear of public protest, but also of repentance. As a sidebar, since the "we" of Esther and Persian Jews would also include Mordecai, neither is he exempt, in her sweeping statement, from being among the offenders and those worthy of punishment despite his protest of faithfulness (13:12–14).

Thus Esther acknowledges that the result of the corporate sin of Persian Jews is that God has "handed us over to our enemies" (14:6). For God to cause Israel's defeat by her enemies is a common form of punishment for disobedience found throughout the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Ezek 23:28; Lev 26:17; Deut 28:25, 47–57). But the punishing enemies Esther mentions "are not satisfied that we are in bitter slavery" (14:8a). With this statement,

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69. Esther does not specifically name Mordecai among her family, even though we presume he is the only family she has (2:7), and thus she continues her claim to agency apart from him. Esther's statement of "You are righteous, O Lord!" (14:7) follows the typical *Gerichtsdoxologie* form that implies that God is rightly punishing Jews (Werline, *Penitential Prayer*, 185).

70. White Crawford, "Esther," 959. Moore also comments on the mention of idolatry, but thinks the prayer is referring to preexilic idolatry not a present relapse in Esther's day (*Additions*, 211). Menn reads Esther's prayer as representing a stark division of the world into two enemy camps—the Jews and God on one side and the gentiles and their idols on the other ("Prayer of the Queen," 86).

Esther may imply that servitude to the enemies who defeat Israel is the expected outcome of God's punishment (Deut 28:47–48). Levenson writes, "Appealing to the honor and the reputation—perhaps even the ego—of the jealous God, Esther points out that Israel's current oppressors have gone beyond the 'bitter servitude' (v. 19) that the chosen people are traditionally said to have merited in recompense for sin. The new oppressors now are seeking to obliterate them altogether."<sup>71</sup>

In progressing from servitude to annihilation, Persia, specifically represented by Artaxerxes and Haman, has overstepped its role as an agent of God's punishment for sin, and has placed Persian power in opposition to God's power.<sup>72</sup> Seeking to obliterate Jews, Artaxerxes and Haman have literally "placed their hands upon the hands of their idols" (ἐθήκαν τὰς χεῖρας αὐτῶν ἐπὶ τὰς χεῖρας τῶν εἰδώλων αὐτῶν, 14:8b).<sup>73</sup> This is an act of sealing a covenant or an agreement such as the edict of annihilation.<sup>74</sup> The effect of the sealed decree is: "to abolish what your [God's] mouth has ordained, and to destroy your inheritance, to stop the mouths of those who praise you and to quench your altar and the glory of your house, to open the mouths of the nations for the praise of vain idols, and to magnify forever a mortal king" (14:9–10). The decree's agenda is to obliterate all that is complicit to God's power. It will not only annihilate those whom God has ordained or given as inheritance, but also praise of God is forever silenced as the altar and the glory of God's temple is quenched so that praise is, instead, lifted to the mortal ruler (14:10), Artaxerxes.<sup>75</sup> Any dividends of

71. Levenson, *Esther*, 85.

72. Werline also recognizes the oppressive rulers mentioned in Second Temple penitential prayers have become "a special problem" by placing themselves in direct conflict with God's sovereignty (*Penitential Prayer*, 189). This pattern is similar to Isaiah's prophecies concerning Assyria and Babylon. Assyria is divinely anointed to punish Israel (Isa 8–10), but then punished for its arrogance (Isa 10:1–19). Similarly, God gives Judah into Babylon's hand because God is angry with them, but then Babylon becomes arrogant and God promises to obliterate them (Isa 47).

73. Translation in Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 65.

74. Moore, *Additions*, 211. Moore cites possible parallels from 2 Kgs 10:15; Lam 5:6; and 1 Macc 6:58. In particular, 2 Kgs 10:15 narrates Jehu making a hand-to-hand covenant/agreement to wipe out Baal worshipers loyal to Ahab (2 Kgs 10:15–28). Similarly, Artaxerxes's and Haman's hand-to-hand covenant/agreement is for the annihilation of God worshipers.

75. Καὶ σβέσαι δόξαν οἴκου σου καὶ θυσιαστήριόν σου ("and to extinguish the glory

God's power would be eradicated so that Artaxerxes's claim to hegemonic power might be successful.

Thus, Esther's prayer claims that the decree is more than just punishment of sin, it places the glory of Artaxerxes in direct opposition to God's glory and all that is complicit to God's power. In this way Esther agrees with Mordecai that human glory over God's glory is the root cause of their dire circumstances (13:14). In contrast to Mordecai, though, Esther seems to have greater humility by admitting that she and other Persian Jews have sinned and are deserving of some form of punishment, though not the excessive overstepping of God's power that Persia is attempting. Perhaps it is Esther's humility that motivates her to more disguised modes of negotiation than Mordecai has chosen in his assured and overt negotiation of public defiance.

Then, Esther commences her petition for God's deliverance. Esther begs God not to surrender his "scepter" (τὸ σκήπτρόν σου, 14:11) to "those who have no being" (τοῖς μὴ οὖσιν, 14:11).<sup>76</sup> In the previous verse (14:10) Esther refers to the "praise of vain idols," literally translated, "praise of meaningless or worthless things" (ἀρετὰς ματαίων). So the referent of τοῖς μὴ οὖσιν would appear to be related to the worthless idols that receive the praise of the nations that also magnify a mortal king.<sup>77</sup> Esther begs God not to surrender his scepter to these idols. Given that Mordecai has refused to bow to Haman on the basis that bowing to him would constitute idolatry (13:14), perhaps Esther is pleading with God not to surrender his scepter to Haman and the mortal king he represents, Artaxerxes.

Since a scepter represents the power and authority of a person, it is difficult not to notice the phallic imagery of the scepter Esther entreats God not to surrender, especially in regard to Artaxerxes's extension of the scepter that grants safe access (4:11, which in Esther's case likely means sexual penetration).<sup>78</sup> Sexual potency has been found to be a fundamental

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of your house and your altar," 14:9 NETS) is understood as a reference to the temple (White Crawford, "Esther," 959).

76. Day notes that three manuscripts in the LXX textual tradition read "those who hate you" (μισοῦσι σε) instead of "those who are not" (τοῖς μὴ οὖσιν), which is also a more consistent reading with AT Esther, which reads "adversaries who hate you" (τοῖς μισοῦσί σε ἐχθροῖς) (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 72).

77. See also Wis 14:13 as a reference to idols that did not exist from the beginning and will not last forever (Moore, *Additions*, 211).

78. For the scepter representing the power and authority of a person, see Menn, "Prayer of the Queen," 74.



characteristic of masculinity, especially for kings.<sup>79</sup> Therefore Esther urges God not to surrender God's own phallus, God's life-giving power, to worthless idols that have no being, or possibly even to Haman or Artaxerxes, so that God's own sexual potency and masculinity are not defeated.

Esther also pleads to God, "Do not let them laugh at our downfall; but turn their plan against them, and make an example of him who began this against us" (14:11). The laughter mentioned may envisage Haman and Artaxerxes in their carousing after issuing the decree of the downfall of Persian Jews. The mimicry of violence and oppression present in Mordecai's dream (11:11) and in his prayer (13:17) also appears here in Esther's prayer as she desires the reversal of Haman's and Artaxerxes's plan and their downfall (14:11). Like Mordecai, Esther cannot escape the subordinate imagination of taking her oppressors' place.<sup>80</sup> But in the last phrase of 14:11 Esther seems to shift her focus from a plural personage, "them"—presumably Artaxerxes and Haman, to a singular one, "him"—perhaps Haman alone. She asks God to "make an example of him who began this against us" (14:11), with Haman, the instigator of the plot to exterminate Jews (3:7), being the assumed referent. One can only imagine what Esther hoped God would do to make an example of Haman for those who dared to set human power above God's power—perhaps that Haman might die in an ironic fashion such as being hanged on the gallows he had built for someone else (7:10).

On behalf of her people, Esther implores God to "make yourself known in this time of our affliction" (14:12a). In Ezek 38, after God promised to bring Gog [read Babylon] against Israel (Ezek 38:14–16), God then promised that the divine jealous wrath will come against Gog, saying, "So I will make myself known in the eyes of many nations. Then they shall know that I am the Lord" (Ezek 38:23). In the same way, Esther summons God to make God's self known in the eyes of the very nations God has summoned against the Persian Jews.

Further, before beginning her personal plea, Esther implores God to remember that God is going to win the contest for hegemonic masculinity since God is "King of the gods and Master of all dominion" (βασιλεῦ τῶν θεῶν καὶ πάσης ἀρχῆς ἐπικρατῶν, 14:12b). Scott describes the negotiation of flattery in which subordinates praise their dominant's superiority in

79. George, "Masculinity and Its Regimentation in Deuteronomy," 70–71; Chapman, *Gendered Language of Warfare*.

80. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 52–54.



order to secure better treatment.<sup>81</sup> With similar negotiation of flattery, Esther extols God's supremacy and certain victory before making her personal request.

#### Esther's Personal Appeal (14:12b–14)

After offering her penitential prayer, Esther makes a personal appeal for God to help her as she engages in her negotiation with Artaxerxes on behalf of God and her people. Esther asks for two things—courage (14:12b), and that God might put eloquent speech in her mouth before the lion, Artaxerxes, so that God might hate the man who is fighting against her and her people, Haman (14:13).<sup>82</sup> Esther continues her shift in focus from asking for the demise of Artaxerxes and Haman, to Haman alone (14:11). This shift may signal that Esther, a proponent of disguised negotiation, may realize that Artaxerxes is not only an enemy to be opposed, but also a power who can be manipulated for her purposes.

Both the courage and eloquent speech for which Esther asks are characteristics associated with the performance of masculinity.<sup>83</sup> Performers of masculinity are brave in the face of danger and can wax fluent in persuading people to do as they say. Claiming her own agency as God's representative in the contest for hegemonic masculinity, Esther asks for the patriarchal dividend of God's masculinity. By desiring to perform

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81. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 18.

82. Lions are symbols of anger and ferocity (White Crawford, *Esther*, 959) and typical imagery associated with royalty (Menn, "Prayer of the Queen," 74), thus the equation with Artaxerxes. Or Day suggests that by calling Artaxerxes a lion Esther shows that she finds him to be a terrifying beast or that he acts more like an animal than a person (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 73). But perhaps one might also see a reference to Daniel and the lions. Just as the lions Daniel faced were supposedly his enemies but turned out to be a means by which he increased in power on behalf of his God (Dan 6:16–28), so too will Esther face her lion, Artaxerxes, who is the enemy that has decreed the death of her and all other Persian Jews, but facing her lion will turn out to be a means by which she increases in power on behalf of her God (8:1; 16:15–16).

83. Conway, *Behold the Man*, 21–34. Maud Gleason also makes a substantial argument that persuasive rhetoric was perhaps the most powerful performance of masculinity in the Second Sophistic era, as even those who did not conform to biological traits of masculinity could win masculinity through persuasive rhetoric. Maud Gleason, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

masculinity through courage and eloquent speech, Esther requests the help of the supreme one whom she finds to be the proper bearer of universal hegemonic masculinity (14:12).

As one complicit with God's hegemonic masculinity, Esther entreats God, "save us by your hand, and help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, O Lord" (14:14). Salvation is often associated with the hand of God in the book of Psalms (e.g., Pss 60:5; 108:6; 138:7). Esther calls on the tradition of the psalms and sings to God in order that God's hand might save her and her people. But Esther's personal petition goes beyond her penitential confession and petition on behalf of her people, it is an appeal for her own benefit that she, who is aligned with God in her aloneness (14:3), might directly receive a dividend of God's help.

#### Esther's Loyalty to God Despite Deference to Artaxerxes (14:15–18)

Following the descriptions of her alignment with God and her petitions, Esther further declares her loyalty to God by describing how she loathes her access to the other claimant for hegemonic masculinity, her husband, Artaxerxes, the Persian king. She abhors all the ways in which her body must perform negotiations of deference. First, she detests the splendor of the wicked (δόξαν ἀνόμων, 14:15a). The very clothes Esther shed before beginning her prayer to God were the clothes of her glory (τὰ ἱμάτια τῆς δόξης αὐτῆς, 14:2), and clothes associated with the power of Artaxerxes, her dominant, from whom she derived earthly glory. Second, she abhors being penetrated by this gentile ("the bed of the uncircumcised," 14:15). Third, and perhaps most important, she despises wearing the sign of her Persian position that she calls ῥάκος καταμηνίων (literally, translated, "a menstrual rag," 14:16).<sup>84</sup> Crowns are not specifically masculine and can provide power to women as well as men. However, the crown placed on

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84. White Crawford says for Esther to call her crown a menstrual rag makes it unclean and thus untouchable (*Esther*, 959). Moore says he can hardly imagine a stronger expression of abhorrence for the crown than calling it a menstrual rag (*Additions*, 27). The male-stream scholarship of Moore is on display in that comment since he assumes anything associated with menstruation is abhorrent. Day comments on the difference between Esther's terminology, which is literally descriptive of the biological processes of menstruation as compared with Esther's metaphor in AT Esther (the rag is of "one who sits apart," ἀποκαθημένης) which is more euphemistic (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 74). Thus, Esther in AT Esther is a person who is more careful with her words.

Esther's head (2:17) represents the masculine institution of the Persian state which took women from their homes and seized daughters as valuable economic resources from their families in order that a woman might be crowned queen instead of Vashti (2:4) and masculine imperial power might appear restored. So in her most scathing critique, Esther turns her crown, representative of penetrating Persian power, into an object that is particularly debasing for women. Fourth, she refuses the food of Artaxerxes's representative Haman (14:17a) and the king's feast and the wine of libations (14:17b), which are eaten and drunk in excess to worship Artaxerxes's great power (1:3–8), to be inserted into her mouth.<sup>85</sup>

Esther iterates that all the abominations of performing deference to Persian power are a mask, and one she despises wearing and in which she takes no joy (14:18). But even though she detests the deference she performs, as the queen she embodies and represents Persian power. Though Esther confesses the sin of glorifying Artaxerxes (14:6–7) and abhors her sin of deference to him, she continues to participate in the institution of Persian power. Her hidden transcripts reveal that Esther does what she must, even what is detestable and sinful, so that she might negotiate on behalf of God. Or, perhaps, ambivalence even exists for Esther and she “doth protest too much.” Esther's admission of sin and abhorrence of Persian power may be another disguised negotiation, this time before God, whom she represents and from whom she hopes to benefit. Since the conflict at hand is a war between powers, and one of the powers, Artaxerxes, has just decreed the annihilation of her people, she chooses to negotiate in deference to God so that she might reap a divine patriarchal dividend on behalf of her people. But whether her prayer reveals her true attitudes and motivations or further disguised negotiation with God, Esther clearly aligns herself with God in her prayer and accepts whatever subordinate position aligning with God implies.

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85. Day sees the comment about Haman's table to indicate that Esther already knows that Haman is an enemy (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 78). But Haman is not just an enemy, Haman is Artaxerxes's representative and thus is equivalent to God's competitor himself, Artaxerxes. White Crawford and Moore find that the wine of libations would be the wine poured out to gods, thus Esther did not drink of an offering made to gods and so has not participated in idolatry (White Crawford, “Esther,” 959; Moore, *Additions*, 212). However, since Artaxerxes is the only Persian god known in a synchronic literary reading of LXX Esther, then any libations, like the ones the guests have drunk at the banquets in ch. 1, are ingested in praise of Artaxerxes's power and thus may even be considered participation in idol worship.

## Esther's Concluding Plea (14:19)

So Esther petitions the one she flatters as the strongest and thus most masculine contestant to rescue the people whom God hears despairing, but also to rescue her from her own fear (14:19).<sup>86</sup> Since fear is a demasculinizing trait, and one that Esther owns at the beginning of her prayer (14:1), Esther's final request reiterates her need to become complicit with God's masculinity so that she might be able to negotiate on God's behalf.<sup>87</sup>

Esther's negotiation with God in her prayer as a hidden transcript demonstrates her liminality as one who exists in between her identity as the Persian queen subject to Artaxerxes's power, and as a loyal subject of God. Though the liminality of the eunuchs, Vashti, and Mordecai has been inferred from their actions, Esther describes her liminality in her own words. We can presume she shares the liminal space Vashti occupied being in the palace but not in the center of power with the king and his friends or specifically with Haman. But her words indicate that Esther's liminality is more than that of space, it is of identity. After her crowning, she is a double-object of the king and Mordecai, with all the tensions implied for her behavior (2:11, 19–20). In this prayer, Esther does not remove the tension of her double-object status; instead, she changes one of her subjects from Mordecai to God. Even though she has declared her allegiance to God, she still must wear the “menstrual rag” of Artaxerxes whom she despises. She must remain a double-object, though she claims to desire being only subject to God. However, it is the very liminality that she abhors that provides her access to perform disguised negotiation on behalf of her people with God's help. Even Esther's gender must become liminal as she performs masculinity with courage and eloquent speech in order for God to be able to claim hegemonic masculinity. So like the other liminal characters in the book, Esther's liminality is the means of subversive opportunity.

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86. Esther refers to God as “the one who is the strongest of all” (ὁ ἰσχυώων ἐπὶ πάντας, 14:19). For strength as a trait of masculinity, see Clines, “David the Man,” among others.

87. Fear is the opposite of the bravery and courage that are characteristic actions of masculinity (Conway, *Behold the Man*, 21–34).

## READING MORDECAI'S AND ESTHER'S PRAYERS

The literature of the Second Temple period exhibits a great interest in prayer.<sup>88</sup> In the literature, more characters are depicted as praying and the prayers are often more elaborate. Judith Newman posits that “prayer and praying became a central feature of religious life in the centuries following the return from the Babylonian Exile.”<sup>89</sup>

Rodney Werline specifically observes the development of penitential prayer, such as Esther's prayer, which includes a confession of sin (14:3–12), to become an institution in the Second Temple period. Through various examples Werline demonstrates how penitential prayer became a means through which people responded to a crisis of history, especially when temple sacrifice was not an option.<sup>90</sup> In a later essay, Werline also asserts that the ritual of penitential prayer became a way to mediate social relationships and power structures.<sup>91</sup> Thus, penitential prayer became an instrument for subordinate people to perform imperial negotiation.

Readers of LXX Esther in Ptolemaic Egypt would have been people who needed to respond to the harshness of history in a place where temple sacrifice was not an option. Perhaps feeling the weight of intermittent

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88. Judith H. Newman, *Praying by the Book: The Scripturalization of Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*, EJL 14 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 1.

89. Newman, *Praying by the Book*, 1. Through her study of Second Temple prayers, Newman argues the scripturalization of prayer in this time frame as biblical texts and traditions are echoed, alluded to, and quoted in Second Temple prayers. Newman includes many examples of this observation, none of which specifically address Mordecai and Esther's prayers, though they are cursorily noted. However, both prayers seem consistent with Newman's claims concerning the scripturalization of prayer. Though neither directly quotes scripture, both refer to God as the “God of Abraham” (13:15; 14:18); Esther presents a summary of the narrative events of Torah beginning with God's promise of blessing to Abraham (14:5), and Esther draws upon the Deuteronomic tradition of punishment at the hands of imperial powers (14:6). For Mordecai and Esther, their invocation of the Torah is the basis upon which their relationships with God are built. Further, Esther's prayer also utilizes motifs from the psalms (“save us by your hand,” 14:14), and from prophetic literature (e.g., “make yourself known,” 14:12).

90. Werline, *Penitential Prayer*, 191–95.

91. Rodney A. Werline, “Prayer, Politics, and Social Vision in Daniel 9,” in *The Development of Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*, vol. 2 of *Seeking the Favor of God*, ed. by Mark J. Boda, Daniel K. Falk, and Rodney A. Werline, EJL 22 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 31–32.

persecution by the Ptolemies, Alexandrian Jews could have read Esther's prayer as a guide for responding to their oppression.<sup>92</sup> If harsh treatment by the Ptolemies was understood as punishment for sin, then penitential prayer would have been an opportunity for communal repentance so that their circumstances under the Ptolemies might improve.<sup>93</sup>

Broadening the scope beyond penitential prayer, Jon Berquist argues that all prayer became a form of political negotiation in the Second Temple period. Berquist writes,

Prayers became more commonplace as part of the [Second Temple] literature; for instance, compare the number and length of prayers in Chronicles' retelling of Israelite history with the earlier version published in the books of Samuel and Kings. As in the Psalms, the first-person language of prayers connects the individual with the deity, leaving out intermediaries such as kings and priestly systems.... With the rise of prayer..., [people] found ways to express their faith without participating in the imperialized systems or hierarchies. These were religious means of resisting the empire.<sup>94</sup>

For readers of LXX Esther in both Hasmonean Judea and Ptolemaic Egypt, Mordecai and Esther's prayers modeled a form of political negotiation. Through prayer, Hasmonean and Ptolemaic Jews in the first century BCE could align themselves with God, who was King over all things (13:9) and the Master of all authorities (14:12), who was even King and Master over their Hasmonean and Ptolemaic rulers. Prayer could function as a hidden transcript in which they could remove any masks of the deference that they may have felt compelled to wear and perform before their Hasmonean and Ptolemaic rulers (14:15–18). Further, when their Hasmonean and Ptolemaic rulers placed their own human glory above the glory of

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92. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 37–41.

93. Daniel Smith-Christopher finds that penitential prayers do not reflect a desire for a change in status, i.e., a return to power, but rather interest in an alternative mode of living in resistance to power and dominance. Daniel Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 122. However, in LXX Esther, while Esther's penitential prayer may not reflect a desire for a return to power, certainly Mordecai's dream and the subsequent mimicry of Esther's negotiation and the aftermath of her "successful" negotiation demonstrate hope for power reversal.

94. Berquist, "Resistance and Accommodation," 55.

God (13:14; 14:9–10), like Esther they could pray for a dividend of God's strength to empower their political negotiation.

For example, when the Hasmonean dynasty was portrayed as "the welfare of the Jews," the glory of the Hasmonean dynasty was placed in opposition to the glory of God who prophets such as Isaiah claimed to be the ultimate defender and caretaker of the chosen people (Isa 31:5; 46:4).<sup>95</sup> By attempting to assume God's authority as provider for Jewish people, Hasmonean rulers placed their own masculine honor in contest with that of God. For those who may have performed deference to their Hasmonean rulers through submission to (e.g., paying the excessive taxes they exacted) or participation in imperial structures (e.g., serving as a soldier of the expansion-minded Hasmonean state), prayer could become an off-stage space to shed the masks of deference and express dissent.<sup>96</sup> Through the hidden transcripts of prayer, Judean Jews could proclaim the power and masculine honor of God as over and above that of their Hasmonean rulers, and, like Esther, they could petition the universal hegemonic male for a patriarchal dividend in order that they might continue to negotiate with their human rulers.

