

Probing Moral Ambiguity: Grappling with Ethical Portraits in the Hebrew Story of Esther

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Introduction

When a perceptive reader engages the Hebrew book of Esther, an interpretive weight necessarily falls heavily upon her or his shoulders. A masterfully told story though it is, one cannot escape facing the reading decisions that exist as a result of what the author said, alluded to, or did *not* say in the pages of the narrative. Interestingly enough, gaps in understanding abide in all three of these situations. Concerning this phenomenon, M. Sternberg writes,

Biblical narratives are notorious for their sparsity of detail. . . . And the resultant gaps have been left open precisely at key points, central to the discourse as a dramatic progression as well as a structure of meaning and value. Hence their filling in here is not automatic but requires considerable attention to the nuances of the text, both at the level of the represented events and at the level of language; far from a luxury or option, closure becomes a necessity for any reader trying to understand the story even in the simplest terms of what happens and why.¹

This narrative situation and resultant interpretive task certainly apply to the ambiguous aspects of morality in the Scroll of Esther. Since the book was not composed as an ethical treatise, much of its (im)morality is unspoken, not specifically addressed, or only implied at best. The motives and (in)actions of Vashti, Esther,

and Mordecai in the narrative exhibit intriguing "moral gaps" that have been open historically to varied and wide-ranging interpretation. Yet not all of this past explanation has been equally satisfying.

Therefore, in this study I shall seek primarily to pinpoint these lacunae *via* exegetical analysis, and, when possible, attempt cautiously to suggest some possible ways in which the material might be understood within its various contexts, both near and far. To be sure, I will neither be able to eliminate all of the narrative's ambiguities, nor do I intend to fill in all of the gaps pointed out in these episodes; Sternberg's "closure" is not always easily achieved. Rather, a more descriptive and interrogative process will follow, one with a view to an interaction with and apprehension of the moral complexion of the book of Esther in its Hebrew form.²

Vashti

Refusal to Appear when Summoned (1:10-12)

Queen Vashti declined the king's request! No one could have foreseen how monumental this simply reported "no" would be. For a character who remained almost exclusively in the background of a small portion of the narrative, it is intriguing that Vashti's refusal threatened to turn the kingdom upside-down (at least in the eyes of some men). Indeed, the queen's snub sent shock waves throughout both the story and the far-reaching history of

interpretation that has been fascinated by her and her decision. Yet precisely *why* Vashti refused is not stated.³

Concerning her character the text is parsimonious in terms of description and explanation. It tersely informs the reader that when the summons of the king arrived, the queen refused to come in (1:12). What could have motivated this behavior? The author reports that the merry king was noticeably affected by drinking at the time of his request (1:10). The choice of words here suggests both that the king's mood was good and that he was intoxicated to some measure. These descriptions were likely related and might have sketched a negative picture of the king's present state in the mind of the queen. The likelihood of impaired judgment might have sent warning signals to Vashti because of the king's desire to "show off" his queen's "beauty" to the people.⁴ Undoubtedly, for a woman, pretentiousness and inebriation are not a comforting combination in a man.

But it is not at all clear that the king's probable instability had anything to do with Vashti's decision not to appear at the eunuchs' beckoning. Indeed, there is no steady inference to be drawn in that manner. Neither can one firmly decide from the text that the queen refused the king's call out of a notion of dignified proto-feminist principle; information on Vashti's thought processes are simply not given. Despite L. B. Paton's argument that the author takes the queen's actions to be whimsical because no good reason for her refusal can be found,⁵ it appears that Vashti's unknown motivations are neither of great consequence to the author nor of much concern to the other characters who were present at the revelrous seven-day banquet.⁶ The story moves quickly on to

the question of how the court should now *handle* the insubordinate queen, spending little time on the components that related the act of disobedience itself. Because of this strategy, it is the reader alone who is left to wrestle with the moral ambiguity surrounding the queen's inaction, for a satisfying appraisal of her moral character on the basis of the text does not appear to be forthcoming.

It has been suggested that for the author the silence of the narrative concerning Vashti's grounds for refusal "effects a sort of closure, limiting the attention the reader will give this character."⁷ Yet whatever the author's possible intentions, subsequent readers' fascination with the queen's motives has been far from contained. Indeed, Vashti's silence has led to interpreters' verbosity; depending on his or her mindset and contexts, the ethical verdicts on Vashti have been (and will continue to be) widely varied.⁸ At the very least, Vashti's brief presence in the story has served to heighten narrative tension,⁹ and to set up a literary comparison with a later queen who would manage her behavior and office in a different fashion. In this light, Vashti's behavior could be viewed "positively" even though no particular moral assessment is attainable. But, to be sure, this explanation is a practical one.¹⁰

Esther

Concealment of Jewishness in Obedience to Mordecai (2:10, 20)

The act of concealing one's identity is not uncommon in the Old Testament. A few examples include the account of Jacob dressing in kids' skins and wearing Esau's clothes in order to obtain Isaac's blessing (Ge 27:1-29) and the story of Tamar disguising herself as a prostitute to fool Judah (Ge 38:11-26). Perhaps even more analogous to

the Esther account are the stories that relate Abraham (on two occasions!) and Isaac instructing their beautiful wives to pose as their sisters so that the patriarchs might avoid what they feared to be certain death at the hands of foreign kings (Abraham—Ge 12:10-20, 20:1-18; Isaac—Ge 26:7-11). Whereas these texts display an *active* concealment that could be characterized as deception, the information related in Esther, though not altogether dissimilar, is more ambiguous. In the Esther account, *inaction* circumscribed the heroine's *action* — “Esther did not make known her people or her descent” (2:10) — as she carried out the unexplained wishes of Mordecai in her new palace environment. It should be noted that the reason(s) for Mordecai's request was/were not stated, but it is not likely that the author merely desired to show Mordecai's patriarchal dominance over Esther at this and other points.¹¹ Further, there is no hint of prejudice or selectivity in the general call for the empire's women of marriageable age (2:2). In other words, we simply do not know from the text that Esther would have been disqualified because she was Jewish,¹² although some sort of apprehension seems to be in place.¹³ It could be assumed that the Jews were in servitude to some degree in Persia during this time causing Esther's social class to preclude her, but this assumption would not be based on any firm evidence. In the face of all the possible scenarios and suppositions, the narrative remains silent.

According to J. D. Levenson, the point here is clear: Esther did not “break faith” with Mordecai even after she had surpassed him in all aspects of civic rank. Even though it is practically questionable *how* the queen managed to conceal her nationality, the main plot of the story (i.e., Haman's plot of genocide) is dependent

upon the fact that she did just that.¹⁴ Yet the question of the manner in which Esther went about her concealing appears not to be a great point of interest for the author. Similar to the handling of the Vashti account, the narrative leaves many details to the reader's curiosity and imagination. What seems clear, nevertheless, is that in the midst of Esther's obedience, concealment was certain, although deception is not necessarily implied. In the end, it seems that we need not know *why* or *how* Esther conceals her people and descent, just that she *does* conceal them—and very well.

Actively Winning the Favor and Love of the King (2:17a)

In the cover of the concealment plan Esther was gathered along with a vast group of eligible young women and placed under the care of Hegai (2:8). It is clear from the narrative that her presence in the court brought about extremely positive feelings from all persons with whom she came in contact (2:15). Yet it is interesting to note that these sentiments of favor were likely the result of an *active* manner on the part of the young Jewess. In other words, Esther appears to have taken it upon herself to ensure that she was well pleasing before Hegai, and consequently, the king. To be sure, the actual extent of Esther's activity is unknown; nevertheless, the different ways in which the author chose to relate the favor that Esther receives within the book testifies to a clear distinction in the posture of the young woman in different situations.

Yet if Esther can be said to have been active in these cases, does this then raise the reader's curiosity concerning the nature of her actions at these times? If it is possible that Esther was not a passive,

helpless damsel in the hands of a power-hungry, manipulative king in 2:17a, what are we to think of a young woman who successfully won the kingdom-wide beauty pageant?¹⁵ It is most likely that Esther was (to some degree) aware of the nature of the situation in which she found herself, and that she actively sought to be the one whom the king finally came to love. To be clear, the argument here is not for an exclusively (or even mostly) active Esther whose passivity is nowhere to be found in this scene. Exactly what this activity entailed *behaviorally* is not stated in the text, but it is plausible that Esther *acted* persuasively in her encounters with the king — a persuasion that appears to have brought about his love for her.

Apprehension about Transgressing the Law
(4:11)

At this point in the narrative Esther has become queen and the genocidal plot of Haman has been firmly established. This threat caused confusion in Shushan (3:15) and prompted Mordecai to cry out bitterly in sackcloth and ashes (4:1), which caused Esther the deepest distress¹⁶ even though she was not aware initially of the reasons for Mordecai's posture.¹⁷ Only in 4:8-9 did Esther find out the reason for Mordecai's grief when Hatach brought back to her a copy of Haman's edict. Interestingly, no further reaction of distress from the queen is recorded upon hearing *this* news. One would suppose that the deep anguish of 4:4 would be exacerbated by the clarification of Mordecai's and the Jews' plight, yet the text displays no such emotion.

It is also the case in verses 8-9 that Mordecai commanded the queen to go the king on behalf of her people. It is here that we encounter Esther's apprehensive response, a response that is possibly shaped

by the reality of her high position in the court and her disconnected proximity to the "Jewish problem" of that time. Queen Esther diplomatically related a message back to Mordecai informing him that the king's decree prohibited her from entering into his presence unless she has been summoned, and she has not been called for thirty days. To do so unbidden meant certain death, that is, unless the king extended his golden scepter (4:11). At this juncture, the queen seems interested in jeopardizing neither her life nor her lofty position for anyone, and it would appear that she does not even count herself among the threatened Jews. Might there be an explanation for this?

Esther's apprehension in this scene could be attributed to a "convenient" commitment to decrees of the king. It is doubtful that the queen possessed a firm conviction that the king's laws were infallible and altogether insuperable in light of both the golden scepter loophole and her later decision to enter into the king's presence uncalled (4:16-5:1). Instead, it is more likely that the queen's uneasiness stemmed from her feeling of disconnectedness from the larger Jewish community.¹⁸ In other words, she might have considered herself safe from the threat of Haman's edict at this point, and thus might not have desired to risk her life and position unnecessarily.¹⁹ To be sure, these emotions are possible and should be able to be understood at least, even if not condoned. But the lack of an explicit reaction at the news of the genocidal plot, when it had only taken a mentioning that Mordecai was in sackcloth and ashes to bring about deep distress, heightens one's curiosity concerning Esther's thoughts and motivations as she dwelt comfortably in the Persian court. For the fact of the queen's apprehension is clear,

even though a perceptible rationalization of it is not expressly stated. Tacitly, though, Esther's misgivings come into clearer view—misgivings that she must face in the coming message exchanges with Mordecai.

Apprehension Not Fully Reversed: An Unoptimistic Submission? (4:16)

What is encountered in the material between 4:11 and the end of the chapter is certainly remarkable, yet it is probably not quite as outstanding as most readers would suppose. The persuasive rhetorical techniques of the queen's father figure, Mordecai, should not go unnoticed, for they are undoubtedly effective. Yet as far as Mordecai's words go in prompting Esther forward in the cause for her condemned people, the queen likely remained somewhat unoptimistic concerning her chances before the king. Whereas traditionally readers have imagined a brave, confident, and unwavering Esther at the close of chapter four, the text leaves the door open for a slightly different portrait of the queen. In other words, the change in the attitude of the queen from 4:11 to 4:16 has *not* been a complete reversal.

An informed reading of the oft commented upon interpretation of 4:14a is integral to a fuller understanding of Esther's mindset in 4:16, for depending on how 4:14a is rendered, the possibility of at least two scenarios emerge in 4:16. In short, the translation of 4:14a is key in determining just what kind of decision confronts Esther in the pivotal sixteenth verse. In the past, the first portion of 4:14 has been read as "a conditional statement, with one protasis and two apodoses."²⁰ Its usual translation follows: "For if you certainly keep silent at this time, (then) relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, and [then] you

and the house of your father will be destroyed."²¹ J. M. Wiebe notes the interpretive consequences of such a translation:

Taken in this way, this text seems to affirm that if Esther does not take action to help save the Jews, they would still be delivered by some other unnamed agent. Moreover, her reluctance to act would result in the elimination not only of herself, but of her entire family as well.²²

Yet this conventional rendering of the Hebrew also has its problems. Wiebe points out two of the most glaring in question form:

1. How is the mysterious phrase "another place" to be handled?
2. How might one explain the condemned fate of Esther and her family if she does not act, leaving the destiny of the Jews to the uncertainty of an unnamed deliverer?²³

Concerning the first difficulty, it is not likely that the narrator utilized "place" as a surrogate reference to God, even though this was a common veiling technique in later Jewish literature.²⁴ If surrogacy were the case, one would have to account for the inclusion of "another" in the phrase, which produces the theologically problematic translation—"from *another* place [i.e., another god]." Thus, concerning the implications of this thinking, P. R. Ackroyd contends that the Jews' salvation must arise from "some other source" and not directly from God at all.²⁵ Suggestions as to what this other source might be vary. Could it be another high ranking Jew? Or perhaps it would be in the form of a popular revolt of the Jews or even sympathetic Persians?²⁶ Maybe the other source is an

outside political power that will rescue the Jews and is not mentioned in the story at all?²⁷ In light of all of these suggestions, however, Wiebe remarks that the text “no-where even hints at the source of such a hope.”²⁸ Thus, the difficulty in understanding the phrase “another place” is in no real way eased. The verse leaves large gaps in the reader’s understanding and questions as to its meaning and reference. Yet it could well be that these gaps and questions are necessary and purposeful techniques of the often-subtle narrative.