## CONCLUSION

When Artaxerxes, Haman, and the full resources of Persian power are loaded for the extermination of Jews in light of Mordecai's defiance, transcripts of negotiation are elicited. Mordecai publicly protests, and Susaites and Persian Jews breach their hidden transcripts by also registering public dissent. In the hidden transcript of their conversation, Mordecai and Esther argue over imperial negotiation methodology. Though Mordecai attempts to enlist Esther to embrace his negotiation methods of public defiance, Esther maintains her commitment to disguised negotiation and progresses in agency. In their prayers, both Mordecai and Esther affirm their loyalty to God's claim for hegemonic masculinity, but Esther's prayer has the added weight of including a request to become complicit with God's masculinity, and thus to become God's representative in the contest. Connections are also made to readers in both Ptolemaic Egypt and Hasmonean Judea who may have found Mordecai's and Esther's prayers to

95. The phrase "the welfare of the Jews" is from Regev, *Hasmoneans*, 268–72.

96. For taxes, see Gruen, "Jews and Greeks," 270. For serving as a soldier, see Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, 235–65.

present an example of how the act of praying could function as a hidden transcript of political negotiation.

In the next chapter of this study, Esther will assert her role as God's representative and perform disguised negotiation of Artaxerxes on behalf of her and her people's survival, as well as in service of God's ultimate victory in the contest for hegemonic masculinity.



Preparing the Table:  
 Esther's First Negotiation with Artaxerxes  
 (15:1–16; 5:3–6:13)

Resistance [to the insistent masculinized culture] may mean seizing on a hyper-masculine persona.... But resistance may equally mean doing something outrageously unmasculine.

—R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*

After the hidden transcript of her prayer, Esther performs her first act of negotiation with Artaxerxes. Esther's first act of negotiation includes her approach to Artaxerxes in order to request a banquet that she will host and at which she will ask for another banquet (15:1–16; 5:3–8). I argue that in her first act of negotiation Esther's body exhibits hybridity and thus is able to perform disguised negotiation of anonymity through feminine frailty utilizing her appearance (15:1–5), physical transgression of boundaries (15:6), fainting as obeisance (15:7, 15), and performance of sexuality through sexual interaction (15:11), and preparing food for a banquet (5:4, 8). Esther supplements her body's performance of anonymity through negotiation that employs disguised speech, including euphemism (15:13–14), flattery (15:13–14), and deference (5:4, 8). In keeping Esther's agency in performing disguised negotiation at the forefront, events between Esther's two banquets are only briefly summarized at the end of this chapter, and God's intervention into the affairs of the Persian court (15:8; 6:1) are argued as occurring only in partnership with Esther to bolster her success.

A principal element of my argument is that Esther utilizes her body as her primary means of negotiation. Berquist describes how the body is a key signifier for religious meaning in biblical literature. The body functions as both an identity marker through its prescription to culturally defined

characteristics, and also as a defense against intrusion from opposing cultures.<sup>1</sup> Thus, ancient Israel created rituals associated with the body to defend its purity and its cultural-religious identity.<sup>2</sup> Among his readings of bodies in the Hebrew Bible, Berquist reads Esther as one who uses her body as a porous boundary and embraces the hybridity of her identity as a Jew and a Persian as a means of political power.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Mary Mills argues that Esther negotiates the tension of her two worlds (Persian and Jewish) with her body—not only through sexual activity, but also through eating and drinking.<sup>4</sup>

I have previously argued that Esther's body is the site upon which the contest for hegemonic masculinity was waged as her body was penetrated by Persian power in her preparation (2:12) and audition (2:15–17) to become the queen, and the physical debasement of her body was also a means for gaining proximity to God (14:1–2).<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I argue that Esther's body becomes the source of her negotiation as she performs frailty and sexuality before Artaxerxes and Haman as a means of gaining favor from Artaxerxes and driving a wedge between him and Haman.

#### ESTHER'S PREPARATION TO APPROACH ARTAXERXES (15:1–5)

At the beginning of her prayer in Addition C, in preparation for approaching God, her divine king, Esther took off the clothes of her glory and clothed herself, instead, with garments of distress, ashes, and human excrement (14:2). As Esther begins her disguised negotiation with Artaxerxes in Addition D, Esther's body again had to be prepared, this time to approach her human king. Addition D begins, "On the third day, when she ended her prayer, she took off the garments in which she had worshiped, and arrayed herself in splendid attire" (15:1).

Esther takes off the clothing of her worship or service (τὰ ἱμάτια τῆς θεραπείας, 15:1), removing the physical debasement associated with

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1. Jon L. Berquist, *Controlling Corporeality: The Body and Household in Ancient Israel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 1–10.

2. Berquist, *Controlling Corporeality*, 10–12.

3. Berquist, *Controlling Corporeality*, 158–59.

4. Mary E. Mills, "Household and Table: Diasporic Boundaries in Daniel and Esther," *CBQ* 68 (2006): 419.

5. Menn, "Prayer of the Queen," 83.

approaching God.<sup>6</sup> The clothes she removes represent her claim that God is the king over all other powers, even Artaxerxes (14:12). Since Esther is committed to disguised forms of negotiation, as evidenced in her conversation with Mordecai (4:4–17), Esther must reclothe herself with the symbols of her participation in Persian power. So Esther, literally, “puts on her glory” (περιεβάλετο τὴν δόξαν αὐτῆς, 15:1) and “becomes remarkable in appearance” (γενηθεῖσα ἐπιφανής, 15:2).<sup>7</sup> We may assume the “glory” Esther wears is the same “garments of her glory” (τὰ ἱμάτια τῆς δόξης αὐτῆς, 14:2) she removed at the beginning of her prayer.<sup>8</sup> But since “garments” is removed from the phrase here, the “glory” Esther wears seems to be more closely associated with her essence and not just her clothing.<sup>9</sup>

With Esther’s glory directly associated with her and not only her clothing, Esther’s cultural hybridity is accentuated. Esther is able to move between two fundamentally different identities through bodily action—one of the glory associated with participating in and being penetrated by Persian power, and one of the physical debasement associated with participation in devotion to God. Both of these physical embodiments are representative of different cultures. Esther’s body, then, displays hybridity—the interaction, interdependency, and struggle between Jewish and Persian cultures.<sup>10</sup>

Wills observes the distinction between Esther’s Jewish appearance in debasement and her Persian appearance of glory, and posits that Esther,

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6. Moore, *Additions*, 217.

7. The phrase “puts on her glory” is a literal translation. NRSV reads, “arrayed herself in splendid attire.” For γενηθεῖσα ἐπιφανής, see GELS, s.v. “ἐπιφανής.” Day finds the passive participle γενηθεῖσα to suggest that Esther does not intentionally transform her appearance but it is done to her (“she was made manifestly splendid”) thus reducing her agency (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 85, 89). But a queen like Esther would surely have maids, like the two she takes with her and falls on (15:2–4, 7) to make her beautiful rather than having the tedious task of beautifying herself.

8. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 89.

9. Day writes, “Esther’s glory or honor is her possession or somehow essentially connected to her.... The singular δόξαν could be understood as a collective here, as ‘her glorious things,’ but it still would remain unclear exactly from what she obtains such an appearance of glory” (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 89). Though Mordecai has previously indicated that human glory should not be set above the glory of God (13:14), Esther’s glory is not adorned as a challenge to God’s power, but is worn as a disguise in order that God’s power and glory might be elevated through her negotiation.

10. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 217.

as well as the apocryphal heroine Judith, wear masks of false identities in order to confront Artaxerxes and Holofernes. He writes,

Esther's beautiful garments mark her public identity. Her pure and true identity is more marked by the garments of mourning and ashes and the dung in her hair. The same irony is present in Judith: her beautiful garments are her *false* identity; her mourning garments are her chaste and *true* identity. Yet Esther and Judith both take on their beautiful garments of false identity for a mission, and in a sense, they are marching forth for God.<sup>11</sup>

But Wills's vocabulary of "false" and "true" identity is too simplistic. In ambivalence, both Esther's Persian glory and her Jewish debasement are, simultaneously, "true" aspects of her hybrid identity.

Sugirtharajah writes of the hybrid space of intertwining cultures, such as the blending of Jewish and Persian cultures for the character of Esther, "It is a space where one is equally committed to and disturbed by the colonized and the colonizing cultures."<sup>12</sup> Esther has stated that she is disturbed by, even abhors, her participation in Persian power (14:15–18). But Esther has indicated that she also is committed to utilizing her participation in Persian power and culture to negotiate on behalf of her people, as evidenced by her desire for Mordecai to end his public protest (4:4), that she chooses to protest privately (14:1–2), and that she will go to the king "majestically adorned" in Persian glory (15:1–2). Esther's hybrid identity has been a source of tension as revealed in her hidden transcript, yet it is the very means by which she will maintain life for her and all Persian Jews.

Following Esther's adornment in her glory, the reader is reminded that Esther's preparation is "after invoking the aid of the all-seeing God and Savior" (15:2). Esther has invoked God's aid and thus God will respond to her request for God to help her (14:3) and will be Esther's savior. Esther has said that "there will be no salvation for him" (οὐκ ἔστιν αὐτῷ σωτηρία, 4:11) meaning that those who break the custom of going into the inner court without being called will not be saved. But when God is referred to as savior before Esther's approach, the reader can be assured that there will be salvation for Esther through the intervention of God, her savior.

11. Wills, *Jewish Novel*, 124, emphasis original.

12. Sugirtharajah, "Postcolonial Theory and Biblical Studies," 543.

After putting on the Persian glory of her hybrid self and being assured of God's intervention, Esther begins moving toward the king, and "she took two maids with her, and upon one she leaned as if being delicate, while the other followed, carrying her train. She was radiant with perfect beauty, and she looked happy, as if beloved, but her heart was frozen with fear" (15:2c-5).<sup>13</sup> Appearing to need her maids to support her and carry her train, Esther performs feminine frailty—weakness that exists in contrast to the strength performed by masculinity.<sup>14</sup> Moore has commented that Esther's need for maids to support her is evidence that her three-day fast has taken a physical toll.<sup>15</sup> But this interpretation fails to take into account the performance aspect of Esther's frail beauty. Even though Day concludes that Esther is portrayed as weak in Addition D, she insightfully points out that when Esther leans on one of her maids it is not because she is delicate, but rather "*as if* being delicate."<sup>16</sup> With the performance aspect of ὡς ("as if") operative, Day gleans, "Esther does not lean upon her servants or have them help carry her clothing (v. 4) because she is unable to support herself but because she wants to convey the impression of one who is dainty and gentle when the king first lays eyes on her. She desires to appear as if she is soft and delicate."<sup>17</sup> Esther's maids, with whom she has developed an outlet for her hidden transcripts (4:16), even act in supporting roles to help Esther to pull off her performance. Esther's frail appearance in "perfect beauty" is a mask worn to engage in disguised negotiation with Artaxerxes.<sup>18</sup> Wearing weakness,

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13. For the phrase found in 15:3, καὶ τῇ μὲν μιᾷ ἐπηρείδeto ὡς τρυφερευομένη, the NRSV translates "on one she leaned gently for support." However, I have chosen the translation of Day for this phrase (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 85), as will be discussed subsequently.

14. Fox, "Three Esthers," 58; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 271–72.

15. As postulated by Moore, *Additions*, 217–18.

16. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 101.

17. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 90.

18. When reading Esther's weeping and pleading in MT Esther 8:3 as Esther asks the king to avert the evil Haman has caused against her people, Day writes, "Esther tends to employ all the means at her disposal, and if applying 'feminine wiles' will get the king to do what she wants, she has no problem doing so. Esther is not displaying weakness by crying, but within the context of her request she may be using her weeping and falling at his feet to further Ahasuerus's [Artaxerxes's] decision in her favor. He would not be the first man, or the last, to melt at a pretty lady's tears" (*Esther*, 132). I am arguing that Esther uses her feminine frailty in LXX Esther as a means of negotiat-

the opposite of masculinity, in addition to her feminine beauty, Esther does not appear to pose any threat to the masculine king.<sup>19</sup>

Further, Esther's performance of frailty and beauty are masking that her heart is frozen with fear (15:5). Esther has already iterated her fear in her prayer and has asked God to save her from it (14:19). The fulfillment of her prayer occurs throughout the progression of Esther's three negotiations with Artaxerxes during which God, Esther's savior (15:2), saves Esther from her fear and gives her a dividend of the masculine courage that she has also requested (14:12). So, with trust in God to answer her prayer, Esther approaches Artaxerxes wearing the same radiant beauty that won her the crown initially (2:17) and provided a literal pay-off for all subjects of Persia (2:18). Now, Esther utilizes her beauty as a means of disguised negotiation and hopes for another pay-off, this time the salvation of Persian Jews.<sup>20</sup>

Esther's mask of feminine frailty and beauty functions as the disguised negotiation of anonymity. Scott describes the use of anonymity as a form of disguised negotiation that allows subordinates to overcome their fear of retaliation against their negotiation, and also provides a means of making a more direct expression of dissent.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, Scott describes how the apolitical status of women in patriarchal societies can be exploited since women are viewed as less threatening and thus retaliation against their opposition is not as severe.<sup>22</sup>

In her hidden transcript, Esther has revealed her desire that Jewish people will not be destroyed and that the plan of those who ordered the annihilation will be turned against them (14:8–11). Her desire is subversive and

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ing with Artaxerxes similar to what Day has suggested in regard Esther's weeping and pleading in MT Esther 8:3, which is not found in LXX Esther. What is odd is that Day does not argue this line of reasoning concerning Esther in LXX Esther in *Three Faces of a Queen*. Even though Day notes the possible performance of leaning on her maids (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 101), Day does not see any further performance in Esther's actions in Addition D and even concludes that Esther appears weak in these verses.

19. Fox writes, Esther "removes any suggestion of threat to his masculine control" ("Three Esthers," 59).

20. Alice Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 197; Berman, "Hadassah Bat Abihail," 658. Both Bach and Berman emphasize that Esther learned her beauty had great power over the king and was a tool she could use in order to advocate for her people.

21. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 140, 148–49.

22. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 149–50.

would warrant heart-freezing fear (14:5) of retaliation if revealed. Esther's anonymity as a woman performing feminine frailty allows her to reveal her desire, though still in a disguised manner, in a way that mediates her fear of retaliation. Though Esther asked for dividends of God's masculinity and even moves into a gender-liminal state by performing masculinity, Esther will negotiate with the king by also performing femininity that allows her to be viewed as politically nonthreatening in her negotiation.

Since Esther's anonymity is a key aspect of the political agency she exerts in disguised negotiation with Artaxerxes, it must be noted that Mordecai had initially instructed Esther in the ways of anonymity by telling her not to disclose her people or country (2:10). By hiding her ethnic identity, Esther's anonymity may have aided her ability to win the king's favor and become queen. As Esther was an object of Mordecai's possible negotiation during the queen-finding scheme, Esther's anonymity, both as a hidden Jew but also as a woman, had previously functioned to further Mordecai's disguised negotiation. But, since Mordecai's methodology has shifted from disguised to overt negotiation, perhaps Esther has learned a tool of the trade from Mordecai and now refines the way she performs the negotiation of anonymity to act on behalf of her people with her own agency.

#### ESTHER'S NEGOTIATION OF AN IMPERIAL CUSTOM (15:6–12)

With the anonymity of feminine frailty on full display, the time has come for Esther to physically move toward the king and enter the palace throne room, the centermost ring of the kingdom that symbolizes absolute earthly power.<sup>23</sup> Since being removed from her home (2:8), Esther has existed in the palace. She has been called to go into the king's most intimate quarters previously (2:15–17) and, though the frequency of her visits has decreased (4:11), she was also called to go into him other times. Thus, like Vashti and the eunuchs, Esther is also spatially liminal.<sup>24</sup> Just as Vashti and the eunuchs had the ability to move between the centermost spaces of power, and the fringes of that power, so does Esther. At the beginning of her approach to Artaxerxes, then, the liminal Esther literally moves through all the doors (15:6a) to get to the king's quarters. The number of doors is

23. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 18.

24. Beal, "Esther," 9–10. Though Beal only writes of the liminality of the eunuchs.

not included, but that she does not go through one, but *all* the doors gives the reader an image of Esther's long approach to the king, crossing many thresholds.<sup>25</sup> Mills describes how these rooms and thresholds represent social and cultural boundaries that Esther's body must cross in order to save her people.<sup>26</sup> Esther's liminal body will negotiate with Artaxerxes via (1) her hybrid cultural identity by participating in Persian power but also demonstrating loyalty to God (14:1–19); and (2) her hybrid gender identity by performing masculine courage and eloquent speech, but also feminine frailty. Thus, like the culturally constructed boundaries of identity Esther has transgressed, when she crosses physical thresholds and moves closer to the center of power, the liminal Esther is poised to subvert imperial power and transgress its laws.<sup>27</sup> The first imperial law Esther's negotiation must transgress is approaching the king unsummoned.

Reaching the king's quarters, "she stood before the king. He was seated on his royal throne, clothed in the full array of his majesty, all covered with gold and precious stones. He was most terrifying" (15:6b–c). Standing before the king, Esther sees the full scope of imperial power. From his throne, the king has imperial power to issue political decrees commanding people to follow whatever life-and-death orders he issues; he has the power to send out his military to enforce those decrees with violence and to gather economic resources that were gained/plundered/seized in military campaigns, the very resources that fund the gold and precious stones that cover his throne. The image of the king sitting upon the throne that was representative of his masculine power may have been ideological fuel enough that Esther would certainly be terrified when she sees the king for the first time since his fearful power has been turned against her and her people.<sup>28</sup>

When the king notices Esther and her maids, "Lifting his face, flushed with splendor, he looked at her in fierce anger. The queen faltered, and

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25. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 91. Day notices how LXX Esther, in contrast to MT or AT Esther, portrays the king as the most protected and inaccessible.

26. Mills, "Household and Table," 417–19.

27. For liminal characters' unique position to subvert or maintain power, see Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 76.

28. Esther tells Mordecai she has not been called to go to the king in thirty days on the day when the decree is posted (4:11), and this encounter takes place three days after her conversation with Mordecai (15:1). Also see Mann, *Sources of Power*, 19–28 for the four sources of social power (political, military, economic, ideological) that Artaxerxes would hold as the ruler of an empire.



turned pale and faint, and collapsed on the head of the maid who went in front of her" (15:7). Why the king is so angry with Esther is not explicit, but many have presumed that he is angry because Esther and her maids have come before him without being called.<sup>29</sup> The Old Latin version of Esther even inserts this reasoning for the king's anger and reads, "Looking with his eyes, he saw her as a bull at the peak of his anger, and he considered killing her; but he was uncertain, and calling out, he said, 'Who dares to enter unsummoned into the court?'"<sup>30</sup>

But beyond a presumption of the king's anger because Esther has approached him unsummoned, perhaps a hint of Mordecai's overt defiance that caused the crisis for Jews also underlies this passage. When Esther moves through all the doors to finally reach the king, "she stood before him" (15:6). Just as obeisance to Haman, the second father of Persia (13:6) who functioned as a representative of Artaxerxes's power, was required (3:2), surely bowing before the king was common practice as well. Thus, the king may have been angry that Esther and her maids stood before him rather than bowing in the same way that Mordecai did not bow to Haman. However, Esther quickly rectifies her inappropriate posture before the king by dramatically collapsing onto the head of one of her maids while looking pale and faint (15:7). She literally falls, or bows, before the king.

As Esther had claimed agency to become God's representative apart from Mordecai in her prayer (14:1–5), Esther again differentiates herself from Mordecai by doing the very thing Mordecai refused to do and that he could have done to save their people in the first place. Many scholars comment that Esther's apparent fainting adds to her characterization as weak, delicate, and even overcome by the king's great power.<sup>31</sup> But while Esther's fainting spell does make her appear weak, it is also part of her performance of feminine frailty. It is even possible that Esther feigns her fainting spell in order to further perform feminine frailty, but her "heart frozen with fear" may have been the culprit for her fainting rather than dramatic acting. In either case, Esther's appearance as weak and feminine makes her appear nonthreatening to Artaxerxes and furthers her negotiation.

With Esther's theatrically collapsed body lying on top of the head of her maid, God makes God's first appearance in the narrative activity

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29. E.g., Levenson, *Esther*, 87.

30. Cited and translated in Moore, *Additions*, 216, 218.

31. E.g., Fox, "Three Esthers," 58–60; Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 100–101; Levenson, *Esther*, 87–88; White Crawford, *Esther*, 962; Moore, *Additions*, 219.

of LXX Esther. God has been mentioned as the receiver of the righteous nation's cries (11:10) who had determined (11:12) to save the righteous nation by a tiny spring that would bring water, light, and the reversal of power (11:10–11). God has also been mentioned as one who should be feared and God's laws kept (2:20), one who should be called upon (4:8), one who was prayed to as king above all kings (13:9; 14:12), and one from whom Esther requests courage, eloquent speech, and salvation from her fear (14:12–13, 19). But other than the dream God apparently gives to Mordecai (though that God gave the dream is not explicitly stated), God's "determinations" to this point have been largely unseen. However, at this crucial moment of Esther's negotiation, God actively intervenes in the unfolding events. "Then God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness, and in alarm he sprang from his throne and took her in his arms until she came to herself" (15:8a–b). With great power, even power over the emotions of a human king who portrays hegemonic masculinity on earth, God changes the king's anger to gentleness.

Moore reads God's intervention at this stage in LXX Esther as the dramatic climax of the book. Once the spirit of the king was changed by God, the rest of the conflict's denouement could fall into place.<sup>32</sup> Moore writes,

But although Esther had steeled herself for this terrible moment of truth ... when the terrible moment came and the awesome king glared at her, Esther failed completely: she fainted dead away (vss. 6–7). She was inadequate for the test. But God was not: he [*sic*] changed the king's mood to gentleness (vs. 8), thereby bringing victory out of her defeat. It was God's power, not Esther's courage or charms, that saved the day. God, not Esther, is the hero of Addition D.<sup>33</sup>

However, Moore's reading of Esther's "failure" fails to take into account the later success of Esther's negotiation including a performance of feminine weakness and remedying Mordecai's defiance. Certainly, God's intervention was invaluable to the king's cooperation, but God intervenes in partnership with Esther's disguised negotiation, not because she is inadequate.<sup>34</sup> Esther has agency as God's representative and undertakes

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32. Moore, *Additions*, 218–20.

33. Moore, *Additions*, 219.

34. Fox also acknowledges the partnership between God and Esther in eliciting a positive response from the king. He writes, "But God—and undoubtedly, Esther's feminine frailty—puts the king in a tender mood" ("Three Esthers," 58).

negotiation on behalf of her people and to assert the hegemonic masculinity of God. Because Esther prays for God's help (14:1–19), God intervenes at a critical moment to allow for the success of Esther's negotiation. In doing so, God also establishes God's ultimate power as the holder of universal hegemonic masculinity who can even manipulate the exemplar of hegemonic masculinity on earth.

The result is that the king, now under the control of the ultimate masculine power of God, "comforted Esther with soothing words, and said to her, 'What is it Esther? I am your husband.'<sup>35</sup> Take courage; You shall not die, for our law applies only to our subjects. Come near'" (15:8c–10). Rather than being angry with Esther, the king's attitude toward her turned soft. He comforts her feebleness and demonstrates his physical and emotional connection with her.<sup>36</sup> Telling her, "Take courage," the king even encourages Esther that it is acceptable for her to perform a characteristic of masculinity—the courage that she had asked to attain as a dividend of God's masculinity (14:12) and that she performs by approaching the king.<sup>37</sup> Even as Esther's hybrid and liminal body performs femininity, she is admonished also to perform masculinity.

The king then proceeds to tell Esther that the law of not approaching him unsummoned never applied to her in the first place (15:10). Fox comments that the king's initial anger was illogical if the law never applied to Esther.<sup>38</sup> But the king's anger may have been directed at her lack of bowing rather than her unsummoned approach. Or, perhaps Artaxerxes changes that law on the spot by saying it does not apply to Esther. Just as Esther transgresses the law of not approaching the king without being called, so too does the king appear to transgress that law by perhaps changing or amending it. After all, he is the king and he can do whatever he wishes.

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35. The Greek which the NRSV translates as "I am your husband," actually reads, ἐγὼ ὁ ἀδελφός, "I am your brother." Scholars suggest the following: that "brother" is a term of endearment (Moore, *Additions*, 218); it means "close kinsman" (White Crawford, *Esther*, 962); it is a blanket term for family in Jewish novels (Wills, *Jewish Novel*, 126); or it simply denotes closeness between Esther and Artaxerxes (Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 94–95). But it is interesting that Mordecai can be understood as both Esther's adopted father and her husband, and now Artaxerxes is also understood as both a family member and a spouse.

36. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 94–95.

37. Conway, *Behold the Man*, 21–34.

38. Fox, "Three Esthers," 58–59.

So the king “raised the golden scepter and touched her neck with it; he embraced her, and said, ‘Speak to me’” (15:11–12). The reader may presume that like her first encounter with the king in which she “went into” him (2:16), a euphemism for sexual intercourse, Esther’s subsequent interactions with the king were also sexual in nature (4:10–11). So as the king raises the golden scepter, which represents masculine power and sexual potency as a phallic symbol, the reader may assume that a sexual encounter occurs when Esther comes near (15:10) and the king embraces her (15:12).

Duran writes of the connection between gender, sex, and transgression of the law in this scene in MT Esther, “What allows Esther into the king’s court, against the law, is not a contravening law but a momentary transcendence of the law, when by the king’s good grace, because of her beauty and ability to please, he extends to her the scepter. Legally, upon invitation, the women are ushered into the court by desexed men. Now alegally, Esther is ushered in by what is surely a symbol of this man’s sex.”<sup>39</sup> Though in LXX Esther the king extends the scepter partially because God intervenes to make Esther’s negotiation successful, the same connection Duran makes is valid in this text as well. Esther utilizes the performance of femininity, likely through a sexual act in addition to her performance of feminine frailty, to negotiate so that the king transgresses a law, albeit his own law. In this instance the law in question concerns her safety in appearing before him. In her subsequent acts of negotiation, the law in question will concern the safety of Persian Jews. The king’s susceptibility to change imperial law under the influence of Esther’s femininity here, then, may foreshadow that the king will also change another edict, the one decreeing the annihilation of Persian Jews, as Esther’s negotiation continues.

#### ESTHER SPEAKS TO THE KING (15:13–16)

After Esther has successfully negotiated the transgression of one imperial law, Esther continues to negotiate for the transgression of another imperial law—the one that functions as her and her people’s death sentence. In the intimate moment of Esther’s negotiation, the king asks Esther to speak to him (15:12b) and gives her an opportunity to continue her negotiation through the eloquent speech she has also obtained as

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39. Duran, “Who Wants to Marry a Persian King?” 82.

a patriarchal dividend of God's hegemonic masculinity (14:13). Esther's carefully chosen words and bodily actions continue her performance of disguised negotiation.

Esther's initial address to Artaxerxes begins as an answer to his question, "What is it?" (15:9). The actual answer to the king's "What is it?" is that Esther wants Artaxerxes to save her people from the annihilation he has ordered. But her disguised negotiation does not go directly to the point, and, instead, exploits the ambiguity. Esther answers as if the king is asking why she would faint and collapse in his presence, and her answer to that question is not completely truthful. Though Esther's collapse is a remedy to Mordecai's failure to bow and functions as negotiation of anonymity through a melodramatic performance of feminine frailty, Esther's answer continues her performance by giving false reasoning for her fainting/feinting and praise for the king's kindness to her. In this way, Esther's speech employs the disguised negotiation of euphemism and flattery. "She said to him, 'I saw you, my lord, like an angel of God, and my heart was shaken with fear at your glory. For you are wonderful, my lord, and your countenance is full of grace'" (15:13–14).

First, Esther's address of Artaxerxes as "my lord" may function as the negotiation of euphemism. Scott describes the negotiation of euphemism as "what happens to a hidden transcript when it is expressed in a power-laden situation by an actor who wishes to avoid the sanctions that direct statement will bring."<sup>40</sup> By veiling the message, subordinates utilize euphemism to blaspheme dominants in public by making associations that only subordinates understand.<sup>41</sup> In her prayer Esther called on God as "Lord" (κύριε) seven times in her prayer (14:3, 5, 7, 11, 12, 14, 18), specifically "my Lord" (κύριέ μου) when she begins her prayer in 14:3. Additionally, Mordecai referred to God as "Lord" (κύριος) eight times in his prayer (13:9 [2x], 11 [2x], 12, 14, 15, 17). It would seem, then, that a connection has been established that the identity of "Lord" is the God of Israel.<sup>42</sup> Thus, Esther's

40. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 152.

41. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 152–53.

42. Koller describes how R. Yohanan also sees language supposedly referring to Artaxerxes throughout the book of Esther as actually references to God. However, he states that R. Yohanan refers to all of MT Esther's references to "the king" as insinuations of "the King of Kings of Kings." So anytime Artaxerxes is referred to only as "the king," R. Yohanan reads this as God. E.g., in MT Esther, "the king was very wrathful" (1:12) and "the wrath of the king abated" (7:10) both refer to God's wrath. I do not

statements might be read as veiled comments that Esther saw God, appearing like an angel/messenger (ὡς ἄγγελον θεοῦ, 15:13) to change Artaxerxes's spirit, and that she praised God's grace for changing Artaxerxes's anger to gentleness. If so, then Esther, whose "heart was shaken with fear at your glory" (καὶ ἐταράχθη ἡ καρδία μου ἀπὸ φόβου τῆς δόξης σου, 15:13), was not communicating a positive, reverent fear of Artaxerxes's human glory and perhaps even setting it above God's glory as Mordecai warns against (13:14).<sup>43</sup> Rather, Esther was conveying her pious fear of the glory of God through a euphemism.

Second, since Esther's statements were made directly to Artaxerxes, they may also function as the negotiation of flattery. Scott describes the negotiation of flattery as instances in which subordinates utilize praise of their dominant's superiority to secure better treatment.<sup>44</sup> Esther's praise of God as "my Lord" (κύριέ μου), when heard by Artaxerxes as praise of him, could have been heard as respect for Artaxerxes's political power since κύριος was a title for political rulers in the Hellenistic era.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, though Artaxerxes may have been confused by Esther calling him an angel/messenger of God, he certainly would have welcomed hearing that Esther's heart feared his glory (15:13), and would have resonated with admiration of him being called "wonderful" and having a "countenance full of grace" (15:14).<sup>46</sup> Artaxerxes desired to be feared, but also beloved.

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follow this reading of R. Yohanan, but also see euphemism, though only here where Esther calls Artaxerxes "lord" (*Esther in Ancient Thought*, 213, citing Midrash Abba Gurion 7b and Esther Rab. 3:10–15).

43. The Greek word *ταράσσω* has been a common word throughout LXX Esther and further discussion of its use here will be discussed when the word appears again in conjunction with the king (15:16). Moore suggests that she was ignoring Mordecai's warning here (*Additions*, 219).

44. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 18.

45. Menn, "Prayer of the Queen," 73; Deissmann, *Light from the East*, 351–53.

46. The phrase "angel/messenger of God" would be easier to understand as a flattery of Artaxerxes if she called him a messenger of the gods (plural) instead of an angel/messenger of God (singular). The likelihood of Artaxerxes being a monotheist is low, unless, of course, his only god was himself. However, Artaxerxes does appear to transition to being one who at least acknowledges the great power of Esther's God since in his edict found in Addition E he says that God "rules over all things" (16:18, 21). Moore writes of Esther calling Artaxerxes an angel of God, "If this phrase represents only flattery on Esther's part, then it is quite unconscionable, if not blasphemous, for one with the scruples of Greek Esther" (*Additions*, 219). Though Moore recognized that a surface reading of Esther's praise of Artaxerxes as an angel of God was difficult,

Artaxerxes had military power to be feared as he ruled over 127 provinces (1:1; 3:12; 13:1; 16:1), even the whole world (13:2), and was able to issue decrees to exterminate an entire people group (3:12–13; 13:1–7; 3:14). But Artaxerxes also concocted a narrative that legitimated his superiority by (falsely) extolling his benevolence and commitment to the goodwill and peace of the kingdom (13:2–5). Esther’s subversive commendation, then, would provide surface affirmation of the king’s power and supremacy. Her performance of flattery to Artaxerxes, with her heart even supposedly revering his “glory” that she hates (15:13), is utilized to help secure the “better treatment” Scott describes—that her people might not become the objects of genocide. So while Day finds Esther’s flattery of the king to express the high regard in which she holds him and her gratefulness of his benevolent extension of safety, such an interpretation fails to take into account the function of flattery as an instrument of political negotiation.<sup>47</sup>

While Esther is still speaking with her performance of disguised negotiation through euphemism and flattery, Esther’s body continues to perform negotiation as, again, “she fainted and fell” (15:15). Perhaps Esther learned that her first faint had great benefits and so she feigns another “faint” in the continuation of her negotiation. Esther’s second fainting spell is described by forms of the same two verbs as her first collapse (ἔπεσεν/ἔπεσεν and ἐκλύσει/ἐκλύσεως, 15:7 and 15:15, respectively)—which would seem to indicate the same kind of action happening again.<sup>48</sup> So in the same way Esther’s first faint remedied Mordecai’s failure to bow and performed the nonthreatening anonymity of feminine frailty, Esther now performs another melodramatic faint/feint with the same aims. Her second “fall” also punctuates her “praise” of Artaxerxes whose strength and glory is juxtaposed against Esther’s apparent feebleness.

Upon seeing Esther’s second collapse, “Then the king was troubled, and all his servants tried to comfort her” (καὶ ὁ βασιλεὺς ἐταράσσετο, καὶ πᾶσα ἡ θεραπεία αὐτοῦ παρεκάλει αὐτήν, 15:16).<sup>49</sup> Greek ταράσσω is a verb that has appeared throughout LXX Esther. Tumult and great tumult were

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he didn’t take the next step to imagine that Esther’s speech did not match her motivations for saying it.

47. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 96–97.

48. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 97–98.

49. “The king was troubled” is the translation of Day (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 88). The NRSV translates ἐταράσσετο as “was agitated,” which has a more negative connotation.



predicted in Mordecai's dream (τάραχος ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, 11:5; and τάραχος μέγας ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, 11:8); Esther experienced great tumult after learning about the edict against the Jews (ἐταράχθη, 4:4) as did the city of Susa (ἐταράσσετο, 3:15); and in just a few verses prior, Esther's performance of euphemism, flattery, anonymity, and feminine frailty included a statement that her heart was troubled (ἐταράχθη) by the king's glory (15:13). Here, the king's "troubled" state reflects these previous predictions and descriptions of tumult, but Artaxerxes's trouble, confusion, or disturbed mental state is out of concern for Esther.<sup>50</sup> God's intervention to change Artaxerxes's spirit has proved substantial in that the same chaotic feeling Esther felt for the decreed annihilation of her people is what Artaxerxes now feels for her. In this way, Esther has again progressed in agency and gained power, since Esther is no longer the one who experiences or performs tumult, but she is the one who inflicts it onto others.<sup>51</sup>

#### ESTHER REQUESTS A BANQUET (5:3–4)

Esther's negotiation of anonymity by utilizing feminine frailty is able to move the king so intensely that, "The king said to her, 'What do wish, Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to half of my kingdom'" (5:3). For the second time, again following one of her collapses, Artaxerxes asks Esther what her request is. But in his second questioning of her, he adds an offer of half his kingdom to perhaps jog her memory as to why she has approached him in the first place.

LXX Esther has made it abundantly clear that Artaxerxes's kingdom has superfluous resources (e.g., 1:1–4) and stretches across 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia (1:1; 3:12; 13:1; 16:1).<sup>52</sup> So when the king offers Esther half of all his kingdom, 63.5 provinces, scholars have suggested that his offer is not a literal but a hyperbolic or idiomatic offer that consists of

50. For the translation "disturbed mental state," see *GELS*, s.v. "ταράσσω."

51. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 132. Day also mentions Esther's increase in power in reference to the tumult (ἐταράχθη) she inflicts on Haman in 7:6, but does not include mention of it in her discussion on Addition D and the king.

52. Day even says that the king's ostentatious displays show him to be a "material king" who assumes people come to him asking for some sort of gift (*Esther*, 96–97). But the king's material wealth is not just for economic gain, but as a display of power. The king is not a material king, but a power king.



only some significant measure of wealth.<sup>53</sup> But what scholars have not discussed is that what the king offers Esther is not only monetary or physical resources, but power. If the king were to give Esther half of his kingdom, the king would be transferring half of his masculine power to Esther. Haman may be the “second father” of Persia (13:6), but such a move would make Esther the co-first-father.

It seems quite odd that Artaxerxes would make such an offer at this point. The decrees to force women’s submission, to seize women for the royal harem, and to exterminate Jews have all been done to maintain and protect masculine imperial power, but now the king offers to give it away. I suggest, here, two potential reasons why the king might make this offer. First, perhaps Esther’s negotiation of Artaxerxes is particularly effective since she undertakes the negotiation of the anonymity as a woman. The king, as the hegemonic male on earth, must protect his masculinity from all challengers, as he and Haman have done in response to previous overt challenges from Vashti and Mordecai. But, Esther, as not only a woman, but a performer of feminine frailty as the opposite of masculinity, and who does not publicly assert subjectivity in overt defiance, may not seem as threatening. The king may perceive that he can give away half his power to a feeble woman and still remain the hegemonic male. So now he is feigning to share power with her, when in fact his offer is calculable and controllable. Or, second, perhaps God’s intervention has not only provided for Esther’s success by manipulating Artaxerxes’s emotions, but because God has control over him; Artaxerxes has lost his claim to dominion over the earth. Artaxerxes’s offer of half his kingdom to Esther, then, functions symbolically to denote that some measure of his masculine power has already been lost when God took over control of him.

But, even though Artaxerxes offers to make Esther his equal in power and the reader might expect her to respond eagerly in the affirmative, she replies in an unexpected fashion. “And Esther said, ‘Today is a special day for me. If it pleases the king, let him and Haman come to the dinner that I shall prepare today’” (5:4). Why Esther chose to host a banquet rather than asking for the reversal of the pogrom, or even taking half of the kingdom to turn it against Artaxerxes, has been considered by numerous interpreters. Included among the possibilities suggested for Esther’s reasoning are: (1) Esther wants Artaxerxes to forget her indiscretion of approaching him

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53. Moore, *Esther*, 55; Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 406; Berlin, *Esther*, 53.

unsummoned before making her request; (2) Esther wants to delay until the king has partaken of the banquet (especially the wine) and is in a good mood; (3) Esther perceived it was not the right moment; and (4) Esther lacked courage at the last minute.<sup>54</sup>

But for Esther to ask the king directly to reverse the edict of Jewish extermination, even at this point after gaining the king's considerable care, would not fit Esther's commitment to performing disguised negotiation. The words of Esther's request are read here as negotiation of deference and flattery. Then, Esther's offer to host a banquet is explained as a progression in Esther's agency, and as an extension of her sexuality in continuance of her bodily negotiation of anonymity as a woman in order to create conflict between Artaxerxes and Haman.

Leaving the king's offer of half his power on the table and still not answering the king as to why she initially approached him, in Esther's response to the king she first comments on the special nature of the day on which their exchange takes place. Though her reasoning for why the day is special is not explicit, perhaps Esther is suggesting that any day she gets to faint/feint in front of the king is special and by doing so she continues to negotiate in deference and flattery of the king's power.

Then, Esther begins her request by employing the language of the court and a rhetoric of pleasing saying, "If it pleases the king," let me host a banquet (5:4).<sup>55</sup> Throughout LXX Esther, the king has proven himself to be amenable to proposals which operate as maintenance/exertion of his power—for example, Muchaeus's proposal to enforce women's submission (1:16–20); the queen-finding scheme suggested by the king's servants (2:2–4); and Haman's recommendation of Jewish extermination (3:8–9). Since banquets have been established as a means through which the king's power is exerted, displayed, and celebrated (1:1–8; 2:18; 3:15), Esther's proposal of an intimate banquet is also an act of deference to the king's power. This proposal, like the other recommendations made to him in LXX Esther, pleases the king, who is happy to participate in a celebration of his greatness.

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54. For option (1), see Levenson, *Esther*, 90, citing Eliezer Ashkenazi, "Yosef Leqah," in *Megillat Esther 'im Perush Ha-Gr"a Ha-Shalem*, ed. Chanan David Nobel (Jerusalem, 1991), to Esth 5:4. For option (2), see Day, *Esther*, 97–99. For option (3), see Moore, *Esther*, 56, citing A. W. Streane, *The Book of Esther*, CBSC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907). For option (4), see Moore, *Esther*, 56, citing Hermann Gunkel, *Esther* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1916).

55. Day, *Esther*, 91.

Several feasts of eating and drinking have occurred throughout LXX Esther—Artaxerxes threw a banquet for the elites of the kingdom (δοχήν, 1:3); Artaxerxes hosted a drinking party for the inhabitants of Susa (πότον, 1:5); Vashti hosted a drinking party for women in the palace (πότον, 1:9); Artaxerxes gave a drinking party to celebrate Esther's coronation (πότον, 2:18); and Artaxerxes and Haman caroused (ἐκωθωνίζοντο, 3:15) after issuing the decree of annihilation of Jews. Esther's banquet (δοχήν, 5:4), then, is described by the same term as Artaxerxes's most extravagant 180-day feast for the elites of the kingdom (δοχήν, 1:3).<sup>56</sup> Differently from Artaxerxes's six-month public spectacle though, Esther's elite banquet will be private. But, still, in being able to throw a banquet like Artaxerxes's most ostentatious display of power, despite being a more hidden affair, Esther demonstrates great power herself. Esther's agency and power continues to progress as she mimics the same means, banqueting, by which Artaxerxes has exerted power in the past.

But even more than Esther's banquet functioning as a progression in agency, Esther's banquet may be a further negotiation performed by Esther's body. Alice Bach links the acts of eating and drinking in the biblical narrative to the transfer of power to women. Bach argues that food was a displaced trope for sexual pleasure in ancient daily life as the pleasure of eating is a part of a larger definition of erotic pleasure that includes more than genital sexuality, but all stimuli which bring pleasure to the body.<sup>57</sup> So as a female character is eroticized through her connection to the food she prepares to enter male bodies, Bach posits that feeding becomes key to women's ability to seize power.<sup>58</sup> Bach uses biblical examples to demonstrate this point, including the connection between feeding and gaining knowledge in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:1–7); Jael's offer of food before killing Sisera (Judg 4:17–21); and how Judith drinks with Holofernes before killing him in his drunken state (Jdt 12:10–13:10).<sup>59</sup>

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56. Differently than LXX Esther, in AT Esth 5:4 Esther invites the men to a drinking party (πότος) and in MT Esth 5:4 she invites them to a feast (המשחה), which also implies drinking. In AT and MT Esther, Esther is most likely inviting the king to “a smaller affair, a ‘cocktail party’ if you will, where the focus would be on drinking and conversation rather than foods served, as would be for an actual feast or banquet” (Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 109). Only in LXX Esther does Esther throw a banquet similar to Artaxerxes's largest celebration.

57. Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal*, 167–69.

58. Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal*, 171, 183.

59. Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal*, 183–86.

But in reference to Esther, Bach writes, “Esther has understood that her power comes from being the object of the gaze and has exploited that power. But the site that Esther chooses for her seduction is not the bedroom but the banquet hall. It is food, wine, and spectacle that Esther uses rather than her body to get the king to order Haman’s death.”<sup>60</sup> In contrast to Bach, I have argued that Esther’s seduction has also included “the bedroom,” or whatever place where Esther “goes into” the king (2:15) or is extended the royal scepter (15:11). So just as Bach has emphasized that food is a sexual trope through which a female body is eroticized, the banquet hall is a bedroom, and the bedroom is a banquet hall. The food Esther prepares for the banquet, that will enter Artaxerxes’s and Haman’s bodies, is an extension of her sexuality.<sup>61</sup> Thus, Esther’s banquet functions as continued negotiation of anonymity through the performance of feminine sexuality.

It is worth noting that Vashti refused to appear at the king’s banquet because she refused to be sexually objectified in the display of her beauty (1:11). In contrast, Esther not only appears at a banquet with the king, as Vashti refused to do, but throws the banquet as an extension of her sexuality. While Vashti engaged in overt defiance, Esther utilizes any disguise available to her in negotiation, even the disguise of sexual objectification. In the same way that Esther remedied Mordecai’s overt defiance of refusing to bow by falling before the king two times, Esther also remedies Vashti’s overt defiance of refusing to appear in sexual objectification by creating an opportunity to perform her sexuality before the king and his closest advisor.

Perhaps Esther’s utilization of her sexuality in hosting the banquet is even the reason she invites Haman to attend the banquet with her and Artaxerxes. She could have invited the king to a cozy “banquet” prepared only for two, but instead she includes Haman, the arch-nemesis of Jews. Reasons posited by scholars to explain why Esther included Haman on the limited guest-list include: (1) Esther attempts to get in Haman’s good

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60. Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal*, 190–91.