The second difficulty that Wiebe sees stems from the first. If the traditional translation and interpretation of 4:14a is followed, the second apodosis presents a problem, Esther and her family are doomed to destruction if she does not act and the unnamed agent delivers the Jews, but the reasons for this fate are not clear. Clines has argued that God himself would punish the queen and her family if she did not act.²⁹ Yet Clines’ proposal envisions God explicitly entering a story in which he is, at best, only implicitly present and working. Fitting in better with the human-oriented action of the narrative, other scholars imagine that Esther and her family would not be spared because the Jews would look upon them as perfidious and act in retribution.³⁰ In the end, however, the proposed solutions to the two difficulties are problematic enough to encourage another rendering of 4:14a. For this, we will continue to observe the work of J. M. Wiebe.

Wiebe’s proposal centers on the rendering of the first apodosis, which he believes to be “an *interrogative apodosis*.”³¹ Read in this way, the suggestion is that this interrogative apodosis asks a rhetorical question that expects a negative response.³² Thus, his translation reads as follows: “For if you certainly keep silent at this time,

will relief and deliverance arise for the Jews from another place? Then you and the house of your father will be destroyed.”³³ On this reading, Mordecai was stating pointedly that Esther is the *only* possible hope for her people; indeed, there is no mystery deliverance by “another place” at all.³⁴ His strategy, then, was to motivate the queen to appear before the king not out of threat, but out of a sense of familial and national loyalty. If she does not act, the elimination of all of the Jews, including Esther and her family, would result from Haman’s genocidal edict. Upon this rendering, Wiebe submits that the aforementioned problems that arise from the traditional translation and interpretation vanish,³⁵ allowing 4:14a to fit much better into the overall context of the present scene and book as a whole.³⁶

If 4:14a is taken traditionally, the scenario that faces the queen in 4:16 presupposes a choice with two options. Esther either can choose to go before the king herself and take her chances, or she can attempt to remove herself from the situation altogether and hope that liberation will indeed come from some other source. Yet if she prefers to put her faith in another deliverer, the chances for survival, oddly enough, look slim according to the second apodosis.³⁷ If Wiebe’s rendering is followed, however, the scenario that confronts Esther still presents a choice, although there is only one viable option in view. The interrogative apodosis limits possible deliverers to one, the queen herself. This is all part of Mordecai’s persuasive technique employed by the writer in the service of Jewish deliverance.

In light of the translation/interpretation discussion above, the queen’s dilemma in 4:16 comes into clearer view. Wiebe’s suggestions concerning 4:14a

slightly alter the portrait of Esther in her greatest narrative moment thus far, which is the instance when the queen assumed the leadership of the Jewish cause and resolved to place her people's survival over the decree of the king. Soon Esther will go into the king, doing that which is not according to the law, and risk (lay down?) her life for her kindred.

Despite an undeniable display of courage, the queen's resolve is likely underlined by an unoptimistic submission to her task. In her most famous words, "and when I perish, I perish," Esther has submitted to the likelihood that her life will not continue. Yet since she was the only hope for her people, perhaps her efforts would in some way to expose how heinous (that is, in Jewish eyes) the edict sealed by the king really was—so vile that, at the very least, he stood to lose his beloved queen if something was not done.

The keys to this interpretation lie in the adopted reading of 4:14a and the understanding of "and when" in Esther's famous phrase of brave submission cited above. Against the traditional rendering, the interpretation espoused here understands Mordecai's challenge in 4:14a to be singularly focused in that Esther stood as the only hope for the Jewish people at that time. His rhetorical interrogative, "Will relief and deliverance arise for the Jews from another place?" demands a negative response as expresses the desperate need for Esther's advocacy. Accordingly, the queen called on all the Jews of Shushan to fast for three days while she and her maidens did likewise (4:16a). The seriousness of the time is evidenced by these actions, for the survival of the Jewish people lay in the balance. Then, in a moment of high dramatic tension, Esther decided to relinquish her life for her people by break-

ing the civil law, an offense punishable by immediate death.

Thus, the well-known declaration of the queen was neither one of carelessness³⁸ nor one of unwavering confidence; instead, it was one of cognizant, and perhaps despairing, submission³⁹ to her probable death.⁴⁰ Indeed, she alone was in a position to undertake the challenge of the uninviting court of the king; there was no other potential deliverer waiting in the wings (*cf.* 4:14a). It was to this task that she ultimately submitted,⁴¹ likely with hope, but, at best, with uncertainty concerning even the chances of her own survival.⁴² In light of all this, it would be fair to suppose that the queen's apprehension so evident in 4:11 has not been *fully* reversed in 4:16.⁴³

Tact at the Second Banquet (7:1-8)

Ever since Esther had come to terms with her unique role in the fight for Jewish deliverance (4:16), and when she had successfully negotiated her first approach before the king (5:1-2), the queen's resolve seemed to strengthen and her skills as a shrewd negotiator were displayed. Once she was given a voice (5:4), Esther requested one banquet (5:6) at which she successfully asked for the presence of the king and Haman at a further one (5:8). Esther's rhetorical skill in these petitions was evident, and her plan was perfectly executed. It is evident that we are no longer dealing here with the young woman under the hovering care of Mordecai. Now, it is *Queen Esther* who was active, keen, and conscientiously determined in her efforts to save her people. NRSV Verse "John 3:16"

We come at this time to the crucial scene of the second banquet, which showcased the queen's craft *par excellence* (7:1-8). This

episode clearly displays a unity of composition, but for the purposes of presentation, it will be analyzed in two parts (verses 1-4 and 5-8). In the leading section, the observant reader will notice the queen's cunning tact and rhetorical gifts,⁴⁴ while in the latter division the fruits of Esther's labor are harvested as she puts the finishing touches on Haman's demise.

In verses 1-2 the king and Haman sat down to drink with the queen at her second banquet (6:14-7:2). At this point the king reiterated his longing to know Esther's wish (request) and her desire. Apparently the timing was now right for the Jewess to put her plan into action as she exclaimed, "Let my life be given to me as my wish and my people as my desire" (7:3b). The king's curiosity would certainly have been heightened at these words. But Esther did not stop there. In the words that follow, the queen tactfully constructed a brilliant line of reasoning that carried with it the Jews' greatest hope for survival. Everything hung upon Esther's persuasive techniques at this moment.