61. Though he does not draw the same conclusion I do, that food is a trope through which Esther’s body is sexualized, LaCocque also alludes to the theme of sexuality present in the banquets through (1) the advantage Esther has over Artaxerxes in her beauty, (2) that her banquet is a portrait of a sex orgy to which Esther invites two males while Vashti would only banquet with women, and (3) Haman’s appearance as a rapist as the second banquet (*Esther Regina*, 118–20).

graces and honors him while “she fattens him for the kill”; (2) Esther wanted to avert suspicion on Haman’s part; and (3) Esther was setting a trap of some sort for Haman.<sup>62</sup> I tend to agree with the third suggestion that Esther was preparing a trap for Haman, especially in LXX Esther in which Esther states that she wishes an example to be made of the one who began the plot against her people (14:11), who presumably is Haman. Several early rabbinic commentators of Esther have suggested that Esther may have been trying to make Artaxerxes jealous of Haman and, thus, incite a conflict between them.<sup>63</sup> Hazony also argues for Esther’s inclusion of Haman at the banquet as skillful provocation of conflict:

What is needed is to drive a wedge between the king and the vizier [Haman], something that will give Esther the leverage she needs to pry Ahashverosh [Artaxerxes] away from him. To do this, she must avoid the trap of arguing policy directly, and find a way of challenging Haman’s trusted status on personal grounds, causing the vizier [Haman] to appear flawed in judgment or even suspect in the eyes of the king. It is to achieve this that Esther proposes Ahashverosh [Artaxerxes] come to her dinner, telling the king that she wishes to invite “the king and Haman to the banquet I have prepared for him.”<sup>64</sup>

Esther’s husband, the king, has already demonstrated his devotion to Esther as a result of her disguised negotiation with the assistance of God’s manipulation. So when Esther’s sexuality is extended to both Artaxerxes and Haman in the form of a banquet, surely conflict will ensue and Haman will be viewed as a challenger for the queen’s affection. Laniak writes, “To be ‘cuckolded,’ in the language of traditional Mediterranean societies, is the greatest shame for a man. And to violate Esther *the queen* is tantamount to tyranny against the king.”<sup>65</sup> With Artaxerxes hopefully realizing

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62. For option (1), see Levenson, *Esther*, 90. Also cited as a possible motive by Beal, “Esther,” 72. For option (2), see Moore, *Esther*, 56 citing Jacob Hoschander, *The Book of Esther in Light of History* (Philadelphia: Dropsie College, 1923). For option (3), see Day, *Esther*, 97. R. Eliezer cited in Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 72.

63. B. Meg. 15b, and Rashi on 5:4 cited in Levenson, *Esther*, 90.

64. Hazony, *Dawn*, 150. Hazony is reading MT Esther in which Esther says she will make the banquet for “him” (אֶשֶׁר-עָשִׂיתִי לוֹ, 5:4), who Hazony argues is actually Haman. But LXX Esther does not state for whom the banquet is prepared, only that Artaxerxes and Haman are both invited.

65. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 115–16. Laniak cites Anton Blok, “Rams and Billy Goats: A Key to the Mediterranean Code of Honour,” *Man* 16

that his second-in-command is a rival for his queen's sexuality, perhaps Esther will be able to convince Artaxerxes that following any of Haman's recommendations has been a grave mistake in judgment.

#### ESTHER'S FIRST BANQUET (5:5–8)

When Esther asks the king to attend a banquet she prepares for him and Haman, he responds affirmatively and initiates immediate action to grant Esther's wish. "Then the king said, 'Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther desires'" (5:5a). Though Esther has made her request by deferring to what might please the king, Artaxerxes calls Haman to come in order to defer to what Esther desires. Esther's desires now occupy a place of importance with the king. Previously, the king has held the desires, proposals, and recommendations of his advisors in high regard as well—his friends (1:13–15), Muchaeus (1:16–21), his servants (2:2–4), and Haman (3:8–11). As the king acts according to Esther's wishes here, the king responds to her similarly to how he has responded to his other advisors. Hancock has argued that Esther, in her negotiations with the king in chapters 5–8, acts as a political counselor or advisor to the king.<sup>66</sup> When Esther moved through all the doors to get to the king's throne room (15:6), it seems as though she has not only transgressed cultural and gender boundaries, but also those of power. Esther has moved from a liminal space into the circle of power closest to the king in which the king's closest friends and advisors obtain the greatest measure of the king's power and exert it on the king's behalf.

Now complicit with the king's masculinity as one of his advisors, Esther's complicity with God's masculinity is held in contrast. But God's superiority is evidenced when Haman quickly responds to Esther's indirect summons.<sup>67</sup> Previously, Artaxerxes summoned Vashti to a banquet via the eunuchs (1:10–11), and she did not comply. Now, Esther summons Haman to a banquet via Artaxerxes, and Haman complies. Esther

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(1981): 427–40; and Julian Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem or the Politics of Sex: Essays in Anthropology of the Mediterranean*, CSSCA 19 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 127–71.

66. Hancock, *Esther and the Politics of Negotiation*, 83–121.

67. Klein finds the imposition that Haman must move quickly, or hurry, as a subtle erosion of his honor since he does not have autonomy over his own time ("Honor and Shame in Esther," 167).

performs her masculinity through exhibiting authority; she issues a summons that is followed, in contrast to Artaxerxes whose summons of Vashti is not heeded.<sup>68</sup> In this way, Artaxerxes's earthly hegemonic masculinity does not even compare to Esther's complicity with God's universal hegemonic masculinity.

With God's superiority established, when Artaxerxes and Haman both arrive at the dinner Esther prepares, the king acts in deference to Esther: "While they were drinking wine, the king said to Esther, 'What is it, Queen Esther? It shall be granted to you'" (5:6). Artaxerxes not only again promises to do as she requests, but he also demonstrates respect for Esther by referring to her by her royal title—Queen Esther.<sup>69</sup> Realizing the banquet itself was not Esther's real request, the king again promises the queen that whatever she desires will be granted to her.<sup>70</sup>

But, while the reader anticipates Esther to deliver the important petition to save her people, Esther invites Haman and Artaxerxes to another banquet: "She said, 'My petition and request is: If I have found favor in the sight of the king, let the king and Haman come to the dinner I shall prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as I have done today'" (5:7–8).

Many scholars have suggested that Esther again does not directly ask for the salvation of her people but instead proposes a second banquet in order to raise the tension and suspense for both Artaxerxes and readers.<sup>71</sup> Day also lists other possible reasons for the second banquet, including: Esther wanted to get the king more drunk, she needed extra time to build up her courage, she wanted Haman to feel safe and not threatened, and she plays a traditional female role to assure Artaxerxes she is not a threat to the male hierarchy.<sup>72</sup> Certainly, the last of Day's suggestions has been

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68. For authority as masculinity, see Conway, *Behold the Man*, 22; Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 141; Goldingay, "Hosea 1–3, Genesis 1–4," 39. Concerning Esther's summons, Day does not make this exact correlation, but does write, "It is ironic that Ahasuerus [Artaxerxes] will come at Esther's bidding, in contrast to Vashti's refusal to come at his bidding" (*Esther*, 98). See also Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 69.

69. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 114.

70. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 69.

71. Moore, *Esther*, 58; Berlin, *Esther*, 54; Beal, "Esther," 72; Day, *Esther*, 100.

72. Day, *Esther*, 100. Two scholars posit Esther's use of two banquets is a biblical allusion. Berger suggests Esther's banquets are an allusion to Saul's two banquets in 1 Sam 20. The first of Saul's banquet is uneventful (1 Sam 20:26). Then at the second banquet, Saul becomes enraged because he senses a threat from David, whom Jonathan is protecting (1 Sam 20:27–34) ("Esther and Benjaminite Royalty," 636–37). The



operative, as evidenced in Addition D, which describes how Esther negotiates with Artaxerxes via a performance of feminine frailty, the opposite of masculinity.

But, also, if the key to Esther's banquet was to create a conflict between Artaxerxes and Haman by using a performance of her sexuality, then the first banquet has not accomplished her goal.<sup>73</sup> Even though Haman partakes of the queen's libations, Artaxerxes seems oblivious to the threat. So Esther offers Artaxerxes a hint. Esther began her request for a first banquet by saying, "if it pleases the king" (5:4). But in her request for a second banquet she adjusts the preface to her petition saying, "if I have found favor with the king" (5:8) which grounds her request in his opinion of her.<sup>74</sup> Esther reminds the king that these banquets are not only a celebration of his power as other banquets have functioned. Esther's banquets are thrown and prepared by his queen, therefore the meals are also about their relationship. She hopes Artaxerxes will understand this clue and will recognize the threat Haman's presence poses at the next banquet, and thus the necessary fracture will be created in their relationship.

#### READING ESTHER'S PERFORMANCE OF FEMININE FRAILTY

Contemporary interpreters have read Esther's "frailty," specifically in Addition D, in various ways. Several scholars note the similarity between characterizations of heroines in Greek novels and Esther's depiction as an attractive, pious, emotional, educated, victimized woman with romanticized sensibilities.<sup>75</sup> Because of these similarities, Fox posits that the author of Addition D elaborated on Esther's character in order to make her more attractive to a late Hellenistic audience. He argues that the

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correlation Berger makes is that Esther's initiative at the banquet protects the Jews, in the same way that Jonathan's initiative protects David. This correlation further enforces Esther's role as a Benjaminite royal figure in the line of Saul. Laniak notes that Esther's use of two banquets may correspond to Joseph's two banquets. At the first, Joseph keeps his identity secret from his brothers (Gen 43:16–34), then he reveals himself and his intentions at the second (Gen 45:3) (*Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 89, n. 67).

73. Hazony, *Dawn*, 150–51.

74. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 112.

75. Wills, *Jewish Novel*, 116–31; Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 214–22; Fox, "Three Esthers," 58–60; Levenson, *Esther*, 88; Koller, *Esther in Ancient Thought*, 119; Miller, *Three Versions of Esther*, 196–97.



result of Addition D's amplification is that Esther appears weaker and less independent in contrast to the Esther in MT Esther who is assertive and courageous.<sup>76</sup> Fox writes, "The Esther of the MT may have seemed a bit too forward and self-assured to the Jewish reader of the Alexandrian diaspora who had absorbed Hellenistic attitudes. There seems to have been a progressive deterioration in the status of women in Hellenistic culture. In such a setting, for a young lady to approach the Great King on her own initiative was not merely dangerous, it was improper."<sup>77</sup> Fox bases his assumption of the deterioration of women's status in the Hellenistic period on Frymer-Kensky's *In the Wake of the Goddesses*. Frymer-Kensky argues that the strong misogyny present in Greek literature has an unfortunate effect on biblical literature that can be seen in Second Temple texts such as Ecclesiastes, Wisdom of Ben Sira, Enoch, and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs.<sup>78</sup>

But in contrast to Fox's perception of Esther's portrayal as weak, Levenson makes a more positive assessment. Levenson finds that these characteristics make Esther and Judith, who has a similar characterization to Esther, appear as strong and courageous exemplars of womanhood. Levenson writes

Esther (as she appears in the Septuagint and the rabbinic tradition) and Judith are both celebrated for their reliance on God, their religious observance, their faithfulness to the ways of the ancestors, their courage, their gift of persuasive speech, and their physical beauty. It is reasonable to infer that these two heroines reflect an ideal of womanhood widespread in late Second Temple Judaism.<sup>79</sup>

Both Fox and Levenson point to early readers of LXX Esther like the Hasmonean and Ptolemaic readers I have constructed, but their projections of

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76. Fox, "Three Esthers," 58–60. Koller and Miller follow Fox's argument (Koller, *Esther in Ancient Thought*, 119; Miller, *Three Versions of Esther*, 196–97). Miller uses Fox's assertion to demonstrate the Esther in LXX Esther was particularly vulnerable to feminist critique.

77. Fox, "Three Esthers," 59.

78. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 203–12. Frymer-Kensky discusses Judith as well, but concludes that Judith is not a misogynist work; however, Judith's use of her beauty as a weapon supports the notion that women were viewed as dangerous and must be kept separate from men.

79. Levenson, *Esther*, 88.

those audience's readings of Esther's character are divergent. I, however, would posit that both Fox and Levenson are correct. While I do not doubt Frymer-Kensky's observations of misogyny in Second Temple literature, certainly the perspectives the literature presented, the public transcript, only represented a portion of readers' perspectives. While some readers of that literature affirmed misogyny, others also resisted, if not publicly, then in their hidden transcripts.

Therefore, some early readers who affirmed the misogynistic attitudes Frymer-Kensky suggests may have read Esther as a weak, frail woman. Those readers living in Hasmonean Judea and Ptolemaic Alexandria may have found Esther's negotiation to be that of a weak woman whose incompetent action was rescued only by God's intervention. These readers may have advocated for stronger, more public negotiation and defiance of Hasmonean and Ptolemaic rulers similar to that of Mordecai. For example, we might imagine Jews in Hasmonean Judea advocating for refusing to fight in the Hasmonean army or forcibly circumcise Hasmonean opponents.<sup>80</sup> Or we might envision Alexandrian Jews encouraging the ransacking of their synagogues that were built "on behalf of" the reigning Ptolemy.<sup>81</sup>

But other readers may have resisted misogynistic attitudes and appreciated Esther's negotiation as anonymity as I have argued here. They may have viewed Esther as an exemplar who utilized her femininity for a political purpose. Those readers may have advocated for the same kind of disguised negotiation Esther portrays. For example, we might imagine Jews in Hasmonean Judea advocating for tax evasion, or Alexandrian Jews finding ways to cozy up and gain access to power as they did in influencing Cleopatra to not occupy Hasmonean Judea.<sup>82</sup>

Both readings of Esther—as weak, or as performing weakness as anonymity—were likely simultaneously present with the ambivalent audiences

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80. Tcherikover describes the rampant military expansion efforts of the Hasmoneans. Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews*, 235–65. Josephus (*A.J.* 13.257–258) tells how John Hyrcanus I utilized forced circumcision to encourage submission.

81. Fraser reports this detail of the inscriptions found on synagogues in Alexandria (*Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 281–84).

82. Gruen describes the heavy taxation of the Hasmonean dynasty ("Jews and Greeks," 270). Barclay mentions Cleopatra's designs on the Hasmoneans (*Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 39–40).

of Hasmonean Judea and Ptolemaic Alexandria. This study has chosen to emphasize Esther's political agency to perform negotiation in complex and varied ways, though some of the early readers may have missed this possible reading. But the negotiation methodology Scott describes, as well as postcolonial discourse, have provided insight into possible readings of subordinate people. Through this lens, a reading of Esther's negotiation is uncovered that may have inspired and/or affirmed the already-present disguised negotiation among subordinates in Hasmonean Judea and Ptolemaic Alexandria.

#### BETWEEN THE BANQUETS (5:9–6:13)

Several events happen between Esther's two three-person banquets. Haman passes Mordecai on his way home and his anger is rekindled (5:9). Once at home, Haman brags about his greatness to his wife, Zosara, and his friends, and complains about Mordecai (5:10–13). Zosara and Haman's friends advise him to have an absurdly high gallows built and ask the king to hang Mordecai on them (5:14). Meanwhile, back at the palace, God takes sleep from Artaxerxes and the king is reminded of Mordecai's thwarting of an assassination attempt and the absence of a proper reward given to him (6:1–3). Then, Haman, who showed up at the palace in the middle of the night to ask for Mordecai's immediate hanging, winds up unwittingly suggesting and carrying out Mordecai's reward (6:4–11). Haman mourns what he has to do and returns home to receive his "fall" notice from Zosara and his friends (6:12–13).

Because these events merely advance the plot toward Esther's successful negotiation, I will make only four points concerning these passages: Haman's preoccupation with his own honor; God's intervention as partnership with Esther; an exploration and imagination of the king's internal hidden transcript; and the beginning of a reversal of fortunes for Haman.

#### HAMAN'S MASCULINE HONOR

After the private banquet, all that Haman does seems directly connected with bolstering his own honor. Haman moves toward home apparently with the purpose of bragging to his wife and friends about his dominance and power specifically mentioning the riches, honor, and position bestowed on him by the king, and that he was invited by the queen to

two private banquets (5:11–12).<sup>83</sup> His boasting, to people who probably already know everything he is telling them, seems to be a way Haman attempts to gain honor from those closest to him.<sup>84</sup>

However, Haman reveals in his hidden transcript that all of this power and honor gives him no pleasure when he has to lay eyes on Mordecai whom he had to pass on his way home (5:9).<sup>85</sup> Haman has determined Mordecai to be his mortal enemy for thwarting an assassination plot (12:6) and refusing to give him masculine honor (3:5–6). Therefore, to restore the honor Mordecai has denied him, Haman's wife and friends play their role in bolstering Haman's honor (at least for now). They suggest that delaying Mordecai's destruction to occur eleven months later among the rest of his people is not soon enough or disgraceful enough.<sup>86</sup> Instead, Haman should have absurdly tall gallows constructed and instruct the king to hang Mordecai on them (5:13).<sup>87</sup> The point of this public punishment fitting for an assassin (2:23), would be to publically disgrace, or remove honor, from Mordecai in order that Haman's honor could be strengthened.<sup>88</sup> However, it is ironic that Haman's wife, along with his friends, tell him what to do to gain this honor. Thus, the "honor" that Zosara gives Haman, her husband,

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83. Klein writes of Haman taking honor from Esther's invitation, "Ironically, Haman depicts himself as honored by a woman's invitation to table. Even as he claims honor, he diminishes that honor" ("Honor and Shame in Esther," 165–66).

84. Day describes Haman's bragging as a part of Haman's obsession with his own honor. He tells of his greatness to his friends to attempt to gain honor from them (*Esther*, 105).

85. Klein, "Honor and Shame in Esther," 166. LXX Esther does not give a reason that Haman is angry with Mordecai at this point. Mordecai's mere presence seems to cause Haman to boil. But MT Esther specifies why Haman is angry in that he "observed that he [Mordecai] neither rose nor trembled before him" (MT Esth 5:9). Mordecai infuriates Haman even further by not only not bowing before him, but also not rising or trembling, which would have been signs of respect, fear, or awe that Mordecai could have shown to Haman (Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 74).

86. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 74.

87. That the gallows were said to be fifty cubits high, or eighty feet, seems to be another of LXX Esther's exaggerations like 127 provinces or a 180-day banquet (Levenson, *Esther*, 93). The king has appeared hasty in approving the recommendations of his advisors and so if the gallows were already in place it would be that much easier for the plot to be carried out (Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 74–75).

88. Levenson, *Esther*, 93. Day also imagines that perhaps Haman wants publicly to hang Mordecai so that Persian Jews will know Mordecai was the source of their condemnation (*Esther*, 107–8).

according to the decree that commands women's submission (1:20–22), is actually in exercising authority over him and telling him what to do to Mordecai.<sup>89</sup> This ironic reversal of authority may signal the beginning of Haman's loss of honor.

Haman also demonstrates his obsession for honor when he suggests an expansive ceremony for the person the king wishes to honor, whom Haman assumes to be himself (6:6–9).<sup>90</sup> The honor Haman prescribes includes giving the honoree a fine linen robe the king has worn, allowing the person to ride on the king's horse, and making public proclamations that anyone the king honors will receive such treatment (6:7–9).<sup>91</sup> But these acts of honor Haman recommends are elements of a succession ceremony.<sup>92</sup> Haman is maneuvering for the masculine honor of more power, and perhaps even a take-over of the monarchy.<sup>93</sup> But it is Haman's hubris, his insatiable appetite for honor, power, and masculinity, that ultimately leads to his downfall.<sup>94</sup>

#### GOD'S INTERVENTION AS PARTNERSHIP

On the night between Esther's two banquets, "the Lord took sleep from the king" (6:1a). Just as God intervened by changing the spirit of the king from

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89. Day, *Esther*, 113; Levenson, *Esther*, 92.

90. Fox and Berlin show the focus on honor Haman has in that he does not ask for wealth or more power, since he has those. Haman only wants more honor (Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 46; Berlin, *Esther*, 58).

91. Several commentators have noted the similarity between the honor Haman prescribes to the honor given Joseph by Pharaoh in Gen 41:37–43. E.g., Berlin, *Esther*, 59; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 76–77; Levenson, *Esther*, 95; Craig, *Reading Esther*, 100.

92. Eleazar wears Aaron's priestly garments when he inherits the priestly office (Num 20:25–28); Elisha receives Elijah's cloak to symbolize that he has replaced Elijah (1 Kgs 19:19–21); and David cuts off a piece of Saul's cloak as a symbolic taking of the kingship (1 Sam 24) (Berlin, *Esther*, 59). Also, riding on the king's horse resembles how David orders Solomon to be mounted on his mule and anointed as king (1 Kgs 1:32–49) (Berlin, *Esther*, 60; Levenson, *Esther*, 97–98). Beal calls this Haman's imaginary coronation ceremony ("Esther," 83).

93. Berlin, *Esther*, 60–61. In the king's edict found in Addition E, the king seems to have recognized Haman's political aspirations (16:12–14) (Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 101).

94. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 122–25. Bechtel also writes, "There is a sense in which Haman is condemned here by the excesses of his own ego" (*Esther*, 66).

anger to gentleness at Esther's approach (15:8), again God intercedes and seems to have control over the king by not allowing him to sleep. God's intervention is again crucial to the success of Esther's negotiation as it allows for Haman's downfall to begin when the king makes an interesting discovery in the book of records. However, God's intervention is done only in partnership with Esther's negotiation; it does not provide immediate deliverance. Esther will still have to continue her negotiation (6:14–7:10; 8:3–6) in order for the salvation of Jews to be achieved.

#### EXPLORATION OF THE KING'S INTERNAL HIDDEN TRANSCRIPT

Throughout the night between Esther's banquets, the king's internal thoughts and motivations, his hidden transcript, are obscured from the reader. Thus, four questions arise. First, why does the insomniac king ask for the book of daily records to be read to him (6:1b)? Perhaps the king wishes to be lulled to sleep by the boring entries, or perhaps the literary gap as to why the king calls for the book of records is more substantial.<sup>95</sup> Maybe the king's sleeplessness caused him to ponder the day's events and the banquet with Esther and Haman. Though the action of Esther's first banquet took place quickly, in his God-induced insomnia the king may have had time to realize the danger inherent in Haman's presence at an intimate banquet with the queen. Esther's plan to create conflict between Artaxerxes and Haman may be coming together. So with these worries about Haman, perhaps the king calls for the annals to find some hint of Haman's disloyalty or plot against him.<sup>96</sup>

Second, why does the king's interest center on an entry involving Mordecai's act to thwart an assassination plot or two (6:2 perhaps referring to 12:1–6 and/or 2:21–23)? Does the king find some connection to Haman in the details recorded about these assassination plots (12:6 seems to imply Haman's association with the first attempt)? Or perhaps the king is focused on the maintenance of his own masculine power and honor since rewarding benefactors is a point of honor for the king; the king must reward

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95. Day suggests it is the boring entries (*Esther*, 108).

96. Hazony, *Dawn*, 160–61; Beal, "Esther," 79. Beal mentions the king's worries about Haman may be keeping him awake, and also implies that the king may have been investigating Esther as well since she was the one who invited Haman. However, I have argued that Esther's performance of femininity makes her appear nonthreatening to masculine power.

those who have shown him loyalty in order that the king himself might have honor.<sup>97</sup>

Third, is the king trying to trap Haman in their exchange? The king's silence as to the identity of the person he wishes to honor (6:6a) may merely be for the purposes of literary irony and peripety.<sup>98</sup> But, if Esther's ploy has been successful and the king has begun to view Haman as a threat, then the king may be demonstrating calculating cleverness to test Haman's loyalty.

Fourth, does the king make the connection that Mordecai is among those who have been sentenced to extermination?<sup>99</sup> When the king declares to Haman who is to be honored, he calls Mordecai a Jew (6:10), one of the people whose extinction he had decreed. Did the king know that it was Jews, like Mordecai, who were the target of his edict of annihilation to be enacted several months later (13:1–7)?<sup>100</sup> None of this is explained in the text, but, at the very least, when the king reveals he knows the honoree is a Jew, Haman surely sensed that tide was turning. Further, if the king had begun to question Haman's loyalty as a result of Esther's negotiation, then calling Mordecai a Jew may have been a grave hint to Haman as to what was to come.

#### REVERSAL OF FORTUNES FOR MORDECAI AND HAMAN

After Haman is forced to honor Mordecai, who has refused to honor Haman, Haman goes home to mourn and cover his head (6:12). In the same way that Mordecai (4:1), Persian Jews (4:2), and Esther (14:1–2) changed

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97. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 105; Moore, *Esther*, 64; Paton, *Esther*, 245.

98. Peripeties are "sudden and unexpected reversals of circumstance or situation whereby intended actions produce the opposite results" (Craig, *Reading Esther*, 81).

99. Beal says perhaps the information that Mordecai was a Jew was recorded in the annals because Esther had disclosed it. But Beal says it is hard to know what the king realizes at this point ("Esther," 83–84). White Crawford does not leave room for the king's possible awareness of all that is happening. She writes, "the king does not connect the edict of destruction he so blithely approved with the Jews" (Esther," 914).

100. Though Jews are not named in the edict written in the king's name (13:1–7), 3:13 reports that "Instructions were sent by couriers throughout all the empire of Artaxerxes to destroy the Jewish people." But since it was Mordecai and Susaite Jews who registered public protest of the edict of annihilation at the king's gate the king may have known Mordecai's connection to the target of the edict.

their clothes in reaction to their circumstances, now Haman will cover his head and don a different appearance to mourn “the death of his honor.”<sup>101</sup> Zosara and Haman’s friends even confirm the reversal of Haman’s fortunes telling him that his humiliation has begun and he will surely fall.<sup>102</sup> They say, “You will not be able to defend yourself, because the living God is with him” (6:13b). Like other instances in the Hebrew Bible, when affirmation of God’s victory is placed in the mouth of non-Jews it is a demonstration that even neutral or hostile people recognize God’s superiority.<sup>103</sup>

But reversal has also occurred for Mordecai. Rather than the sackcloth and ashes of his public protest at the king’s gate against the king’s edict of annihilation, Mordecai now wears the king’s robe and rides the king’s horse (6:11). Mordecai’s appearance is now identified with the king.<sup>104</sup> As such, Mordecai has a higher status and more political power, and receives a dividend of the king’s earthly hegemonic masculinity.<sup>105</sup> Like the clothes of Esther’s glory (14:2; 15:1), Mordecai now wears garments of honor, and thus participates in and benefits from the Persian power he once protested.<sup>106</sup> Notably, Mordecai does not refuse this honor even though he has seemed dedicated to overt defiance. Perhaps when the direction of honor is toward him, Mordecai’s commitments have changed.

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101. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 79. Fox also writes that signs of mourning are not just for the dead, but emotions associated with death-related situations, like the death of Haman’s honor. Beal, Day, and Laniak make the connection between Haman and Mordecai’s postures and public images, but not to the Persian Jews or Esther (Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 82; Day, *Esther*, 103; Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 116–21).

102. Day, Laniak, and Levenson note the use of “fall” as a theme in MT Esther related to Haman’s “fall.” He has caused the lots to fall (3:7), then the king tells him not to let a thing fall from what he has said to be done for Mordecai (6:10). Now Haman’s wife predicts his fall (6:13), and Haman will fall on Esther’s couch (7:8) and perhaps the reader might even imagine him fall from the rope on which he is hanged (7:10). In LXX Esther, the same verb root is associated with the king’s statement regarding what is to be done for Mordecai (καὶ μὴ παραπεσάτω σου λόγος ὧν ἐλάλησας, 6:10), Haman’s fall predicted by Zosara (πεσῶν πεσῶ, 6:13), and how Haman falls on Esther’s couch (Ἀμαν δὲ ἐπιπεπτῶκει ἐπὶ τὴν κλίνην ἀξιῶν τὴν βασιλισσαν, 7:8). See Day, *Esther*, 113; Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 125; and Levenson, *Esther*, 104–5.

103. E.g., Num 22–24, esp. 24:20; Dan 2:46–47; 3:28–33; 4:34; Jdt 5:5–21. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 79; Berlin, *Esther*, 63.

104. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 81–82.

105. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 116–21.

106. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 107.



As the plot returns to Esther's negotiation and her second banquet commences, these symbols of reversal for Haman and Mordecai point toward the fact that salvation for Persian Jews has begun, but negotiation must continue for it to be achieved.

### CONCLUSION

In this chapter I argue that the forms of Esther's initial disguised negotiation with Artaxerxes include flattery, euphemism, deference, and most pervasively, performances of feminine frailty and sexuality that function as anonymity. Through her performances of frailty and sexuality, Esther utilizes her body as her primary means of negotiation. Esther's first banquet functions as an extension of her sexuality, intended to drive a wedge between Artaxerxes and Haman. In this chapter I have also demonstrated that ambivalent readers in Hasmonean Judea and Ptolemaic Alexandria may have found Esther to be weak, but others may have also read Esther as performing weakness in negotiation and anonymity. Both readings were likely simultaneously present.

Though Esther has prepared the table, Haman has not yet taken a bite and so negotiation must continue. The next chapter examines Esther's second and third acts of negotiation with Artaxerxes and the imperial responses to her negotiation.



Esther's Second and Third Acts of Negotiation  
with Artaxerxes: The Mimicry of Success  
(6:14–8:12; 16:1–24; 8:13–14; 8:15–11:1)

Then they cried out to God; and at their outcry, as though from a tiny spring, there came a great river, with abundant water; light came and the sun rose, and the lowly were exalted and devoured those held in honor.

—LXX Esther 11:10–11

Esther's negotiation with Artaxerxes continues with her second banquet, during which she requests that Artaxerxes deliver her and her people (6:14–7:8). Esther's speech and actions unmask Haman's true identity as a threat to the king, and also reveal her Jewish identity in the process (7:4–8).<sup>1</sup> The imperial response to Haman's threat is immediate elimination of Haman by ironic means (7:9–10), and the elevation of Esther and Mordecai (8:1–2). Esther then performs her third act of negotiation with Artaxerxes and asks the king to revoke the irrevocable decree (8:3–6). The imperial response to Esther's third negotiation is to allow Esther and Mordecai to write a counterdecree that constructs Haman as a Persian enemy and allows Jews to defend themselves on the appointed day (8:7–12; 16:1–24; 8:13–14). Then LXX Esther ends by describing the aftermath of the counterdecree including Jewish elevation, celebration, and violence (8:15–9:18), as well as the establishment of Purim (9:19–32). The narration of events ends with the kingdom in the hands of Esther, Artaxerxes, and Mordecai (9:31–10:3). Finally, Mordecai remembers his dream and relates it to the events described (10:4–13) and the letter about Purim is translated (11:1).

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1. Moore, *Esther*, 74.

In this chapter I argue that Esther's second negotiation continues as anonymity in her performance of feminine sexuality, as well as the negotiation of deference. Esther also negotiates through mimicry by constructing Haman as the exceptional other. In response to Esther's negotiation, the king's action is portrayed as taken to maintain his imperial power and masculinity. Esther's third negotiation, then, again utilizes deference and a performance of sexuality. The imperial response to Esther's third negotiation, the counterdecree, demonstrates that all of Esther's negotiation is successful, since it results in the deliverance of her people, but also that her negotiation functions as mimicry of the methodology of Haman. Though Esther begins her negotiation of Artaxerxes in a performance of frailty, following her third and final negotiation Esther occupies a primary position of power. Esther's negotiation results in the victory of God in the contest for universal hegemonic masculinity. The aftermath of the decree continues the mimicry and reinscription of Persian power, and Esther remains complicit with God and Artaxerxes while Mordecai represents the public face of Jews and the defiance present under Artaxerxes's nose.

#### ESTHER'S SECOND NEGOTIATION OF ARTAXERXES:

##### THE SECOND BANQUET AND THE REQUEST FOR DELIVERANCE (6:14–8:2)

As Zosara and Haman's friends are giving Haman some ominously bad news, the eunuchs arrive to whisk Haman away to Esther's second banquet (6:14). In similar fashion to the first banquet, Haman is brought as an object to the banquet which Esther, the subject whose agency continues to progress, has prepared.<sup>2</sup> But, while the two banquets bear similarity, two specific differences are mentioned here. First, unlike the first banquet, Esther's second banquet is only a drinking affair (πότην), which is the same kind of party as the six-day affair where Vashti defied the king (1:5). Second, the eunuchs, who are not mentioned in the first banquet, are involved at the second one. Just as the eunuchs had been instructed to bring Vashti to the king's banquet (1:10–11), now the liminal eunuchs are instructed to parade another guest to a royal banquet (6:14) though the gender roles of inviter and invitee are reversed.<sup>3</sup> As seen in the two assassination-plots by eunuchs (12:1–6; 2:21–23), the eunuchs' involve-

2. Klein, "Honor and Shame in Esther," 167.

3. White Crawford, "Esther," 918.

ment in Vashti's objectification (1:10–11), their role in Esther's preparation to become queen (2:8–14), and their presence at Esther and Mordecai's conversation (4:4–17), when the eunuchs are present, negotiation and subversion tend to occur.

The account of the second banquet begins, "So the king and Haman went in to drink with the queen" (7:1). As I have argued from Bach, a female character can be eroticized through her connection to the food she prepares to enter male bodies; thus feeding becomes key to a woman's ability to seize power.<sup>4</sup> The second banquet even indicates that the king and Haman both "went in to" (Εἰσῆλθεν) the banquet that Esther prepared, which is an often-used euphemism for intercourse (2:15; 4:11). So like the first banquet, Esther continues the negotiation of anonymity through a performance of her sexuality as a means of creating conflict between Artaxerxes and Haman. Though her offer of sexuality was disguised in the first banquet, and continues to be disguised at the beginning of the second banquet, the sexual overtones of the banquets will soon be brought to light.

Just as the king has questioned Esther before (15:9; 5:3, 6), at the beginning of the second banquet the king asks Esther what her concern and petition are, and again offers her half of his imperial power (7:2, also in 5:3). As Esther begins her statement, she speaks in deference to the king as she did when asking for the second banquet, and says, "If I have found favor with the king" (Εἰ εὗρον χάριν ἐνώπιον τοῦ βασιλέως, 7:3 and 5:8). Again, Esther grounds her request in the king's opinion of her and reminds the king that the banquet is about their relationship in order that he might perceive the threat Haman poses.<sup>5</sup>

With the king prompted to recall his devotion to his queen, Esther finally discloses her true request. "If I have found favor with the king, let my life be granted me at my petition, and my people at my request. For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, plundered, and made slaves—we and our children—male and female slaves. This has come to my knowledge. Our antagonist brings shame on the king's court" (7:3–4).

Esther reveals that her life is in danger. But it is not only the life of the queen that is in jeopardy, but the lives of her people as well. Esther begins

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4. Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal*, 171, 183.

5. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 112. Beal also comments that the phrase "If I have found favor with the king" confirms the king's fixation on her as an object (*Book of Hiding*, 97).

her statement by identifying herself closely with her people and demonstrating solidarity.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps realizing that the king might be willing to save his wife even if he does not care about her people, the queen essentially says “to kill her people is to kill her.”<sup>7</sup>

Esther’s disguised negotiation continues by couching her entire plea in terms of the honor of the Persian court, and, accordingly, the king’s own masculine honor and political power.<sup>8</sup> Esther describes the threat to her and her people in the passive tense (“we have been sold,” ἐπράθημεν, 7:4). Rather than pointing the finger of culpability at the king, by whose hand the edict of extermination was written, Esther uses the passive to hide the king’s responsibility and to direct the king’s potentially angry response outward.<sup>9</sup> As to what Esther means in her reference to being sold into slavery, scholars have considered it as (1) a reference to the bribe Haman offered Artaxerxes; (2) that, in MT Esther, Haman utilized a homophone so that the king thinks Haman is suggesting buying the scattered nation for slavery when he really intends to destroy them; or (3) that “sold” is a figurative flourish as in being “sold out.”<sup>10</sup> But in LXX Esther, Esther has said in her prayer that her people’s enemies “are not satisfied that we are in bitter slavery, but they have covenanted with their idols to abolish what your mouth has ordained, and to destroy your inheritance” (14:8–9). In the same way Esther connected slavery and being destroyed in her prayer for salvation before one king, God, perhaps Esther is again connecting these two disgraceful and horrifying punishments in her plea for salvation before another king, Artaxerxes. Furthermore, regardless of why Esther

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6. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 123.

7. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 83.

8. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 123. Laniak also writes, “Her [Esther’s] petition is couched in the formalities of deference which call upon his [Artaxerxes’s] grace and also subtly call upon his duty and honor” (*Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 112).

9. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 84–86.

10. For option (1), see, e.g., Levenson, *Esther*, 102; White Crawford, “Esther,” 918; and Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 112. On option (2), Berg posits that though the text reads לעבדים (“to destroy them”), the king may have heard לעבדם (“to cause them to work”), which makes Haman’s offer of money make sense to the king who thinks Haman wants to buy these people for slaves (*Book of Esther*, 100–103). For option (3), see Bechtel, *Esther*, 63. Bechtel also references other occurrences of this figurative language in Deut 32:30 and Judg 4:9, which refer to God “selling” someone to be destroyed.

connects slavery and destruction, Esther uses these terms to appeal to the king's masculine honor. If the king's own wife, the queen, has been sold into slavery to be plundered and destroyed, then the king's masculine honor would be at stake.<sup>11</sup> For clients or objects of a king, as Queen Esther is to Artaxerxes, protection is expected as a basic provision.<sup>12</sup> Thus, Esther's petition for her life to be spared from slavery and destruction invokes the king's own honor as her patron.

Additionally, concerning the king's honor, Esther states, "For the slanderer/adversary is not worthy of the court of the king" (οὐ γὰρ ἄξιος ὁ διάβολος τῆς αὐλῆς τοῦ βασιλέως, 7:4).<sup>13</sup> With this declaration, Esther asserts that the instigator of the destruction of the queen and her people has brought shame upon the king's court.<sup>14</sup> A personal affront to the king, such as selling or destroying the king's wife, is an act of stealing the king's masculine honor and power.<sup>15</sup> So Esther contends that the king must act to maintain his masculine honor, which is inextricably intertwined with his imperial power.

But perhaps there were multiple edicts for the destruction of entire people groups enacted at that time, because the king does not appear to make the connection as to the identity of Esther's people and the initiator of her demise. "Then the king said, 'Who is the person that would dare to do this thing?' Esther said, 'Our enemy is this evil man Haman!'" (7:5–6a). With the courageous and masculine revelation that Haman is the perpetrator, the king and Haman may finally deduce that the destruction Esther references is of Jewish people; thus now they know Esther's identity as a Jew whose death has been decreed.<sup>16</sup>

By revealing that she is among the Persian Jews who have been projected as an exceptional other, Esther destabilizes the king's power, which has been built on sameness and the elimination of difference. Beal writes of the banquets in MT Esther

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11. White Crawford, "Esther," 918.

12. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 109–10, 112–16.

13. Literal translation. NRSV reads, "Our antagonist brings shame on the king's court."

14. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 132; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 84.

15. Koller, *Esther in Ancient Thought*, 57–58; Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 158, 174–77; LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 20–22.

16. Berman, "Hadassah Bat Abihail," 662. Beal writes that Esther's identity is revealed in her statement in 7:3–4 (*Book of Hiding*, 98). But, if that is the case, then the king's question as to who the perpetrator is would not make much sense.

From chapter 1 up to this point in the narrative, the drinking party in the book of Esther has functioned as a central locus of identification, that is, of making sameness. This functioned primarily with regard to sex in chapter 1. At the end of chapter 2, similarly, it signified a return to “proper” sexual politics as Esther became queen “instead of Vashti.” At the end of chapter 3, Haman and the king drinking together signified their identification with one another over against the Jews. And while not a same-sex affair, Esther’s first drinking party likewise confirmed Haman’s identification with the king, even in relation to her.... In each of these drinking parties, subjects are located and identified together at the very center of the nation. With Esther’s disclosure, however, that pattern is shattered. Her revelation puts an end to any such cozy feelings. It introduces the other into the center of the order in a way that exposes and explodes all imagined sameness.<sup>17</sup>

If the Persian queen, who has entered the center of Persian power by crossing thresholds and commanding the presence of the king and his second-in-command at banquets which she hosts, is an other, then the masculine imperial order built on totalitarian sameness is in jeopardy.<sup>18</sup>

To remedy the instability Esther has caused by revealing her identity as an Other, Esther negotiates by turning the tables and projecting Haman to be the exceptional other. Esther calls Haman “our enemy” (7:6a). The reference of “our” could be Esther and her people, but it also could be Esther and the king. Haman is an enemy of the royal couple. Further, Esther also calls Haman an “evil man” (7:6a). Through this designation, Esther sets Haman against Artaxerxes’s and Persia’s concocted ideological narrative of beneficence and goodwill (13:2–5). Esther projects Haman as an Other similarly to the way Haman had projected Jews as an Other and an enemy to the Persian way of life when he proposed the Jewish pogrom (3:8).<sup>19</sup> Through her banquets, Esther sought to create a crack in the surface of Haman’s compliance to the king’s dominance. Esther manipulated the king to think Haman may be a rival to the king’s claim to his queen through extending her sexuality to both of them at her banquets. Further, God’s intervention of sleeplessness may have helped Artaxerxes realize Haman’s threat to Esther and Persia. Now Esther expands the crack in the appearance of Haman’s compliance into a permanent divide and names

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17. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 97–98.

18. LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 35.

19. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 95; Beal, “Esther,” 91.



Haman as the other. Even though Artaxerxes shares responsibility for the Jewish pogrom (if he should not be considered the primary culprit), a key aspect of Esther's disguised negotiation is to deflect the king's culpability and direct his anger onto Haman. Artaxerxes cannot be the Other since his masculine honor and identity is tied to the "sameness" upon which the ideological superiority of the Persian Empire is built. So Esther constructs Haman as the exceptional other, the difference needed to maintain imperial order so that her otherness is reduced.

But by utilizing a discourse of othering Haman, Esther negotiates with Artaxerxes in mimicry of how Haman has negotiated with the king. In this way, Esther also demonstrates ambivalence. Esther negotiates to subvert an imperial edict of the king instigated by Haman, but she does in the very same way Haman acted to have the edict decreed in the first place.

After hearing Esther's accusations, "Haman was terrified in the presence of the king and queen" (Ἀμαν δὲ ἐταράχθη ἀπὸ τοῦ βασιλέως καὶ τῆς βασιλίσσης, 7:6b). One of the keywords in LXX Esther, *ταράσσω*, appears again, this time in reference to Haman. The tumult that Mordecai's dream had predicted (11:5, 8), that was experienced by the Susaites (3:15) and Esther (4:4) in response to the Jewish pogrom, that Esther performed before Artaxerxes (15:13), and that even Artaxerxes felt toward Esther after her performance of feminine frailty (15:16), is now suffered by Haman. Esther further progresses in agency and gains even more power since she continues to impose chaotic and disturbed feelings on others.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Esther's mimicry and ambivalence is further amplified. Just as Haman's decree inflicted tumult onto Esther and the Susaites, her othering of Haman causes tumult for him as well.<sup>21</sup>

All of Esther's negotiation—the banquet as anonymity in a performance of feminine sexuality, her deference to the king's masculine honor and the maintenance of imperial power, and her othering of Haman—has been done so that the king will respond to her petition for her life and the lives of her people. But Esther's desired outcome is not immediately enacted. After her speech and Haman's tumult, "The king rose from the banquet and went into the garden" (7:7a). Interpreters have offered speculation as to why the king said nothing and left the banquet, but the king's

20. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 132.

21. Day does not report the full extent of the usage of *ταράσσω* but states that Esther has reversed positions with Haman in their experiences of tumult (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 127).

reasoning aside, the literary purpose of the king stepping outside is so that Esther and Haman have a moment alone.<sup>22</sup>

With the king in the garden, Haman seizes an opportunity, which is discovered upon the king's return. "And Haman began to beg for his life from the queen, for he saw that he was in serious trouble. When the king returned from the garden, Haman had thrown himself on the couch, pleading with the queen. The king said, 'Will he dare even assault my wife in my own house?'" (7:7b–8b). In this scene, ambiguity is present as it is unclear whether Haman is assaulting the queen, pleading with her, or both. Moreover, role reversal is also present. In the same way Esther has presented petitions before Artaxerxes (5:4, 7; 7:3–4), now she is presented with a petition denoting her continued progression in agency.<sup>23</sup> Also, as Haman had required Mordecai to fall before him but Mordecai refused with the consequence that Jews were condemned (3:2–13), now Haman willingly falls before a condemned Jew to plead for release from his own condemnation.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, though Esther had been the one who fell in her fainting/feinting episodes (15:7, 15), now Haman is the one who collapses.

But even more than the role reversals present in his plea, Haman is perceived by Artaxerxes not as suppliant, but as rapist.<sup>25</sup> Though some interpreters consider the punishment that follows for Haman to be on account of a crime, rape, he did not commit, certainly sexual innuendos are present when Haman falls onto the queen's bed.<sup>26</sup> Even innuendo may

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22. Some of the reasons posited for the king's silence include: the king is furious and needs some fresh air before responding (Day, *Esther*, 123); the indecisive king cannot handle such a significant matter on the spot (Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 15); the king is worried about his role in this fiasco (Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 86; LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 121); and that he was torn over his loyalty to Haman in light of this revelation (mentioned by Paton, *Esther*, 262). On the literary meaning, see Levenson, *Esther*, 104.

23. Day, *Esther*, 124. Esther's apparent unwillingness to act mercifully toward Haman and intercede with Artaxerxes on his behalf has been viewed negatively among some early scholars (e.g., Paton, *Esther*, 264). But Moore has defended Esther's inaction in that Haman needed to experience full defeat in order for Jewish salvation to be achieved (*Esther*, 74). In this study, since I am arguing that Esther negotiates in mimicry, Esther does not intercede for Haman in the same way that Haman never considered interceding for Jews. Haman and his honor will be obliterated in the same way he wished for the obliteration of Jews.