Likely playing upon her knowledge of the offered blood money to be given in exchange for the annihilation of the Jews (3:9), Esther explained to the king that she and her people had been "sold...to be exterminated, killed and destroyed."⁴⁵ Because of this impending doom, the present "leader" of the Jewish people resolved to act and inform the king. Yet while the reader might suppose that this information would be enough to compel the king to react and do something to save his beloved queen and her people, Esther preempted any reaction of the king with further inducement: "If we had been sold for male and female slaves I would have kept silent, for the calamity is not comparable with the annoyance to the king."⁴⁶

With this, the queen had successfully, and conscientiously, whet the king's appetite to know who has caused all of this trouble.⁴⁷ The answer was close at hand.

Her plan unfolded quickly in the heightened suspense of verses 5-8. Because of Esther's skill in the presentation of the Jews' dilemma, the agitated king even had trouble formulating a coherent question as he now sought to know who was responsible for the threat against his wife's people.⁴⁸ His desire came across clearly enough, however, and the queen was quick and ready to oblige him by calling out, "A man, an enemy and a foe—this evil Haman!" (7:6a).⁴⁹

This disturbing news affected the two men in the room in quite different ways. The king was clearly enraged, but found himself at a loss for words, so he stormed from the banquet into the garden to ponder what actions he might take (7:7).⁵⁰ Haman's reaction to Esther's pronouncement displayed itself in a sense of terror,⁵¹ and he remained in the presence of the queen when the king departed to the garden so that he could plead for his life. The second in command sensed that the king's anger was directed towards him, and it was only a matter of time before his majesty would return and execute his judgment (7:7).⁵²

Upon his return, it is not known whether or not the fate of Haman had been decided. But if he had not made up his mind as he strode in the garden, the posture of his vizier greatly assisted his decision-making process. By his *appearance* Haman had signed his own death warrant. What exactly he was doing as he fell upon the queen's couch is unknown, and for all narrative purposes it does not matter. Although Esther is the central character of this episode and was active throughout it, the narrative is silent con-

cerning what part she played in the present scene other than to mention, in passing, that she was upon her couch (7:8). It is likely, however, that between the quick judgment of the returning king and the self-destructive appearances (or actions) of his vizier, no further persuasive work was needed.

The Vengeful Queen (9:13)

Although most scholarly attention has focused upon the behavior of an anonymous group of Jews in the book of Esther, there is sufficient reason to take a brief look at the queen herself concerning this subject. At best, Esther's ethical complexion is questionable in her dealings with her enemies. But can she fairly be called "a sophisticated Jael"?⁵³

Ever since 8:9, Mordecai has returned as the lead actor of the two Jewish heroes in the book. He is the one who wrote the counter decree (8:9-10). Mordecai alone went out from the house of the king in royal attire to the delight of the citadel of Shushan (8:15). It was he who was great in the house of the king, the figure whom many people feared (9:3), the one whose fame spread throughout the land as he grew more and more powerful (9:4), and the Jew who will occupy the stage solely at the end of the story (10:2-3). Yet, however small it is, Esther is not entirely without a voice in the narrative's latter portions.

On 13th Adar, after the Jews had completed their first day of battle with their enemies, the word concerning the casualties in Shushan came to the king (9:11). After receiving this information, the king returned to his queen and related that five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman had died that day. He then inquired of her what the Jews had done in the rest of the provinces, and formulaically restated that

whatever wishes and requests she had would be done (9:12). Instead of answering the king's question concerning the activities of the Jews in the wider kingdom, Esther skipped right to her requests as she spoke these words: "If unto the king it is pleasing, let it be granted also tomorrow to the Jews who [are] in Shushan to do according to the law (decree) of today—and the ten sons of Haman, let them hang upon the tree" (9:13).

One should notice in this particular text that the queen carefully kept all her petitions within the realm of the law. Her first request was that the king would approve the decree of 13th Adar for the Susian Jews the next day. The reason for this particular request for a punishing massacre is unknown, and hence, puzzling. Could it have been that the enemies of the Jews were still a threat in Susa? According to the edict that only gave them a mandate to attack on 13th Adar, they should not have been. In light of this probability, the suspicion concerning Esther's motives is heightened a bit. Further, it seems clear that the victory of the Jews on 13th Adar was nothing short of comprehensive.⁵⁴ In a comment that goes beyond suspicion to conclusion, Paton calls the queen's request "horrible" and sees only a "malignant spirit of revenge" present in it.⁵⁵ But is the picture different if the queen's petition at this point is "punitive and precautionary" so as to eliminate further threat as Fox has suggested?⁵⁶ Is Esther's request then excusable, necessary, or even laudatory? To be sure, the text does not entertain explicitly any of our questions (if they are even relevant at all). It only reports the ensuing results of the altercations on 14th Adar (9:15).

Esther's second request was for the public humiliation of the sons of Haman who had already been killed in 9:10. Fol-

lowing the majority of commentators, this petition was not a repeated call for Haman's sons' death, so it constitutes evidence for other source material.⁵⁷ This practice, likely for the purposes of public disgrace, is attested both in biblical and non-biblical sources.⁵⁸ But unlike the similar "hanging" cases of the king of Ai and the five kings of the Amorites (Jos 8:29, 10:26), God is neither (explicitly) commanding nor directing this battle.

It would be difficult to comment conclusively upon Esther's attitude toward the Jews' enemies. Yet it is clear that the text depicts Esther as the impetus behind the call for more bloodshed on 14th Adar.⁵⁹ In the words of Fox, "Esther seems vindictive" at this point in light of the fact that "the Jews are in no present danger...they have massacred their enemies....Even if Esther's request is for a precautionary massacre, it is, literally, overkill."⁶⁰ However, in Fox's view, the underlying seriousness of Esther's actions is lessened somewhat by literary-cultic explanations concerning the celebration days of Purim.⁶¹ Yet the gravity of the narrative's words might not be so easily undercut or explained away.⁶² It might well be appropriate that the moral concern of Esther's petition in 9:13 overrides, or at least rivals in seriousness, the establishment or explanation of the festival schedule.⁶³ Thus, to suggest that Esther resembles "a sophisticated Jael" might not be so forced after all.⁶⁴ At the very least, she is "determined and inflexible."⁶⁵

Mordecai

Loyalty to the King (2:21-23)

Aside from his introduction in 2:5-7 and a further descriptive mention (2:10-11), the first appearance of Mordecai shows him exhibiting the traits of an ex-

emplary official and subject of the king (2:21-23).⁶⁶ For present purposes, knowledge of the exact nature of his official role within the court of the king is not vital.⁶⁷ Instead, this analysis will center on Mordecai's upstanding and conscientious "legal" actions in the service of the king. It is here that we observe the initial Jewish interaction with the whimsically un-systematic, and curiously unalterable, Persian law. As has previously been observed in the actions of Esther's neglect of the decree of the king that forbade an unbidden entrance into his presence (4:16-5:1), the attitude of the Jews concerning the civil law was not entirely consistent. Whereas Persian legal inconsistencies likely stemmed from a sense of personal interest and insecurity, Jewish behavior regarding (or disregarding) the Persian law presumably was governed by a sense of *national* interest and security.