24. Day, *Esther*, 123; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 87; Levenson, *Esther*, 104.

25. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 110.

26. For those who consider the punishment as the result of rape, see Bechtel,

be enough to comprise tyranny against a king, much less all Haman's other machinations, so perhaps the king should not let Haman off the hook too easily. Moreover, Artaxerxes's perception that Haman has assaulted the queen and committed a crime against the state has been the goal of Esther's negotiation all along.<sup>27</sup> Hazony captures the moment well, writing, "Esther's stratagem, her arousal of the king's jealousy and suspicions, has therefore brought appearances into line with the truth: Haman has in fact sought to take the queen with the king in the palace—not sexually, but, similarly enough."<sup>28</sup> While Esther has already appealed to the king's masculine honor by describing how Haman tried to enslave and/or destroy the queen and her people, Haman's "fall" before the queen now completes the picture that Esther has been trying to paint. The perceived portrait of Haman physically assaulting the queen in the king's own house represents Haman's assault on Persian Jews by proposing the edict of annihilation. Haman is portrayed as a threat to the king's masculine honor, and thus is a hazard to the masculine imperial order of the state. So with his fate obviously sealed, "Haman, when he heard, turned away his face" (7:8c).<sup>29</sup>

IMPERIAL RESPONSE TO ESTHER'S SECOND ACT OF NEGOTIATION:  
ELIMINATION AND THE TRANSFER OF POWER (7:9–8:2)

In the narrative portrayal of previous events that threatened the masculine imperial order, such as Vashti's insubordination, the resulting lack of a queen, and Mordecai's insubordination, a pattern of "instigation-rage-recommendation-implementation-return of pleasure" has been established (1:13–22; 2:2–4; 3:5–15).<sup>30</sup> Here, the king's rage again has been instigated by Haman's assault on not only the queen, but also the king's masculine imperial power. So as the pattern suggests, a recommendation for an imperial response is needed. Enter Bugathan, a eunuch. Bugathan

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*Esther*, 66; Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 111; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 88; Day, *Esther*, 125. Further implications of other "falls" in LXX *Esther* as pertaining to the performance of gender will be considered in the discussion of 8:3.

27. Day, *Esther*, 124.

28. Hazony, *Dawn*, 167.

29. In MT *Esther*, Haman's face is covered (וּפָנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ חִפּוּ, 7:8c) perhaps by the eunuchs in preparation for his hanging. In LXX *Esther* Haman's response is simply that he averts his face. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 129–30.

30. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 99.

does not make a direct suggestion, but points out important information that provides a means for imperial response. “Then Bugathan, one of the eunuchs, said to the king, ‘Look, Haman has even prepared gallows for Mordecai, who gave information of concern to the king; it is standing at Haman’s house, a gallows fifty cubits high’” (7:9a). Bugathan highlights Haman’s opposition to Mordecai, which was previously unknown to the king.<sup>31</sup> Mordecai has just been rewarded for his perceived loyal actions to the king by receiving honor associated with royalty and being identified with the king (6:10–11).<sup>32</sup> Therefore, Haman’s opposition to Mordecai is a second charge against him. Haman has not only assaulted and attempted to kill the queen, but also planned to kill the king’s benefactor.<sup>33</sup> “So the king said, ‘Let Haman be hanged on that.’ So Haman was hanged on the gallows he prepared for Mordecai. With that the anger of the king abated” (7:9b–10). Peripety again appears between the fates of Mordecai and Haman. Haman’s hanging is “a perfect, albeit grisly, statement of poetic justice. In his death, Haman, the one so concerned about public honor, will be publicly shamed in front of his own home.”<sup>34</sup>

The king’s elimination of Haman, though, is not a complete response to Esther’s initial request for the lives of her and her people to be spared (7:3–4). For this reason, Clines writes, “The simple fact is that Haman’s death has solved nothing, relieved nothing.”<sup>35</sup> But the king’s defeat of Haman does have a significant purpose. The king eliminates the dangerous and exceptional Other Esther has constructed, and in doing so, the immediate threat to the king’s masculine honor and imperial power is assuaged.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the king’s anger is abated (7:10b).

Though similarities between Mordecai and Vashti have been considered in their acts of overt defiance, associations also exist between Vashti and Haman.<sup>37</sup> Both act in a way that enrages the king (1:12; 7:7–8), then

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31. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 99.

32. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 81–82.

33. White Crawford, “Esther,” 919.

34. Day, *Esther*, 125.

35. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 18. Also followed by Day, *Esther*, 131.

36. Hazony writes, “His [Artaxerxes’s] anger over the threat to him and his household has been appeased by Haman’s death” (*Dawn*, 178). Hazony also sees Haman’s death as the elimination of a threat to Artaxerxes and his household, but does not make the additional connections of Haman as other, and honor and household as related to masculinity and imperial power.

37. Day, *Esther*, 125; Levenson, *Esther*, 104; Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 99.

when they are removed from the court or killed, the immediate threat they pose is eliminated and the king's anger subsides (2:1; 7:10). But, in both cases, additional imperial responses beyond elimination are necessary to restabilize the empire after a threat to the masculine imperial order. For Vashti, those responses included a decree to force women's submission to their husbands (1:16–22), and another decree that was enacted to give authority for women to be seized from across the kingdom in order that a new queen might be located (2:2–4). These actions were taken so that complicit masculinities and the masculinity of the hegemonic male would be stabilized. In the case of Haman's threat, multiple imperial responses will also be needed to alleviate the threat to masculine imperial power.

The first additional imperial response to restabilize Persian power, beyond eliminating the other, is for Artaxerxes to reward Esther and Mordecai as a means of filling the power vacuum left by the execution of the king's second-in-command. "On that very day King Artaxerxes granted to Esther all the property of the persecutor Haman. Mordecai was summoned by the king, for Esther had told the king that he was related to her. The king took the ring that had been taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai; and Esther set Mordecai over everything that had been Haman's" (8:1–2).

The king awards Esther all Haman's property (8:1a). Haman's property would likely have included all that belonged to Haman materially as well as his servants and family members—all of which was representative of the economic power Haman had accrued through his complicity with Artaxerxes's power.<sup>38</sup> So Esther receives Haman's property, his power, his authority, and his status as complicit with Artaxerxes.<sup>39</sup> Though the king has previously offered Esther up to half of his kingdom (5:3; 7:2), and subsequently half of his power, Esther has never accepted Artaxerxes's proposition. Now, after she exposed Haman as a threat to the king's masculine honor and power, Artaxerxes no longer offers, but grants Haman's property to Esther. Since Haman was second-in-command, this grant makes Esther the second-most powerful in Persia behind Artaxerxes, and, accordingly, complicit with and a beneficiary of Artaxerxes's hegemonic masculinity as the second-most masculine on earth.

Then, after the king learned from Esther that Mordecai was related to her (likely she relayed the uncle-adopted-foster father part, not the

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38. Beal, "Esther," 97.

39. Beal, "Esther," 97.

potential husband part), the king summons Mordecai and gives him the signet ring (8:1b–8:2a) that formerly had been given to Haman (3:10). The ring symbolized Haman's political authority to seal the edict decreeing Jewish extermination, and thus a measure of political authority.<sup>40</sup> Mordecai has already been paraded in royal clothing and honored as associated with the king himself, and now political power has also been bestowed upon Mordecai.<sup>41</sup>

With Mordecai holding the signet ring and Esther assuming Haman's property, it appears that Esther and Mordecai share the political authority that Haman previously held, according to Beal.<sup>42</sup> But, even though Mordecai shares power with Esther, Esther's position is higher than that of Mordecai. Esther's superiority is demonstrated when she does not "give" Haman's property to Mordecai in the manner which Artaxerxes gave it to her (ἐδωρήσατο, 8:1). Instead, she sets Mordecai over (κατέστησεν, 8:2) all that had been Haman's in the same way Artaxerxes had appointed officers to seize women during the queen-finding scheme (καταστήσει, 2:3).<sup>43</sup> Esther's action in appointing Mordecai over Haman's house, of which she retains ownership, can be interpreted as Esther exercising the power of appointment that is normally reserved for the king.<sup>44</sup> In retaining possession of her wealth and appointing her former guardian now to become guardian over her wealth, Esther acts as a source of power and reverses roles with Mordecai.<sup>45</sup> For Mordecai to be able to act with authority over Haman's estate fulfills the prophecy of Zosara and Haman's friends (6:13).<sup>46</sup> But, despite the assertions of some scholars of MT Esther to the contrary, Mordecai does not replace Haman, Esther does.<sup>47</sup> Mordecai shares in some of Haman's former power as holder of the signet ring and wearer of the

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40. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 90; Beal, "Esther," 97; Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 139.

41. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 81–82; Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 116–21.

42. Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 97–98.

43. De Troyer, *End of the Alpha Text of Esther*, 187–88.

44. Beal makes this observation, though in reading MT Esther the verbs he connects are וַתֵּשֶׁבֶת (8:2) in which Esther sets Mordecai over Haman's house, and וַיֵּשֶׁב (3:1) in which Mordecai sets Haman's seat above the other officials ("Esther," 97–98).

45. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 90–91.

46. Levenson, *Esther*, 107.

47. For scholars seeing Mordecai as replacing Haman, see, e.g., Day, *Esther*, 126; Levenson, *Esther*, 105; Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 100; Berlin, *Esther*, 73.

royal clothes of honor, but all of these honors have either come by Esther's help or by Esther own hand.<sup>48</sup> Esther reported the assassination plot to the king for which Mordecai was rewarded, Esther revealed Mordecai's relation to her by which he received the signet ring, and Esther appointed Mordecai to his role over Haman's property. So in the same way Esther replaced Vashti as queen, Esther now also replaces Haman as second-in-command.

Esther asked God for courage (14:12), eloquent speech (14:13), and removal of fear (14:19), all of which she has demonstrated over the course of her first two negotiations. In receiving these patriarchal dividends from God, Esther has demonstrated her role as complicit with God's hegemonic masculinity. However, in doing so, Esther has used her dividend of divine masculinity to manipulate the hegemonic male on earth so that she might become complicit with the earthly hegemonic masculinity of Artaxerxes as well. The superiority of God's masculinity in the contest for supremacy is clear. If God's representative, Esther, in partnership with God's intervention, can manipulate earthly hegemonic masculinity, then surely God would be the winner of the contest. But one more obstacle remains. Just as Esther's endangerment as the client/subject of the king was a threat to Artaxerxes's masculine honor as Esther's patron, so too the peril faced by God's clients/subjects, the Jews, must be averted in order that God's masculine honor as their patron can be maintained.

ESTHER'S THIRD NEGOTIATION OF ARTAXERXES:  
ESTHER'S PLEA TO ALTER AN IRREVOCABLE DECREE (8:3–6)

Unfortunately, though perhaps also with the benefit of fortune, the power the king grants to Esther and Mordecai was not the subject of Esther's request. Therefore, Esther must negotiate on behalf of her people and request deliverance from the king once more (8:3–6). Coming before the king once again, Esther's negotiation on behalf of the salvation of her people takes the form of the negotiation of anonymity through the performance of feminine frailty and sexuality. Additionally, Esther speaks in deference to the king and negotiates by appealing to the threat Haman still poses to the king's masculine honor and the masculine imperial order since Esther's life is still in jeopardy.

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48. Day, *Esther*, 127.



Verse 3 of chapter 8 begins with a description of the scene.<sup>49</sup> “Then she spoke once again to the king and, falling at his feet” (καὶ προσθεῖσα ἐλάλησεν πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα καὶ προσέπεσεν πρὸς τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ, 8:3a). This incident is a familiar sight with various elements reminiscent of previous encounters. In the same manner that Esther fell to the floor two times previously when speaking to the king (ἔπεσεν, 15:7; and ἔπεσεν, 15:15), Esther again collapses (προσέπεσεν, 8:3) before the king. Though Klein views Esther’s fall before the king here as an action of humility/shame and thus a reversal of the power/honor the king had just bestowed on her, each of Esther’s collapses has been a means of successful negotiation.<sup>50</sup> Esther’s two previous collapses have been argued to be a remedy to Mordecai’s failure to perform obeisance, and a performance of feminine frailty functioning as the negotiation of anonymity to obviate the king’s perception of her as a threat.<sup>51</sup> Esther’s third collapse may function similarly as the deference of obeisance and to give the perception that she is a weak woman incapable of any subversive agency against the king.

But more than Esther’s collapse as deference and a performance of feminine frailty, Esther’s third fall is the performance of a sexual act. Esther’s fall is specified as before the “feet” of Artaxerxes (τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ). In the Hebrew Bible, feet are often used as a euphemism for “private parts” or “lower body,” as is seen when Ruth uncovers the feet of Boaz late at night on the threshing floor.<sup>52</sup> Thus, as Esther falls before Artaxerxes’s genitals, Esther performs a sexual act as a means of her negotiation. Surely there can be no doubt as to the sexual nature of their encounter, when the king once again “extended his golden scepter to Esther” (8:4). The king raises the phallic symbol of his masculinity and power to Esther after she “falls” before his “feet.”<sup>53</sup> Acting similarly to how she did previously in flattering the king and asking for the first banquet (15:7–10), Esther seems to have

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49. Day, *Esther*, 131.

50. Klein, “Honor and Shame in Esther,” 169.

51. Reading MT Esther, Day sees Esther’s “weeping and pleading” in 8:3 as the use of her “feminine wiles” to get what she wants from the king (*Esther*, 132). But Day does not make the connection of falling before Artaxerxes’s feet as a use of femininity and sexuality.

52. Robertson Farmer, “Book of Ruth,” 926.

53. For the association of the scepter with authority: Menn, “Prayer of the Queen,”

74. For the connection of the scepter to the king’s sex: Duran, “Who Wants to Marry a Persian King?,” 82.



found a successful means of negotiating the scepter-laws of approaching the king.

Each of the three instances of Esther falling is directly associated with the performance of gender, but this connection has also been demonstrated by other characters in LXX Esther as well. Haman fell (ἐπιπεπτῶκει, 7:8) upon Esther's couch, or bed, which the king interpreted as a sexual assault on the queen. Thus, Haman's fall was viewed as an assertion of Haman's masculinity and sexuality. Additionally, Mordecai refused to bow, or fall, before Haman (3:2) so that he would not give Haman masculine honor but would honor God's hegemonic masculinity (13:12–14). But while variations of the root πίπτω have been used for the actions of Esther and Haman, a different verb is used for the "falling" Mordecai refuses to perform. Obeisance or prostrating oneself (προσεκύνουν, 3:2) is required before Haman, it is what Mordecai refuses to do (οὐ προσκυνεῖ αὐτῷ Μαρδοχαῖος, 3:5), and it is the action Mordecai defends his refusal to perform (προσκυνεῖν, 13:12). However, obeisance is associated with the giving and receiving of not only honor, but masculine honor, and thus is also associated with the performance of gender.<sup>54</sup> Therefore, in LXX Esther, postures of falling, collapsing, and prostration all have a direct connection to the performance of gender.

For Esther, her performance of gender at Artaxerxes's "feet" is for the purpose of asking him "to avert all the evil that Haman had planned against the Jews" (8:3b). Esther will again carefully couch her negotiation by deflecting any possible blame from Artaxerxes.<sup>55</sup> Though the decree of Jewish annihilation was written in the king's name and the buck stops with him, Esther still places the onus on Haman and even describes the decree as "letters that Haman wrote and sent to destroy the Jews in your kingdom" (8:5). Because she formulates her negotiation against what Haman has done and not the king's role, it does not mean Esther did not realize the king's culpability. It only shows that in Esther's public transcript of negotiation she carefully chooses and crafts her words in order to bring about her desired result. Though Esther asks directly for the king to rescind the decree, she still does so in a disguised manner rather than overtly defying the king who ordered her execution.

54. Fewell and Gunn, "Controlling Perspectives," 404. See discussion of Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman in ch. 5 of this study.

55. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 93; Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 102.

Moreover, by only pointing the finger at Haman, Esther tells some of the truth, but not the whole truth.<sup>56</sup> Just as Haman elevated a half-truth about Mordecai (in that one of his laws was in conflict with Persian law even though he kept every other law) onto the entire race of Mordecai (3:8), now Esther also manipulates a half-truth for her purposes. Esther continues to negotiate in mimicry of Haman's methods. Esther has constructed Haman as a dangerous and exceptional Other as Haman did to the Jews, and now Esther manipulates the truth in the public transcript of her disguised negotiation.

The full text of Esther's speech to Artaxerxes is revealed after the golden scepter is extended to her and she rises to stand before the king (8:4).<sup>57</sup> "Esther said, 'If it pleases you, and if I have found favor, let an order be sent rescinding the letters that Haman wrote and sent to destroy the Jews in your kingdom. How can I look on the ruin of my people? How can I be safe if my ancestral nation is destroyed?'" (8:5–6).

As she has done before, Esther begins her request in deference to the king. Here, Esther combines her previous request-prefaces, "If it pleases the king" (5:4) and "if I have found favor with the king" (5:8; 7:3). She employs the language of the court and a rhetoric of pleasing, indicating that her request is grounded in their relationship.<sup>58</sup> After all, their relationship is the foundation of the court and the masculine imperial order.<sup>59</sup> Then, Esther supplements her request to rescind the letters that Haman (actually Artaxerxes) decreed, with rhetorical questions concerning her emotional state and safety. Rather than making an appeal based on the ethical quandary of mass genocide, Esther appeals to the king's affection

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56. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 93.

57. Day notes the use of the passive as "Esther was raised to stand before the king" (ἐξῆγέρθη δὲ Εσθηρ παρεστηκέναι τῷ βασιλεῖ, 8:4). Thus, Day concludes that Esther is more passive in the episode and assumes it is the king who offers Esther assistance to stand (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 141). But since Esther previously approached the king with two servants whom she leaned on as a performance of feminine frailty (15:3), there is no reason to assume that those same servants, who were in on Esther's performance since they were privy to her hidden transcript, were not the ones to help Esther stand in a continued performance of femininity. Thus, Esther's agency is not diminished.

58. Day, *Esther*, 91. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 112.

59. Day, *Esther*, 124. Laniak also argues that violating Esther is tantamount to tyranny against the king (*Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 115–16).

for her.<sup>60</sup> Though Esther may seem heartless by appearing more concerned for how she would feel to look on the ruin of her people rather than worrying about the destruction of the people themselves, Esther's appeal is tactical.<sup>61</sup> Artaxerxes may not care about the safety of Jews, but he does care about his queen, as evidenced in his responses to her fainting/feinting (15:8–12, 16) and his repeated offers to do as she wishes (5:3, 6; 7:2).<sup>62</sup> So Esther negotiates via a performance of her femininity once again, this time by appealing to the king's concern for his wife's emotional state and safety, rather than overtly asserting defiance as a second-in-command who wants to override a decree of the king.

By focusing on the relationship between herself and the king, Esther emphasizes that the threat to the king's masculine honor remains since Esther's life is still in jeopardy due to the edict she blames on Haman. If a dead man can kill the queen, how much masculine honor and power can the king have? The king must act in order to maintain the masculine imperial order that Haman (actually the king himself) has disrupted.

#### IMPERIAL RESPONSE TO ESTHER'S THIRD NEGOTIATION (8:7–12; 16:1–24; 8:13–14)

In contrast to the king's response to Esther's negotiation in MT Esther, in LXX Esther the king begins by speaking to Esther alone, not her and Mordecai.<sup>63</sup> "The king said to Esther, "Now that I have granted all of Haman's property to you and have hanged him on a tree because he acted against the Jews, what else do you request?" (8:7). The king reminds Esther what he has just done for her in granting her property and power and executing the enemy of her and her people—Haman. Then he poses his own rhetorical question back to Esther. The king knows exactly what she wants—for him to rescind the edict. Though some interpreters have read the king's

60. Day, *Esther*, 133.

61. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 93.

62. Levenson, *Esther*, 108.

63. MT Esther reads, "Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to the Jew Mordecai" (וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֲשֵׁרֶשׁ לְאַסְתֵּר וּלְמֹרְדֵּכַי הַיְּהוּדִי 8:7). Evidence of that the king is addressing Esther alone is found in the king's use of second-person singular pronouns and verbs in 8:7 (καὶ εἶπεν ὁ βασιλεὺς πρὸς Εὐθηρᾷ Εἰ πάντα τὰ ὑπάρχοντα Ἀμαν ἔδωκα καὶ ἐχαρίσάμην σοὶ καὶ αὐτὸν ἐκρέμασα ἐπὶ ξύλου, ὅτι τὰς χεῖρας ἐπήνεγκε τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις, τί ἔτι ἐπιζητεῖς).

response to Esther as being exasperated by her repeated pleas, Day finds the king's answer to be an honest question and not a rebuke.<sup>64</sup> The king has been willing to give her half of his kingdom and power, and has made her second in power through the grant of Haman's property. He has demonstrated that he will do whatever Esther wishes and his response directly to Esther indicates his willingness to fulfill any desire she might have. Therefore, Artaxerxes says to her, "Whatever you want, dear."

But a problem exists. Even though the king says he will do whatever Esther wishes, he cannot rescind the previous decree since earlier decrees have explained that an imperial edict cannot be revoked (1:19). The law that ordered Jewish extinction is irreversible. So the king continues his speech, but shifts to addressing more than just Esther as evidenced by the use of second-person plural pronouns and verbs. "Write in my name what you think best and seal it with my ring; for whatever is written at the king's command and sealed with my ring cannot be contravened" (8:8).<sup>65</sup>

Some have assumed Mordecai is brought into the discussion at this point as a partner for Esther in writing the decree, perhaps even with the consequence of dishonoring Esther's power by summoning Mordecai to take care of the actual business.<sup>66</sup> I agree that Mordecai's presence is necessary since the ring, given to Mordecai, is required to seal the decree "they" might write. But, for two reasons, I am inclined to view the plural "you" as more ambiguous than a clear connection to the fact that Mordecai writes the decree with Esther.

First, later when the enactment of the counterdecree begins, the king reports its performance to Esther alone and again asks how she wishes its enactment to continue (9:12). If Mordecai was a participant in the decree's creation, why was he not consulted as well?<sup>67</sup> Second, there could be multiple referents of the uses of the second-person plural in 8:8. For example, the "you" who writes (γράψατε καὶ ὑμεῖς) could include the secretaries

64. For those seeing it as a response of exasperation, see Moore, *Additions*, 229; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 94. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 144.

65. γράψατε καὶ ὑμεῖς ἐκ τοῦ ὀνόματός μου ὡς δοκεῖ ὑμῖν καὶ σφραγίσατε τῷ δακτυλίῳ μου · ὅσα γὰρ γράφεται τοῦ βασιλέως ἐπιτάξαντος καὶ σφραγισθῇ τῷ δακτυλίῳ μου, οὐκ ἔστιν αὐτοῖς ἀντειπεῖν (8:8).

66. For the first opinion, see, e.g., De Troyer, *End of the Alpha Text of Esther*, 213–15. For the latter, see Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 145.

67. Furthermore, Mordecai never speaks dialogue throughout the concluding events of the book. Mordecai's last reported speech in LXX Esther is his prayer (13:8–17).

mentioned in the following verse (8:9); the “you” to whom what is written is pleasing could include Esther and her people (ὡς δοκεῖ ὑμῖν); and though Mordecai was given the king’s ring, Esther apparently is still necessary to seal the decree since the verb is second-person plural instead of singular in reference to Mordecai (σφραγισθῇ τῷ δακτυλίῳ μου).

Therefore, I find Esther to continue in the primary role of negotiation with the king as she continues to have more power and agency than Mordecai, who is never named in the king’s response. The king will do whatever Esther wishes and even gives her the political power to write a decree. However, the king does not relinquish his own power or complicity in the counterdecree. Acting to maintain his power, the king speaks with possessiveness by using first-person pronouns with the symbols of his power—his ring and his name.<sup>68</sup> With the king’s power over the decree, the same irrevocability of the edict decreeing women’s submission (1:19), and consequently the laws which order the seizure of women for the royal harem (2:2–4) and the slaughter of Persian Jews (3:12–13; 13:1–7), will also be enforced over whatever counterdecree Esther thinks is best.

So ten days after the first edict is written, secretaries are again summoned to pen an empire-wide decree concerning Jews, which will be enforced with the authority of the king (8:9–10).<sup>69</sup> The content of counterdecree is summarized as, “He [Artaxerxes] ordered the Jews in every city to observe their own laws, to defend themselves, and to act as they wished against their opponents and enemies on a certain day, the thirteenth of the twelfth month, which is Adar, throughout all the kingdom of Artaxerxes” (8:11–12).

The first allowance of the decree is that Jews can observe their own laws, something that was not mentioned as prohibited in the first decree, though was stated as an argument against them for following their own laws and opposing the laws of the Persian and every other king (3:8; 13:4). But the following sanction is specifically written in order to “overwrite” the initial unalterable decree against Jews, which ordered that “all [Jews]—wives and children included—be utterly destroyed by the swords of their enemies, without pity or restraint” (13:6).<sup>70</sup> The swordy destruction ordered will still

68. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 146.

69. The decree ordering the annihilation of Jews was written on the thirteenth day of the first month of Nisan (3:12), and the counterdecree is written on the twenty-third day of Nisan in the same year (8:9).

70. The idea of “overwrite” is from Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 99–100.

take place by the king's previous order, but Jews will be allowed to defend themselves and act against their enemies in whatever manner they choose. Though defense in the form of retributory violence and killing is not specifically mentioned, when one's opponents seek pitiless destruction by the sword, physical retaliation is likely necessary as will be seen in 9:1–16.<sup>71</sup>

#### THE TEXT OF THE COUNTERDECREE (16:1–24)

The text of the counterdecree reiterates these summarized sanctions noted in 8:11 with some additional information (16:19–24), but first provides reasoning for the counterdecree in an attempt to maintain a narrative of the king's supremacy and goodwill, and to distance the king from culpability in mass genocide (16:1–18). Consideration of the edict's text will include its wielding of ideological power to restabilize Artaxerxes's power, how the edict constructs Haman as an other, how Mordecai and Esther are praised, and how God's universal hegemonic masculinity is secured by the edict's text.

#### Stabilizing Artaxerxes's Power

The edict begins with a formulaic salutation that reminds readers of Artaxerxes's great power as ruler over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia (16:1).<sup>72</sup> Then, the ideological narrative of the king's supremacy continues by focusing on the king's generosity, which is ironic since his first decree aimed to steal the very lives of Jews.<sup>73</sup> Artaxerxes's generosity was specifically directed toward Haman (presumed to be the unnamed honored "people") on whom was bestowed "the most generous kindness of their benefactors [Artaxerxes]" (16:2).<sup>74</sup> The unfortunate result of Artaxerxes's

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71. De Troyer notes the ambiguity of the phrase as well. De Troyer argues that LXX Esther's translation of MT Esther is clouded, but still gives the same general force as MT Esther's summary of the edict that allows Jews permission to "defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, with their children and women, and to plunder their goods." However, De Troyer does note that perhaps the effect of LXX Esther's reading of the verse distances Jews from the mass-murder upcoming in ch. 9 (*End of the Alpha Text of Esther*, 238–39, see also n. 151).

72. Levenson, *Esther*, 113.

73. Levenson, *Esther*, 113.

74. Moore notes that the designation of "benefactor" likely refers to Artaxerxes (*Additions*, 234).

kindness was that Haman became proud and schemed against the generous king (16:3) to the extent that Artaxerxes claims he was tricked into becoming complicit in the shedding of innocent blood (16:5).<sup>75</sup> But the edict claims the sovereign king's true nature is "sincere goodwill" beguiled by the evil nature of Haman (16:6). In the future, the king promises to change his methods and become more discerning in order that the kingdom returns to being "quiet and peaceable for all" (16:8–9). With these claims of generosity, partial innocence, goodwill, and aims for a quiet and peaceable kingdom, the edict exerts ideological power so that the king's benevolence can be stabilized even though he ordered the execution of his own queen along with innumerable others.

### Otherring Haman

To remove responsibility from the king, the finger of blame for issuing the initial pogrom is pointed at Haman, even though Artaxerxes has admitted partial blame himself. Though Esther privately constructed Haman as a dangerous and exceptional Other to the king, now the edict places this construction of Haman as Other into the public transcript. Haman, to whom all people bowed and who was honored as "father" and as second to the throne (16:11), was actually a Macedonian, "really an alien to the Persian blood, and quite devoid of our kindliness" (16:10). Esther constructed Haman as an enemy of the royal couple and an evil man (7:6), and in the edict Haman is also depicted as an Other because of his character (he is against Persian goodwill and kindliness, 16:6, 10), and ethnicity.<sup>76</sup> Ironically, Haman had characterized Jewish ethnicity as contrary to Persian laws and its way of life (3:8, 13:4–5), now the same charge is leveled against Haman's ethnicity as a Macedonian (16:10).<sup>77</sup> As a Macedonian,

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75. White Crawford writes that an ancient Near Eastern monarch would never have admitted his weakness ("Esther," 966). Fox states that any admission to complicity on the king's part is unconvincing since his concession to Haman was not the only time he did whatever was recommended by a political advisor. The king was fully complicit and knew he ordered genocide, now the counterdecree is only issued because the king is in the hands of new Jewish advisors (*Character and Ideology*, 271).

76. For the idea of Esther constructing Haman as evil and an enemy to the royal couple, see Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 95; Beal, "Esther," 91.

77. Though Haman is called a Bougean in 12:6 and 3:1, the referent of that designation is unclear, as discussed in ch. 2 of this study. Thus, each of the designations of Haman are viewed as terms of opprobrium.



the edict claims Haman's chief motivation in recommending the Jewish pogrom was to catch the kingdom undefended so that Persia might be transferred to the Macedonians (16:14). Haman's goal of mutiny may even have been clear in his construction of a succession ceremony for himself (6:7–9).<sup>78</sup> So in the same way Haman's edict elevated a charge against one Jew for not following one Persian law to a condemnation of the man's entire race, the counteredict elevates any personal motivations of Haman into an ethnic threat to the Persian kingdom and way of life ("he undertook to deprive us of our kingdom and our life," 16:12). The death notice for Jews had been served because they were the singular other, the exceptional difference that must be eliminated in a diverse kingdom. The counterdecree, then, constructs an ethnic Other who is even more dangerous, an Other who is not only opposed to Persian laws and those of every other king (13:4) but who seeks to dismantle Persian power and take it for himself and his people.

#### Commendation of Mordecai and Esther

The edict states that Haman's deceit included asking for "the destruction of Mordecai, our savior and perpetual benefactor, and of Esther, the blameless partner of our kingdom, together with their whole nation" (16:13). Mordecai's description as savior and benefactor emphasizes Mordecai's value to Artaxerxes.<sup>79</sup> Though God is Esther's savior who delivers Esther from fear and transgressed laws (15:2), Mordecai is Artaxerxes's savior who delivers him from assassination attempts (12:1–6; 2:21–23). Though Artaxerxes is a benefactor to Haman (16:2–3), Mordecai is a benefactor to Artaxerxes and is worthy to be honored as such (6:1–11). Designated as "our" savior and benefactor written in the king's name, Mordecai and his worth are possessed by the king and the Persian people or perhaps by the king and Esther. But, differently than Mordecai, Esther is called a blameless partner of the kingdom. While Mordecai is possessed and his value is only relative to Artaxerxes, Esther is presented as an equal, a partner.

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78. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 101.

79. Savior or "Soter" was an honorific title for Hellenistic kings such as Antiochus Soter I (280–261 BCE) and Ptolemy VIII, Soter II (117–108 BCE) (Moore, *Additions*, 236).



### God's Universal Hegemonic Masculinity Secured

Though the edict portrays Persia as “benevolent” and constructs Haman as an Other to stabilize the ideological narrative of Persia's supremacy, the edict also includes praise and acknowledgement of God's power proclaimed in the name of Artaxerxes. When describing Haman's scheme and trickery, the edict claims “they [Haman or those opposed to Artaxerxes's generosity] even assume that they will escape the evil-hating justice of God who always sees everything” (16:4). The edict itself claims that God can see all things, when the Persian god, Artaxerxes, could not see Haman's scheme. Also, after constructing Haman as the exceptional Other instead of Jews, the edict states, “But we find that the Jews, who were consigned to annihilation by this thrice-accused man, are not evildoers, but are governed by most righteous laws and are children of the living God, most high, most mighty, who has directed the kingdom both for us and for our ancestors in the most excellent order” (16:15–16). The edict even calls God most high and mighty—in other words, the most powerful, even more powerful than Artaxerxes himself.

God's ability to manipulate the earthly hegemonic male demonstrated God's superiority in the contest for hegemonic masculinity (15:8, 6:1), but God was still threatened since God's clients/subjects were in jeopardy. However, the decree alleviates that threat by saying Persians should not execute the edict of annihilation (16:17), Jews should be allowed to live under their own laws (16:19), and they should be able to defend themselves with reinforcements (16:20).<sup>80</sup> God's clients/subjects are saved. Moreover, in the midst of the edict's provision, twice God is called the one “who rules over all things” (16:18, 21). Though Mordecai and Esther have called God the most powerful ruler in their prayers (13:9; 14:3, 12), now the king himself admits to defeat. Though in the previous edict the king called himself, “master of the whole world” (13:2), in the counterdecree the king admits that God holds universal hegemonic masculinity as ruler over all. The king even defers to God in that what Haman/Artaxerxes decreed as a day of oppression, would now become a day of celebration because of God's power (16:21). So even though it appears odd for a gentile king to order a Jewish commemorative festival (16:22–23), the king

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80. The edict's statement that Persians would do well not to put the previous edict into execution seems contradictory since the previous edict is irrevocable.

does so out of an admission that God's masculinity and power is greater than his own.<sup>81</sup>

### Mimicry of Violence and Power

With God's supremacy established, the edict of Jewish deliverance demonstrates mimicry of the edict of Jewish annihilation. Esther, as apparently the chief source behind the text of the edict (8:8), adopts Haman's strategy—she appeals to the “greatness” of Artaxerxes, she constructs Haman as an other, and she writes a decree that seems to condone killing and violence, even if in defense. Fox, Beal, Day, and White Crawford caution against viewing the counterdecree as “wrong,” vindictive violence, or similar to the edict of annihilation.<sup>82</sup> Beal writes, “Even if one reads the slaughter decreed here as preemptive rather than defensive, it is nonetheless to be distinguished from the slaughter based on greed and ethnic hatred that was decreed in chapter 3.”<sup>83</sup> But, still, defensive or not, killing is killing and mimicry cannot be denied.<sup>84</sup> As Haman's replacement, Esther adopts the methodology of Haman, to whatever extent, to negotiate with Artaxerxes on behalf of her people and as God's representative in the contest for hegemonic masculinity. In her mimicry, Esther reinscribes dominance. Instead of Haman and Artaxerxes occupying the role of dominants, Esther's reinscription places God and God's clients (herself, Mordecai, fighting Jews, and God's new client Artaxerxes who admits God's supremacy) at the top of the power pyramid. The writing of the edict becomes, then, the fulfillment of Mordecai's dream as the lowly are exalted and devour those held in honor (11:11). Jews will devour/kill the Persians previously held in honor and will be enactors of a violent decree rather than being those acted upon; and Esther, the lowly, has become exalted as second-in-command and has devoured

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81. Since this declaration may represent pagan origins for the Jewish holiday of Purim, it was omitted by Josephus (Moore, *Additions*, 237). Artaxerxes's admission of partial guilt for allowing himself to be tricked does not seem so odd when the king admits there is a ruler more powerful than he.

82. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 220–26; Beal, “Esther,” 101–2; Day, *Esther*, 153–54; White Crawford, “Esther,” 934.

83. Beal, “Esther,” 102.

84. Beal admits problematic questions still remain even when the motivations for the decrees are delineated as greed and defense. Beal, “Esther,” 102.

Haman by negotiating with Artaxerxes, replacing Haman, and adopting his methods. Esther's mimicry, whatever its moral evaluation, is a means by which Esther gains agency and negotiates power. Her actions are simultaneously resemblance and menace that change the discourse of power in LXX Esther's Persia.<sup>85</sup>

#### READING THE COUNTERDECREE AND MIMICRY OF VIOLENCE

With Haman's identification as a Macedonian, a hint of the Hellenistic reign that followed Persia may have been detected by Hasmonean and Alexandrian Jewish readers in the first century BCE. Readers knew that the Persian Empire was eventually overtaken by Alexander the Great, the vastly powerful yet infamous Macedonian, in the fourth century BCE, and his empire eventually was divided to form the Seleucid and Ptolemaic kingdoms that still existed in the first century BCE.<sup>86</sup>

Fuerst suggests that Haman's identification with the Hellenistic kingdoms would have been a reminder of the Seleucid enemies that Jews had encountered in the days of the Maccabean revolt. Haman's demise, as a Greek, would have been a discouragement against attempts at Hellenization in Israel.<sup>87</sup> Thus, Haman's identification with the Macedonians and Hellenistic kingdoms may have been read in support of Hasmonean "dehellenization" to expand their rule in Judea, and a condemnation of the Hellenistic practices adopted by Hasmonean rulers.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, the Ptolemies who ruled over Alexandrian Jews also would have been directly associated with the evil Haman in their Macedonian lineage. Considering Haman, Alexandrian readers may have examined the ways in which their Ptolemaic overlords were working against them as Haman did against Esther, Mordecai, and Persian Jews. Such antagonism was definitely the case with rulers such as Ptolemy Euergetes II who had enacted

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85. For the idea of menace, see Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 126–27.

86. Levenson writes, "[Haman's designation as a Macedonian] doubtless reflects the Macedonian king Alexander the Great's defeat of the Persians in 333 BCE and thus serves to make Haman not only an alien, but a secret agent of a nefarious foreign power to boot" (*Esther*, 114).

87. Fuerst, "Rest of Esther," 163.

88. For dehellenization, see Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 246–47. For the Hellenistic practices of the Hasmoneans, see Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 247–53; Gruen, "Jews and Greeks," 269–70.

persecution against the Alexandrian Jewish community.<sup>89</sup> Notably, the name “Euergetes” comes from the Greek εὐεργέτης meaning “benefactor,” the very nomenclature used for Artaxerxes in the edict (16:2–3).<sup>90</sup> No doubt, Alexandrian Jews caught the reminder that a “benefactor” like Artaxerxes was only beneficial to some.

While these readings were possible in Judea and Alexandria, another possibility exists. Even though the edict and denouement of LXX Esther seems to leave Artaxerxes and Persia stabilized and in a position of earthly dominance, readers knew that historically Persian rule did come to an end. Making direct connections between their own situations and those portrayed in LXX Esther, subordinate Jews in Hasmonean Judea and in Ptolemaic Alexandria may have heard the hint that just as an end came for Persia at the hand of a Macedonian, so too an end may be promised for their rulers. With ambivalence present, this promised end may have been perceived by some as a hope for an end to oppression, or a discouragement that the patron from whom they benefited would one day fall.

Additional ambivalence may have been present for readers considering Esther's and the edict's mimicry of Haman's methodology and violence. Certainly violence performed by and on behalf of God and God's people is sanctioned in the Hebrew scriptures (e.g., Josh 6–8). Thus, some Hasmonean and Ptolemaic readers may not have recognized any theological or moral difficulty with the violence. Readers in Hasmonean Judea even may have made connections between the violence of the counterdecree and the violent rebellion of the Maccabean revolt that achieved liberation for Judea. However, not all Judean Jews supported or participated in the violent Maccabean revolt against Antiochus Epiphanes. Some awaited divine intervention (Dan 7–12), others favored martyrdom to violent opposition (2 Macc 6–7), and still others joined/advocated/allied with Hellenists (1 Macc 1:11–15). In contrast to divinely sanctioned violence, peace and nonviolence are also themes that appear in the Hebrew scriptures (e.g., Hos 2:18; Mic 5:2–5; Pss 11:5; 34:14; 120:6–7; 1 Chr 22:8–9). Thus, other readers, like those who chose other means of negotiation during the Maccabean revolt, may have been opposed to the violence the counterdecree perpetrated. The remembrance of the devastating consequences of violence committed during the Maccabean revolt may have haunted

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89. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora*, 37–39; Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, 121.

90. Moore, *Additions*, 234.

readers in Hasmonean Judea, and thus they may have advocated for more nonviolent means of negotiating with their Hasmonean rulers. Further, with armies playing a large role in both Hasmonean Judea and Ptolemaic Egypt, some readers may have celebrated the violence they committed as a part of their role in those armies, while others resented it.<sup>91</sup>

But the narrative of LXX Esther itself, whether it was accepted or resisted, reinscribes violence and power. God's supremacy is effectively decided when words written in the name of Artaxerxes acknowledge God as ruler over all. God, along with God's clients and representatives, also reinscribe the violence that Haman and Artaxerxes initially decreed. By giving Esther a dividend of universal hegemonic masculinity and partnering with her through manipulation of Artaxerxes, God simultaneously liberates Jews and oppresses those previously in power. The absence of oppressing power seems to be truly outside the realm of even the imagination as dominance is sustained even in inversion.<sup>92</sup>

#### AFTERMATH, REVERSALS, AND CONCLUDING EVENTS (8:15–11:1)

The overall sense of the final chapters of LXX Esther is "a hodgepodge of conclusions."<sup>93</sup> In this section I provide brief observations concerning the immediate aftermath and reversals brought about by the counterdecree, the development of Purim to celebrate the book's power reversals, and a few concluding notes on the continuation of Persian power and Mordecai's exposition of the fulfillment of his dream.

#### IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH AND REVERSALS OF THE DECREE (8:15–9:18)

After the edict is carried across the kingdom and is posted in Susa, public transcripts of responses to the decree can be performed. The first to respond to the decree is Mordecai. "Mordecai went out dressed in the royal robe and wearing a golden crown and a turban of purple linen" (8:15a). Even though Esther has become the replacement for Haman, it is Mordecai who goes before the city of Susa in royal attire. Mordecai has been

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91. For Hasmonean Judea, see Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization*, 235–65. For Ptolemaic Egypt, see Gruen, *Diaspora*, 68.

92. As Carter demonstrates is present in his analysis of Matthew (*Matthew and Empire*, 89).

93. Beal, "Esther," 109.

the public face of Jews since the beginning of LXX Esther, when it was revealed that he serves in the king's court (11:2). It is Mordecai's defiance (3:2) that he performed out of commitment to God's masculine honor and the second commandment (13:12–14) that resulted in the catastrophic decree in the first place, and Mordecai was the first among Jews to perform public protest of the annihilation decree (4:1–3). Now Mordecai is the first to appear after the success of Esther's negotiation as a symbol of Jewish elevation. Though Esther has more power and agency, her ethnicity and solidarity with her people have been largely hidden, while Mordecai is the public face. Therefore, Mordecai's appearance in royal attire does not usurp Esther's power, but serves as a reversal of the garments worn in his previous public protest, and represents the reversal of fortunes for all Persian Jews.<sup>94</sup>

Mordecai's appearance in royal garb may also be read as an act of defiance and challenge to Artaxerxes. After all, Mordecai previously has worn royal clothing and ridden on the royal horse in elements of a succession ceremony (6:10–11). Further, Persians' fear of Jews and Mordecai in the upcoming verses (8:16b; 9:2–3) seems to indicate that Jews had gained power enough to be feared, especially the power to execute. Representative of Jews, Mordecai stands before Susa in royal clothing to proclaim the reversal of fortunes for Jews over the Persians, and thus may be a direct challenge to Persia. Even though Esther maintains her position of power in the background and can utilize her access to negotiate with Artaxerxes, Mordecai again finds his position in the public square as the face of defiance. However, Artaxerxes does not seem to realize the threat, just as he did not recognize the challenge Haman posed.

After Mordecai's appearance, others join in the public transcript of response to the decree. "The people in Susa rejoiced on seeing him [Mordecai]. And the Jews had light and gladness in every city and province wherever the decree was published; wherever the proclamation was made, the Jews had joy and gladness, a banquet and a holiday" (8:15b–16a). In response to the Jewish elevation that Mordecai represents, the emotions of the Susaites and Jews in every province are reversed from their previous tumult (3:15; 4:3) into rejoicing, joy, gladness, and banqueting. Peripety is again present as the mourning and lamenting that filled the kingdom just ten days prior is transformed into celebration.

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94. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 131.

But reactions to the counterdecree are ambivalent. Not only are joy and celebration elicited by the decree, but also fear, as many gentiles become circumcised out of “fear of the Jews” (8:16b). In the same way Artaxerxes’s great celebrations commanded respect and awe but also fear, so too the banqueting and joyous celebrations of power in response to the counterdecree also command fear of Jews. The tables have turned as Jews now take the place of Artaxerxes and Persia in being feared. The violence of the decree has even begun as the symbols of male power belonging to Persian males are mutilated in response to the increase in the masculine power of Jews. In mimicry, Jews have begun to assume the position of power in becoming the oppressors and perpetrators of violence. As Fanon describes of subjugated people, Persian Jews appear to yearn for and embody the very oppressive power and violence they have resisted.<sup>95</sup>

When the day of the edict, the thirteenth of Adar, finally arrives, “the enemies of the Jews perished; no one resisted, because they feared them” (9:1–2). In what appears as a short sentence, presumably long-held Jewish dissent with Persia finds fulfillment in sanctioned killing. In Susa alone, five hundred men are killed including the sons of Haman, and after the killing, Jews indulged in plunder (9:6–10). In the same way women across the empire were seized and plundered from their families by an order of the king without a glimpse of resistance (2:2–4, 8), Jews are able to slaughter their enemies and plunder their resources without any struggle since they now hold the same power and fear that only Artaxerxes and Persia knew previously. Further, just as Artaxerxes wrote of the honor he had paid to Haman in the past (πολλοὶ τῇ πλείεσθι τῶν εὐεργετούντων χρηστότητι πυκνότερον τιμώμενοι μεῖζον ἐφρόνησαν, 16:2), the chief officials of Persia now honored Jews (ἐτίμων τοὺς Ἰοθδαίους) because they feared the power that Mordecai represented as the increase in power for Jews (9:3). Thus, the reversal for Jews is just as much in political power as it is in the inverse of the intended killing.<sup>96</sup> The political elevation of Jews was known throughout the land because of the decree’s popularity (9:4), which may have been so quickly accepted because of the widespread resonance of hidden transcripts of dissent with the counterdecree’s gesture of defiance carried out by Jewish killing and plunder.<sup>97</sup> Mimicry and rein-

95. Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 52–54.