The episode is introduced by the temporally vague phrase "in those days," giving the reader the impression that the exact time and circumstances surrounding the event were not of first importance. Of primary interest, however, was the dedicated response of Mordecai to the assassination plot that became known to him while he occupied his place in the gate of the king. The machination of the eunuchs, Bigthan and Teresh, who guarded the threshold of the king, prompted Mordecai to perform his public duty and report the conspirators to a higher authority. For lack of a better phrase, this action could be likened to a citizen's arrest.⁶⁸ In this case, Mordecai reported the evil scheme to his cousin, who also happened to be the queen. Esther subsequently informed the king of the eunuchs' plot "in the name of Mordecai" (2:22). Then, in what appeared to be a quick (and possibly impromptu) inquisition,

Bigthan and Teresh were sentenced to death. Finally, and for future reference, these events were recorded in the court annals in the presence of the king (2:23).

In this instance, Mordecai's actions are publicly commendable *in theory* even if they did not result in any immediate public distinction.⁶⁹ He conducted himself in a manner that was both for the good of the kingdom, as he proceeded through the appropriate and necessary judicial channels, and eventually positive for his own person. Thus, the king's court was stabilized and the standing of the Jews in the kingdom was not at all hindered. In the wider narrative scope (see 6:1-11), the Jewish cause was greatly aided by the loyal, "citizenry" behavior of Mordecai and his joint policing operation with Esther.⁷⁰ At this point in the story, Mordecai's loyalty to the king was unquestionable, but, as yet, unchallenged.

Refusal to Bow before Haman (3:1-4)

Mordecai's inner struggles are left unstated. Even the narrative descriptions of him fall short of a total portrait of the man who stands alongside the king in greatness at the close of the narrative (*cf.* 10:1-3). But was the picture of Mordecai offered in the previous section an adequate or final one? Should Mordecai be seen as a behavioral model? Consider the words of M. V. Fox: "[M]ordecai is an ideal figure, a repository of virtues, a shining example of how a Jew of the diaspora should behave."⁷¹ But 3:1-4 puts this lofty description to the test. Mordecai's stance in this episode possibly calls into question the depth of his virtue. At the very least, an understanding of the motivations of Mordecai's *inaction* is desired.

The initial words of 3:1, "After these things," do not tightly follow the ending

of chapter two (2:21-23). This perplexing beginning leaves us to ponder the future of Mordecai in the court of the king after he has prevented the assassination plot of the two door guards. One would expect to read on and find Mordecai being promoted within the royal government at this time. Instead, what we observe is the inexplicable elevation of Haman, son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, to a high position in the kingdom. What is clear, however, is that this literary scenario nicely sets up the next episode in the story and moves the plot of the narrative forward quickly.

Regardless of the issue of an unexplainable time sequence,⁷² the more pressing (and more perplexing) issue of Haman's elevation in the Persian court persists. The reason for this distinction is certainly left unspecified in the text. But the story does not pause at this point. Verse two moves directly to the fact that everyone was "bowing down and doing obeisance" to the new vizier at the command of the king—that is, all except Mordecai.⁷³ This unyielding disobedience⁷⁴ and inaction presents a problem in the narrative, a *huge* problem considering that the whole Jewish race was condemned to death on account of Mordecai's refusal to bow and do obeisance to his court superior (*cf.* 3:6-13). Interestingly enough, the king's servants have anticipated our next question as they asked the unyielding Mordecai: "Why [are] you violating the command of the king?" (3:3b). Even though the servants were long-suffering,⁷⁵ the text reports that the reluctance of Mordecai was brought to Haman's attention (3:4). The narrative adds that they did this in order to see if Mordecai's reason for not bowing would exempt him, "for he told them that he [was] a Jew" (3:4b). Yet even though the reason for refusal has been

given, it is somewhat cryptic, and the matter is in no way resolved.

Having given this terse rationale behind Mordecai's unwillingness to do obeisance to Haman, it appears that the writer felt no further need to explain or excuse the Jew.⁷⁶ Literarily, the unknown motivations of Mordecai are not of prime importance since the stage of the conflict has been set and the provocation of Haman has been achieved.⁷⁷ Yet, the curious interpreter throughout the years has not been able to leave the matter so easily.⁷⁸ For without a better, more contextual, attempt at an explanation, Paton's accusation that Mordecai exhibited an "inexplicable" and "unreasonable" arrogance before Haman is as accurate as any other.⁷⁹ Upon closer inspection of the text, a plausible explanation emerges.⁸⁰

It is likely that Mordecai's non-compliance stems from the long-standing ethnic animosity between the Israelites and the Amalekites.⁸¹ The genealogical lines provided for Mordecai (2:5) and Haman (3:1) undoubtedly link them to the warring kings of 1 Samuel 15.⁸² It is these patronymics that would have tipped off alert readers of the Hebrew text. For the keen and circumspect reader, it might possibly be suggested that Mordecai's explanation provided ample, if not painfully overabundant, rationalization of his refusal to bow to his ancestral and tribal archenemy, Haman the Agagite.

A better understanding of Mordecai's reasoning for his resistance in following the king's decree could complicate the moral question in this case. If, as some have suggested, the Jew's inaction here is due to personal arrogance, then we are faced with a moral problem of personal selfishness, which would cast a shadow over the "shining example" of behavior

that Fox claims for his "ideal figure" and "repository of virtues." Yet if, as others have posited, Mordecai's inaction stems from a commitment to Jewish solidarity and a conviction to place his community's interests over above any loyalties he has to the civil government, then the question of the disobedience is not so cut and dried.⁸³ Though perhaps tactless,⁸⁴ Mordecai displayed a weighed allegiance, and it is evident that similar persuasions can be seen in the resolve and actions of Esther in 4:16-5:1. To be sure, the assimilation of these Jews into the foreign culture and court was accompanied by certain reservations.

Refusal to Transgress Court Regulations (4:2)

The selective nature of Mordecai's civil obedience evidences itself once again after Haman's genocidal edict is published (3:12-15). Upon Mordecai's refusal to bow down and do obeisance to him, Haman approached the king with a diplomatic proposition in order to rid the kingdom of an unassimilated⁸⁵ and unlawful people (3:8). The king complicitously acquiesced to this plan (3:10-11). The result of this endorsement was confusion in the city of Shushan (3:15), and utter despair, bitter crying, and mourning in sackcloth and ashes by Mordecai and the Jews (4:1-3). Nevertheless, in the midst of this crisis, it is interesting that Mordecai carefully upheld the civil law in every respect.

In 4:2 Mordecai "went as far as the face of the gate of the king, for no one [was] to go into the gate of the king in clothes of sackcloth." Whether the troubled Jew was attempting to gain Esther's attention by his actions,⁸⁶ or whether he was merely bitterly protesting his people's plight in the public presence of the king⁸⁷ (or both), is not known. It cannot even be said with any historical certainty that Persian law

prohibited persons from going into the king's gate in sackcloth.⁸⁸ Yet it appears, judging by Mordecai's restraint, that he was quite conscientious about observing proper public conduct at this juncture. On either side of his famous and controversial episode of civil disobedience, Mordecai showed the colors of an ideal and law-abiding subject. Throughout the narrative he seemed to be circumspect in his legal standing, and could be characterised as a "wise man in action" in this respect.⁸⁹

A Joint or Unilateral Counter Edict? (8:8-10)

The events that follow Esther's tactful second banqueting episode (7:1-8) mark only success for the Jews. Yet aside from the queen's questionable moment of planned vengeance (9:13) and the confirming "second letter of Purim" (9:29-32),⁹⁰ Mordecai figures almost exclusively as the leading Jew in the last portions of the narrative.⁹¹ Strangely, Esther all but disappears in the waning segments of the story as Mordecai's (royal?) status both in the king's court and in the Jewish community is described in varying degrees of greatness (8:15, 9:4, 10:2-3). This prominence climaxes in the description of the counter decree to Haman's genocidal edict, where Mordecai is the sole authority (8:8-12). The unilateral nature of the counter edict raises some textual and interpretive questions.

In speaking to both Esther the queen and Mordecai the Jew in 8:8, the king specifically declared, "You (pl.) yourselves write to the Jews as is good in your (pl.) eyes." It is expressly implied⁹² that what *they* decided and wrote, sealed in the king's name, would act as if it were a royal decree.⁹³ To be clear, however, it is unlikely that both Esther and Mordecai

would actually dictate the counter edict by taking turns speaking; one or the other would likely instruct the scribes. Nevertheless, this singular voice should have been communicating the corroborative thoughts and plans of the Jewish leaders together. As can be seen in the subsequent narrative, this task of formulating clearly falls to Mordecai.⁹⁴ However, it also appears that he is acting as the *sole* authority behind the edict, for the queen's role in the supposed joint effort is not explicit, and doubtfully implied.

To illustrate this point, a few examples from the progression of the narrative from 8:9-10 will be highlighted. A relevant portion of the text of 8:9 reads that all that *Mordecai* commanded the scribes was written to the entire kingdom. Then, 8:10 proceeds to inform the reader that "*he* wrote in the name of King Ahashverosh and *he* sealed [it] with the signet ring of the king and *he* sent letters in the hand of the couriers...." The point being made here is not that the text should have been written so as to exhibit a joint effort in authority and composition in the counter edict. Rather, these cases are cited only to point out the *apparent* singular influence of Mordecai in this process.⁹⁵ If anything, one would have expected the person in higher authority to have taken the lead in the matter if the king's directives for a joint effort were not followed.⁹⁶ Yet, Mordecai dominates the narrative action from 8:9 on and emerges as the (unilateral) authority figure for the Jewish community. Thus, the responsibility for the actions that proceed from the counter edict fall upon his shoulders; that is, *if* any moral blame can be measured out to the Jews because of their actions on 13th Adar the narrative would seem to hold Mordecai *alone* accountable among the Jewish leaders.

The Wording of the Counter Edict (8:11)

Recently, the wording of Mordecai's counter decree has been the subject of much suspicion concerning "acceptable" moral conduct in the book of Esther. Specifically, questions have arisen because of the traditional translation's inclusion of children and women in the number of those whom the Jews had authorization to "exterminate," "kill," and "destroy" as they stood for their lives on 13th Adar. This, to be sure, is a modern "problem,"⁹⁷ and contemporary interpreters vary in their handling of Mordecai's directives. According to R. Gordis, the moral uncertainties fade away if the verse is translated and understood in a different manner. Such a proposition warrants investigation. Thus, first Gordis' translation of 8:11, then Levenson's more traditional rendering of the verse are presented below. Then I will give a brief analysis of this important verse and offer some thoughts on what is at stake in its interpretation. The relevant portions of Mordecai's counter decree translated by Gordis and Levenson follow:

...the king permitted the Jews in every city to gather and defend themselves, to destroy, kill, and wipe out every armed force of a people or a province attacking "them, their children and their wives, with their goods as booty."⁹⁸

...the king was granting the Jews in every city the right to assemble and to fight for their lives—to destroy, slay, and annihilate the armed forces of any people or province that might attack them, women and children as well, and to take their property as plunder.⁹⁹

That the counter edict of Mordecai in 8:11 is modelled upon the initial writing of Haman in 3:13 is not really disputed

by scholars. Instead, explanatory variances have arisen concerning the understanding of the syntax of the former when compared with the latter. Gordis claims that a "radical difference" exists between the two passages—a difference that in the end will clear the Jews of any hint of impropriety on 13th Adar.¹⁰⁰ In his reading, Gordis understands the final five words of the verse—"them, children and women, and their goods to plunder"—to be a citation from the relevant portions of Haman's edict.

Further, he interprets "children and women" as direct objects, though they are not normally considered direct objects. Therefore, he proposes that the edict describes behavior expected of the Jews' *enemies* and not a like permission given to the Jews themselves.¹⁰¹ His interpretation envisions the Jews repelling an enemy force that would have killed Jewish women and children. He does not think it describes Jews exacting revenge on women and children. He believes this approach also better fits the Jews' later decision not to plunder their enemies (see 9:10, 15). In Gordis' rendering, Mordecai's letter never gave permission to plunder.

Although he thinks Gordis' work a "valiant effort to eliminate the moral difficulty" in the narrative, Fox claims that "this rendering does not (regrettably) accord with the Hebrew."¹⁰² In his opinion, for "children and women" to be the direct objects of "couriers" the repetition of third plural pronominal suffixes would have to be present.¹⁰³ To further this point, Bush adds that the direct object indicator would also be required.¹⁰⁴

Yet even if Gordis' reasoning were correct, it is not at all clear from the narrative context that Mordecai *requires* to be morally exonerated for the wording of his

counter edict. We must recognize that the rhetoric of battle in the ancient world is included in the letters of 3:13 and 8:11. This is not necessarily to condone the intents found therein, but at least to contextualize them.¹⁰⁵ Interestingly, Mordecai's words in 8:11 are reminiscent of the rules of "holy war" that governed Israel's conquests in the time of Joshua, the Judges, and the early part of the monarchy.¹⁰⁶ Still, we must note that differences exist between what Mordecai exhorted and what was authorized in the internal rules of "holy war" that serve to differentiate them from one another; this is not a comparison of like and like. In other words, what the Jews were licensed to do on 13th Adar cannot simply be equated to the "holy war" commission of the Israelites in former years. It is also vital to notice that the author expressed no moral anxiety concerning either the sanctioning of the battle in 8:11 or in its carrying out in chapter nine. Even among the citizens of Susa there was no "confusion" at these words (*cf.* 3:15). Thus, a facile assessment of Mordecai's moral responsibility in this instance is difficult to make, if it can be fairly made at all. In its own context, however, the wording of the counter edict does not appear to be morally reprehensible.