96. Beal, “Esther,” 110; Day, *Esther*, 146.

97. The NRSV translation of 9:4 indicates Mordecai’s name was to be held in honor because of the decree, which appears similar to the honor given Jews out of



scription of violence and oppression, which began with circumcisions, grew as the day appointed for the annihilation of Jews becomes a massacre inflicted by Jews.

Still in great power, but still behind the scenes, Esther is approached by the king so that he can report to her the “success” of the edict in Susa and presumably beyond (9:11–12b). But more than just his report, the king also petitions Esther, “Whatever more you ask will be done for you” (9:12c). Though Esther has previously had to approach the king to make her requests, now the king approaches her.<sup>98</sup> Esther, who has negotiated on behalf of her people and as a representative for God in the contest for hegemonic masculinity, has now achieved her reversal and victory as well. She holds power over Persia as the king even approaches her to ask what he might do to serve her. Mordecai may be the public face of defiance, but Esther holds the power to bend Persia to her will. So then exercising her power, Esther says, “Let the Jews be allowed to do the same tomorrow. Also, hang up the bodies of Haman’s ten sons” (9:13). Day argues that Esther’s request is not specifically for more killing, but that the Jews’ actions may continue with the result of hanging Haman’s sons as the primary goal.<sup>99</sup> Thus, Esther’s aim is to once again publically disgrace her predecessor to the role of Persian premier.<sup>100</sup> She has taken his life, his wealth, and now his sons—all the honor with which Haman was obsessed is dead.<sup>101</sup> In response to Esther’s request, the killing resumes on the fourteenth of Adar and three hundred more people are killed in Susa the next day, though no plunder is taken (9:14–15). Esther’s agency has indeed progressed, and with that progression the violence and body count have also increased.

The killing and celebrations continue throughout the kingdom. Outside of Susa, fifteen thousand are killed and no plunder is taken on the thirteenth of Adar (9:16), and rest, celebration, joy, and gladness are observed on the fourteenth (9:17). In Susa, since killing continued on the

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fear of Mordecai, but it is not a good translation of the verse. The NETS renders the verse (προσέπεσεν γὰρ τὸ πρόσταγμα τοῦ βασιλέως ὀνομασθῆναι ἐν πάσῃ τῇ βασιλείᾳ), “For it turned out that the king’s ordinance was referred to by name throughout all the kingdom” (9:4).

98. Beal, “Esther,” 112.

99. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 155.

100. Day, *Esther*, 147; Beal, “Esther,” 112; Levenson, *Esther*, 132; Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 136–37.

101. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 110.



fourteenth, rest, joy, and gladness were observed on the fifteenth (9:18). No mourning or lamenting for the fifteen thousand eight hundred people killed is reported, only delight in Jewish mimicry of Persian power.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF PURIM (9:19–32)

The great deliverance and defeat of enemies prompt celebration on the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar for scattered Jews and those living in large cities respectively (9:19). The summary of these holidays, how they were written, why they came about, and how they were decreed is reported in 9:20–32. Notably, the holidays, even the whole month of Adar, would become a time for feasting and gladness (9:22).<sup>102</sup> As has been the case for other banquets in LXX Esther, banquets are displays of power and benevolence. In the same way Artaxerxes's banquets were an ideological legitimization of his benevolence as well as his economic power, so too does the feasting prescribed by Jews include benevolence to the poor (9:22). Now in full reversal, Jews not only have an immediate celebration of the counterdecree that gave voice to their rise in power (8:17), but they will have perpetual banquets (9:27–28) as clients of the universal hegemonic male—God.

It is stated that Mordecai recorded the events previously narrated in LXX Esther in a book to be widely circulated (9:20) and that he established the festival to be called Purim (9:26).<sup>103</sup> Interestingly, the way Mordecai tells the story of what happened eliminates Esther's role in negotiating on behalf of Jewish deliverance (9:24–25).<sup>104</sup> Mordecai again assumes the public mantle. But with the interesting conglomeration of conclusions in chapter 9, Esther then quickly moves back to the forefront with Mordecai. Together, they write what they had done, give confirmation to the Purim letters (9:29), and establish a decision (9:31).<sup>105</sup> In the

102. The word used for feasting in 9:22 is *γάμων* ("wedding feast") like the first feast thrown by Artaxerxes (1:5). Though, as with the reference in 1:5, the purpose of this feasting for a wedding is not primary, but the celebration of power is the focus.

103. That Mordecai instituted Purim is not explicitly stated, but in light of the mention of Mordecai writing the book and telling the story based solely on him and Haman, it may be assumed that Mordecai is the intended referent of *ἔστησεν*.

104. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 52–54.

105. The NRSV translation of the 9:29 makes the actions of Esther and Mordecai seem unclear since it translates a noun (*τό στερῆωμα*) as a verb ("gave full authority"). The NETS translation is clearer, "Then Esther the queen daughter of Aminadab,

same way they were both required for the writing of the counterdecree (8:8), together they write about Purim. Then, Esther alone has the power to establish Purim as a decree forever (9:32). Even though Esther and Mordecai have authority and power to pen the counterdecree (8:8), they still do so in Artaxerxes's name (8:10; 16:1). In the fullness of their power reversal at the end of the book, now Esther and Mordecai can write an official letter issuing a decree on their own merit, and Esther even has the power to make it an *eternal* decree via the complicity she gains with the *universal* hegemonic male, God.

#### OTHER CONCLUDING NOTES (10:1–11:1)

So as to not forget the earthly power in LXX Esther, at the end of the book readers are reminded of Artaxerxes's earthly rule, specifically his economic and military power. "The king levied a tax both by land and sea. As for his power and bravery, and the wealth and glory of his kingdom, they were recorded in the annals of the kings of the Persians and Medes" (10:1–2). At the right hand of the earthly king sits Mordecai, who acts on behalf of Artaxerxes's authority but is revered by Jews and beloved by the whole nation (10:3). Representing the elevation of Jewish power and even rising in popularity, Mordecai symbolizes the defiance that has accompanied the king throughout LXX Esther and still exists right under the king's nose.

Mordecai's defiance is further indicated with a reminder of his dream, which has been fulfilled in the events previously narrated throughout the book (10:4–5). The little spring predicted to become a river bringing light, sun, and abundant water was Esther (10:6; 11:10–11), who brought about the exaltation of the lowly (Esther, Mordecai, and Jews) and the devouring of the honored (Haman, Persians, and the revelation of Artaxerxes's and Persia's inferiority to God). The roaring dragons, whose conflict caused a threat to the righteous nation, were Haman and Mordecai (10:7–8; 11:6–7). All this came about due to God's universal hegemonic masculinity (great signs and wonders that never before happened among the nations, 10:10) that God performed on behalf of God's clients and inheritance—Jews (10:10–12). So Mordecai commends people to celebrate the universally

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along with Mardocheios, the Judean, wrote what they had done, and the confirmation of the letter about Phrourai" (καὶ ἔγραψεν Εσθηρ ἡ βασίλισσα θυγάτηρ Αμιναδαβ καὶ Μαρδοχαῖος ὁ Ιουδαῖος ὅσα ἐποίησαν τὸ τε στερέωμα τῆς ἐπιστολῆς τῶν Φρουραι, 9:29).

ruling God forever through Purim (10:13), which was established by this letter and translated in Jerusalem to be delivered to Egypt (11:1).

#### READING PURIM

Craig has argued that MT Esther should be read as a literary carnivalesque. Craig states that the humor, parody, and peripety found in the book represent a carnivalization of literature that elicits laughter and symbols of societal upheaval.<sup>106</sup> The laughter and collective gaiety present in the celebrations at the end of Esther occur in stark contrast to the grave circumstances they surround. As Fox also observes, at the end of Esther one can only laugh at the reversals that have taken place, or else one would cry.<sup>107</sup> Thus, humor becomes a means by which fear is deflected, and laughter produces a sense of freedom from threatening hierarchical structures.<sup>108</sup>

LXX Esther carries the institution of Purim and its accompanying story from Jerusalem to Egypt (9:20–11:1). As the story was read in both Hasmonean Judea and Ptolemaic Egypt year after year in the celebration of Purim that the book established, people would likely have laughed at the reversals present in the book's narration. As Craig describes carnival laughter as universal and ambivalent, readers may have laughed at both the dominants of the book who were ridiculed, and the book's subordinates who caused the trouble but still found a way to negotiate with power.<sup>109</sup>

The carnival laughter of LXX Esther's readers would have been a form of negotiation as Scott describes.<sup>110</sup> Reading LXX Esther and laughing at the book's dominants in a carnival setting of Purim allowed readers with their own Hasmonean or Ptolemaic dominants to find a voice of disapproval. Though, ambivalently, the relief of social tensions in Purim could have served dominants as a kind of "safety-valve," Hasmonean and Alexandrian Jewish subordinates could still find agency in hearing, celebrating, and laughing at stories of power reversal, defiance, and complex negotiation. In the act of reading and laughing, the distance between subordinates and dominants is collapsed and the agency of negotiation occurs.<sup>111</sup>

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106. Craig, *Reading Esther*.

107. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 253.

108. Craig, *Reading Esther*, 147–56; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 253.

109. Craig, *Reading Esther*, 150–52.

110. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 172–82.

111. Craig, *Reading Esther*, 148.

Ambivalence existed for readers among subordinates in Hasmonean Judea and Ptolemaic Egypt in the early first century BCE as they both dissented and benefited from their dominants. In the Purim reading of LXX Esther each year in both contexts, dissent and benefit were simultaneously demonstrated. God was hailed as the victor of the contest for universal hegemonic masculinity, but Artaxerxes, in whatever inferior state, still existed on the earthly throne and Jews could benefit from his reign. Vashti and Mordecai provided examples of overt defiance, while Esther demonstrated methods of disguised negotiation in which earthly power is respected for the benefits it can provide. The carnival reading of LXX Esther gave voice to these ambivalent attitudes as well as varied and complex means of negotiation. In its reading, every subordinate, no matter their attitude or mode of negotiation, could find a character with whom to identify and one at whom they could laugh as a means of averting tears.

#### CONCLUSION

In this chapter I argue that Esther continues her negotiation with Artaxerxes utilizing deference, performances of sexuality functioning as anonymity, and mimicry of Haman's methods by othering him. The king's responses to Esther's second and third acts of negotiation are to eliminate Haman, elevate Esther and Mordecai, and allow Esther and Mordecai to pen a counterdecree. Though the counterdecree alleviates the danger to the earthly masculine imperial order of which Esther has convinced him, the edict written in the king's name also asserts God's superiority as the ultimate hegemonic male. Thus, the counterdecree functions not only to restore the Persian imperial order, but also to assuage the jeopardy posed to God's hegemonic masculinity. With the concern of the mimicry of violence perpetuated by the counterdecree, connections to readers who may have appreciated and/or dissented with the counterdecree's reinscription of violence are also explored. Finally, I offer brief observations concerning the concluding events of LXX Esther to demonstrate that the aftermath of the counterdecree continues the mimicry and ambivalence found throughout the book, and that the book ends with Persia still in the hands of Artaxerxes, though his power is unstable, as the defiance and difference embodied by representatives of Artaxerxes's rival, God, sits right under his nose. In the carnival laughter of Purim, all subordinate readers could find a means of agency and negotiation with imperial power.

## Conclusions, Contributions, and Implications

In this study I have demonstrated that LXX Esther is book in which the structures and negotiations of empire cannot be denied. Throughout the book God and Artaxerxes stake their claims for hegemonic masculinity, and their representatives engage in gendered exertions and negotiations of power. In the end, the negotiations of Queen Esther result in the deliverance of Persian Jews, and Artaxerxes appearing to concede to God's supremacy. However, the existence of domination is only perpetuated in mimicry and ambivalence as violence becomes a hallmark of God's victory.

### CONCLUSIONS

Persian imperial power is presented in LXX Esther as encompassing all four sociospatial networks of power—military, political, economic, and ideological—each of which is dependent upon the performance of Artaxerxes's hegemonic masculinity. The personal is political in LXX Esther (as it is in any other empire). When Artaxerxes's power and/or masculinity is threatened, so too is the masculine imperial power of Persia. Therefore, the Persian Empire must respond with great strength in order to attempt to stabilize the masculine imperial order against any threats. When Vashti jeopardizes Artaxerxes's power and masculinity, the empire responds with oppressive decrees of submission and forced migration to the capital. When Mordecai endangers Haman's complicit power and masculinity, and by proxy that of the king as well, the empire again responds forcefully—this time with decreed genocide. The final threat to Persian imperial power comes when, in mimicry, Esther paints Haman as a menace to the king's masculine honor and power. Unfortunately for Haman, the imperial response in that case is for Haman to be deposed of his power, his wealth, and his life.

Negotiation in LXX Esther is varied and complex. While negotiation can be found even in the explicit and implicit responses of all Persians,

including Persian Jews and Susaites, to exertions of Persian imperial power, the multivalent negotiation performed by Vashti, Mordecai, and Esther is the prime focus of this study. Vashti performs the negotiation of defiance, along with its requisite consequences. Mordecai negotiates in a disguised manner by performing deference to the king when reporting assassination plots, through his symbolic dream of inversion, his potential manipulation of the queen-finding scheme in order to gain agency and access, and in his hidden transcripts in dialogue with Esther and in his prayer to God. However, Mordecai also follows Vashti's example and negotiates in defiance and even publically protests the king's pogrom. Esther, on the other hand, is committed to disguised negotiation. Her body becomes the site upon which the contest for hegemonic masculinity is waged. With her body, Esther negotiates with Artaxerxes by performing feminine frailty and sexuality in anonymity, while also negotiating in disguise with words of flattery, euphemism, and deference. Though Esther achieves success in the form of the deliverance of her people and an elevation in agency, status, power, and wealth for herself, mimicry and ambivalence abound in Esther's negotiation and its results as domination and violence are reinscribed.

Throughout the study I have also made connections to the earliest readers of LXX Esther in early first century BCE Hasmonean Judea and Ptolemaic Alexandria. In both locations, people existed in subordination to imperial-like powers. In both locations, people affirmed, consented to, benefited from, and participated in the power of their dominants. In both locations, people contested and subverted the state powers over them, and dreamed of power inversion. This reading of LXX Esther demonstrates the various ways in which early readers with any or all of these attitudes may have found connection with the gendered power exertions and negotiations portrayed in the book.

### CONTRIBUTIONS

The first contribution of this study is its synchronic reading of LXX Esther. While AT Esther has captured new attention by scholars in recent years, research on LXX Esther is scarce.<sup>1</sup> When LXX Esther's versions of the

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1. For AT Esther, see, e.g., Jobes, *Alpha-Text of Esther*; De Troyer, *End of the Alpha Text of Esther*.

Additions are considered in commentaries, they are normally separated from the canonical material and interpreted, largely, in contrast to the themes and perspective of MT Esther.<sup>2</sup> When scholars have utilized the full text of LXX Esther, they tended to do so only to place it in contrast with the structure, characterization, or morality found in MT Esther and AT Esther.<sup>3</sup> As some ancient communities may only have had access to one text of Esther, my reader-centered approach reads LXX Esther as a stand-alone text instead of interpreting it in contrast to other Esther texts. Therefore, this study's synchronic reading of the full text of LXX Esther is a unique contribution.

A second contribution of this study is its method for reading texts through the lens of the intersection between empire and gender. This study has undertaken a primarily literary reading to illuminate the gendered performance of imperial power and the gendered performance of varied and complex means of negotiation as presented in a narrative text. Then, I have offered connections to the early readers of the text in order to demonstrate how the text may have addressed the imperial circumstances of those readers. The contributions of this type of approach include demonstrating that means of imperial negotiation are more varied and complex than a binary of accommodation or revolt, recognizing the interconnectedness of gender with imperial power and its negotiation, and approaching an imperial-critical reading from a primarily literary, reader-centered perspective rather than an author-centered viewpoint.<sup>4</sup> Though

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2. E.g., Moore, *Additions*; White Crawford, "Esther"; Levenson, *Esther*; Fuerst, "Rest of Esther."

3. For structure, see Dorothy, *Books of Esther*. For characterization, see Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*; Fox, "Three Esthers." For morality, see Charles D. Harvey, *Finding Morality in the Diaspora? Moral Ambiguity and Transformed Morality in the Books of Esther*, BZAW 328 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003).

4. In contrast to the binary implications present in: Portier-Young, *Apocalypse Against Empire*; Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea*; and Horsley, *Revolt of the Scribes*. The interconnectedness as demonstrated in post-colonial feminist work such as that of Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, and by New Testament scholarship such as: Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered*; and Marchal, *Politics of Heaven*. For examples of author-centered imperial-critical approaches, see, e.g., Jon L. Berquist, "Postcolonialism and Imperial Motives for Canonization," *Semeia* 75 (1996): 15–35; Gottwald, "Early Israel as an Anti-Imperial Community"; Portier-Young, *Apocalypse against Empire*; Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea*; Horsley, *Revolt of the Scribes*.

this study's imperial-critical approach is not the only way to provide a reading with attention to empire and gender, it can serve as an example of one particular procedure.

Third, this study contributes to scholarship by nuancing the presentation of imperial power in LXX Esther. Several scholars have commented that the Esther stories present non-Jewish power in an amicable manner since by the end of the book the king provides for the salvation of Jews.<sup>5</sup> These scholars observe that the Persian king is merely an irascible and malleable king who consistently defers to what others recommend should be done and that the king and his advisors regularly confuse the personal with the political and respond to personal affronts with overreactions.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, this study demonstrates that the personal is inextricably intertwined with the political; thus overreactions of the king and his advisors are read as imperial responses to threats waged against the masculine imperial order. Further, rather than a benevolent ruler who saves Jews, this study presents Artaxerxes as primarily interested in the maintenance of his power and masculinity, though he eventually must acknowledge God as the holder of universal hegemonic masculinity.

The fourth contribution of this study is its characterization of Esther from the perspective of the performance of gender in the service of imperial negotiation, rather than judging her portrayal in response in patriarchy. Feminist scholarship that focuses on the characterization of Esther has tended to assume one of two binary approaches—either Esther submits to patriarchy or she subverts it.<sup>7</sup> This study has reframed the question of Esther's response to patriarchy by viewing her character and performance of gender in the context of masculine imperial power and by identifying multivalent strategies that collapse a binary approach. Esther negotiates imperial power by performing femininity as the battle for hegemonic

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5. E.g., Levenson, *Esther*, 26; Berlin, *Esther*, xlii; Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 296; Wills, *Jewish Novel*, 97.

6. E.g., Day, *Esther*, 34, 68–69; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 20, 171–77; Levenson, *Esther*, 52, 58, 68; Bechtel, *Esther*, 24; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 295.

7. For submission to patriarchy, see, e.g., Fuchs, "Status and Role of Female Heroines," 84; Wyler, "Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen," 130–32; Duran, "Esther"; Gendler, "Restoration of Vashti," 242; Mosala, "Implications of the Text of Esther," 129–37. For subversion, see, e.g., Berlin, *Esther*, lv–lvi; White Crawford, "Esther: A Feminine Model," 205–11; Jones, "Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther," 177; McGeough, "Esther the Hero," 44–65; Zaeske, "Unveiling Esther as a Pragmatic Radical Rhetoric," 203; LaCocque, *Feminine Unconventional*, 72.



masculinity is waged upon and through her body, *and* Esther performs masculinity in courage and eloquent speech and even is complicit with the masculinity of both Artaxerxes and God. Esther is not viewed as submitting to or subverting patriarchy, but she is presented as a gender-liminal character that negotiates imperial power in complex and varied ways, including performing both femininity and masculinity. Esther's performance of gendered negotiation is presented as quite successful in LXX Esther; or in other words, her negotiation reinscribes power and relocates her as a beneficiary and agent of imperial power. She provides salvation for Jews and victory for God, yet she also attains a position for herself as second-in-command in Persia.

### IMPLICATIONS

One implication of this study is that it may spark further exploration. One such enterprise may be to utilize a similar imperial-critical approach to conduct synchronic readings of MT Esther and AT Esther through the lens of the intersection of empire and gender. Specifically, MT Esther's lack of any mention of God would certainly yield a different reading than one that demonstrates a contest for hegemonic masculinity between God and Artaxerxes. In regard to AT Esther, given Day's analysis that the character of Esther in AT Esther is more authoritative, active, and violent, it would be interesting to read how the title character in AT Esther represents God's power and masculinity in her negotiation with Artaxerxes.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, MT Esther and AT Esther have different early readers than LXX Esther—in time frame, imperial powers, and geographic location. Therefore, discovering historical connections between those early readers and potential imperial-critical readings of MT Esther and AT Esther would provide added insight into understanding the Esther stories in light of imperial life that existed for Jews in multiple imperial settings.

A second implication may be found in the contemporary application of reading the Esther texts through the lenses of empire and gender. While this study's reading of LXX Esther presents connections with the imperial contexts of the earliest readers of LXX Esther, its contemporary readers may also find correlation with their own circumstances. As multiple extant texts have demonstrated the Esther story to be an adaptable

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8. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 169–96.

one, continued application of Esther to the socio-political circumstances of new, contemporary readers will certainly be welcome in today's world in which gendered and imperial power is ever-present and its negotiation must continue to take place. Recent to the writing of this manuscript one can look for examples of the gendered exertion and negotiation of imperial power in the Syrian Civil War and the global refugee crisis it provoked, the United Kingdom's potential withdrawal from the European Union known as Brexit, and the January 21, 2017 women's march that boasted some five million global marchers on the day after US President Donald Trump's inauguration. For those who live under power, who consent and contest, who benefit from and subvert, who participate in and dream of overthrow, LXX Esther portrays the stories of characters who adopted various, complex, and multivalent strategies for negotiating power. Just as early readers may have found connection with and drawn inspiration from the imperial negotiation of the characters in LXX Esther, perhaps contemporary readers can also utilize LXX Esther as a resource for the many and diverse ways they also may choose to negotiate power in today's world.

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