Concluding Summary

For all my probing, I have hardly unravelled all of the moral ambiguity that entwines the Hebrew Esther story, and it is not apparent that it is possible to do so. Thus, I shall offer a few forward-looking summary statements concerning the material. As I have submitted, a moral appraisal of Vashti from the text is not easily achieved. The ambiguity surrounding her choice not to come when the king called places limits on what can be said, for the

extent of the gaps in the initial queen's portrayal cloud this matter. A similar, though slightly clearer, circumstance affects the interpretation of the moral character of the leaders of the Jews, Esther and Mordecai. Their (in)action and decisions not only inform an assessment of their own moral character, but they also affect the way those whom they lead behave and are subsequently viewed. Thus, any comments about them should be weighed quite carefully.

Concerning Esther, quick and condemning conclusions with regard to her concealment, (inappropriate?) active compoment, hesitant loyalty, cunning, and suspect wishes are ill-advised. Instead, it is necessary to consider the context very carefully and not merely judge her against an abstract and/or contemporary ethical criterion.¹⁰⁷ However, neither should one *necessarily* suppose that just because she was a woman living within a male-dominated age she was therefore justified to operate by a special standard.¹⁰⁸ In the end, Queen Esther might well be faulted for some aspects of her behavior, even though the matters are far from simply decided.

The same could be said with respect to the character of Mordecai. Though his potential moral blemishes are fewer, an honest assessment of his motives and actions, even within their broader contexts, is complex. To be sure, the circumstances in which the Jewish leaders are acting are far from ideal or static, and the resultant moral ambiguity prevents a facile character assessment or "any simplistic construal of the 'shalom' at the end as a reward."¹⁰⁹ All of Esther, especially the texts that concern the Jewish people, is in the context of dual loyalties in a diaspora existence.¹¹⁰ The reality and consequent lifestyle of community displacement must certainly

come into play in any assessment of how individuals and people groups “live” in foreign lands.¹¹¹ Needless to say, the question of how the broader implications of this “diaspora living” effect a sound reading of Esther necessitates further thought and study.

ENDNOTES

¹ M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985) 191-92.

² It should be pointed out that the present study attempts to concentrate *solely* upon the Hebrew account of the book of Esther as it is found in the fourth, revised edition of *BHS*. Its material is selected from a broader chapter that focuses on the moral character of the MT in my ongoing PhD work at New College, University of Edinburgh. This emphasis, however, is not to imply that other versions of the story are not worthy of critical analysis; to the contrary, the Greek narratives (LXX and AT) play an important and interesting part in Esther studies, as they do in my broader thesis.

³ E. J. Bickerman conjectures some interesting explanations, all of which are unverifiable. See his *Four Strange Books of the Bible: Jonah, Daniel, Koheleth, Esther* (New York: Schocken, 1967) 185-186.

⁴ J. D. Levenson, *Esther*, Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press, 1997) 47.

⁵ L. B. Paton, *The Book of Esther*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1908) 149-150.

⁶ M. V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1991) 165-166.

⁷ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 167.

⁸ In rabbinic literature, Vashti was disparaged, which could have been in order to distinguish her from Esther, the true

heroine of the book (see L. L. Bronner, “Esther Revisited: An Aggadic Approach,” in A. Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, Feminist Commentary on the Bible 7 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995] 188; and K. P. Darr, *Far More Precious than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991] 169). This viewpoint continues into the medieval period. See B. D. Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1993) 195-196. Yet in more contemporary thought the deposed queen’s image has been resurrected. She has even been deemed “a moral exemplar of the highest order” (J. M. Cohen, “Vashti—An Unsung Heroine,” *Jewish Biblical Quarterly* 24 [1996] 106).

⁹ J. G. Baldwin, *Esther*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1984) 60.

¹⁰ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 169.

¹¹ *Contra* the notion of B. Wyler who believes that the concealment theme’s main purpose is to indicate that Esther was subordinate both when she was under Mordecai’s care *and* after she became queen. See “Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen,” in A. Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, FCB 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 114.

¹² *Contra* Paton, who claims that Esther knew that she would be the subject of ill treatment if she disclosed her race. Paton’s beliefs stem from his general notion of anti-Semitism that follows the Jews wherever they have lived because of “their pride and exclusive habits” (*The Book of Esther*, 175). For a similarly pessimistic reading of the Jews’ stand-

ing in foreign contexts, see P. Cassell, *An Explanatory Commentary on Esther*, trans. A. Bernstein (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1888) 63-66. M. V. Fox, in a more nuanced reading, also holds that fear of anti-Semitic treatment lay behind the events of Esther's concealment. Yet Fox's view does not envision ubiquitous anti-Semitic hostility as Paton's does; instead, he posits that the danger faced is "a manifestation of an ever-present—but not universal—hostility, for which one must always be prepared" (*Character and Ideology*, 32). For Fox, a kingdom-wide anti-Semitism is not consonant with the text; instead, the ambiguously identified group, "enemies of the Jews," are the constant threat (33). While Fox's suggestion is plausible concerning the text as a whole, it is still unclear that Esther would have been aware of this unpredictable threat. Even if Mordecai was so aware, he might not have informed Esther. The simple silence of the text gives the reader no guidance here.

¹³M. V. Fox, *The Redaction of the Books of Esther: On Reading Composite Texts*, Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 40 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991) 113.

¹⁴Levenson, *Esther*, 61.

¹⁵The opinion that Esther displayed any activity whatsoever in this scene argues against Fox, who pictures Esther as *exclusively* passive, even docile, at this point in the narrative (*Character and Ideology*, 37; 197-198). Interestingly, Fox believes that "[A]lmost every word stresses Esther's passivity in all this" (37). L. Day also characterizes Esther as

"more passive in attaining her favored status," yet she does acknowledge that Esther "actively attains the favor" of Hegai. Concerning her time with the king, however, Day only comments on the "emotional response" of the king "over which she [Esther] would not have had much control" that decides the recipient of the queenly crown (*Three Faces of a Queen*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 186 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995] 45).

¹⁶Moore suggests this form of "perplexed" (*Esther*, 48). However, Moore's decision tends to soften the excruciating emotional content of the queen's reaction. G. Gerleman points to the Akkadian and Ugaritic parallels and argues for a stronger expression here, one likened to "*das schmerzliche Stöhnen und Schreien der gebärenden Frau*" ("the painful groaning and crying out of a woman giving birth") (*Esther*, Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament 21 [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982] 105). In a similar vein, Bush refers to Job 15:20 and Jeremiah 23:19 which connote an active physical reaction "occasioned by the shock of calamity or pain." In this verse, however, the meaning is figurative sense of the verb is preferred—"to be deeply distressed" (*Ruth, Esther*, 390).

¹⁷In 4:4, the text reads that when the eunuchs came and related what Mordecai was doing, "the queen was deeply distressed" (following F. W. Bush's suggestion [*Ruth, Esther*, 390]). It is not until the next

verse that Esther actually sends Hatach to inquire as to the reason why Mordecai has assumed such a position.

¹⁸Note Levenson's overall picture of Esther's transformation from a "self-styled Persian to a reconnected Jew" in chapter four (*Esther*, 80).

¹⁹Fox agrees. He calls Esther's motives "self-centered, although she has been informed of the massive danger facing the people." *Contra* Gerleman, who holds that Esther's hesitancy should be likened to the stalling actions of Moses in taking on God's task in Exodus 3:11, 4:10, 13, and 6:12 and 30 (*Esther*, 105-106), Fox believes that the queen's behavior in this case attests to her concern for her own personal well-being (*Character and Ideology*, 61-62). D. J. A. Clines might be correct not to attribute Esther's hesitancy to cowardice in this case, but it is most likely that some less-than-heroic personality trait is driving the character of Esther at this particular point. See *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 301.

²⁰J. M. Wiebe, "Esther 4.14: 'Will Relief and Deliverance Arise for the Jews from Another Place?'" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 53 (1991) 410.

²¹This reading follows Wiebe's translation, 410.

²²Wiebe, "Esther 4.14," 410.

²³Wiebe, "Esther 4.14," 410-412.

²⁴R. Gordis, "Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther—A New Solution to an Ancient Crux," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981) 360 n. 6.

- ²⁵P. R. Ackroyd, "Two Hebrew Notes," *Annual of the Swedish Theological Institute* 5 (1967) 82. Ackroyd's conclusions are followed by Fox who supposes "another human as a source of deliverance" (*Character and Ideology*, 63).
- ²⁶For the first two suggestions, see Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 302; and *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, JSOTSup 30 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984) 42-43.
- ²⁷For this proposal, note the works of Paton (*Esther*, 223); Moore (*Esther*, 50); and other sources listed by Wiebe ("Esther 4.14," 412 n. 14).
- ²⁸Wiebe, "Esther 4.14," 412.
- ²⁹Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 302; and *The Esther Scroll*, 35-36. See Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 62; and Wiebe, "Esther 4.14," 412 n. 15 for other like sources.
- ³⁰Concerning this position, Wiebe ("Esther 4.14," 412 n. 16) cites L. H. Brockington, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, Century Bible (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1969) 235; Moore, *Esther*, 53; and S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 44 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979) 76, 90 n. 71.
- ³¹Wiebe, "Esther 4.14," 413 (*italics his*).
- ³²On positive rhetorical questions that make negative statements, see G. R. Driver, "Affirmation by Exclamatory Negation," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 5 (1973) 107-113; and esp. R. T. Hyman, "Questions and the Book of Ruth," *Hebrew Studies* 24 (1983) 17-25.
- ³³Wiebe, "Esther 4.14," 413 (*italics his*).
- ³⁴*Contra* J. G. McConville who states that "the Jews will be saved whether or not she meets the call of the moment" (*Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther*, Daily Study Bible [Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1985] 171.)
- ³⁵Wiebe, "Esther 4.14," 413.
- ³⁶Wiebe, "Esther 4.14," 415.
- ³⁷Notice also the words of Mordecai in 4:13: "Do not imagine, of all the Jews, to escape the house of the king with your life."
- ³⁸Levenson is not sure whether Esther has merely resigned to death at this point or willingly accepted her role as the hope of the Jews. What he does admit, however, is that there is a sense of reluctance as he compares Esther's plight to that of Jacob in Genesis 43:14 (*Esther*, 82). More boldly, Clines posits a "courageous determination" involved in both the Esther and Jacob instances (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 303).
- ³⁹Ringgren thinks Esther was aware of the danger that lay before her (*cf.* 4:11, 13-14), and she likely possessed "*eine verzweifelte Entschlossenheit*" ("a despairing determination") in the face of it (H. Ringgren, *Das Buch Esther*, 3rd ed., Das Alte Testament Deutsch 16/2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981) 407; see also Bardtke, *Das Buch Esther*, 335. With this in mind, my view of Esther's submission is in contrast with the sense of "passive resignation" that Day supposes (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 57). Instead, it comes closer to the idea of "self-sacrifice" offered by C. V. Dorothy (*The Books of Esther: Structure, Genre and Textual Integrity*, JSOTSup 187 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997] 245), and W. Dommershausen's notion of Esther's "*Opfers des Gehorsams und der Liebe*" ("sacrifice of obedience and love") (*Ester*, 3rd ed. [Stuttgart: Echter Verlag, 1995] 26; also, *Die Estherrolle*, 74).
- ⁴⁰This understanding is supported by the reading in *BDB*, 455.
- ⁴¹This is submission not necessarily to the wishes of Mordecai, but to the task that lay before her. In light of this, it can be said that Esther displays a measure of initiative independent of Mordecai and is not solely acting out of fear or respect for her father-figure. Esther is a genuine heroine in her own right, even morphologically despite the opinion of E. Fuchs, "Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative," *Mankind Quarterly* 23 (1982) 154.
- ⁴²Paton, Berg, and Day believe that Esther possessed little hope, if any, as she prepared to go into the king. Paton likens the queen's anticipation to one who is submitting to an operation "because there is a chance of escaping death in that way" (*The Book of Esther*, 226). Berg believes that the queen's decision is made "in spite of the utter helplessness of the situation and the presumed futility of her actions" (*The Book of Esther*, 120 n. 55). Day states, "[I]t appears here that Esther already accepts her death as a foregone conclusion to her decision to go in to the king. She appears even less hopeful of escaping death than Paton suggests" (*Three Faces of a Queen*, 58). These opinions are in contrast with those of Fox, who is not sure that Esther believes that death would accompany her refusal to go in to the king. Instead, Fox sees

the queen as one who is “coming to grips” with the danger of the situation; one who realizes that she might fail, but “expresses the hope—though not certainty—of success” (*Character and Ideology*, 64). In terms of the extent of Esther’s hope in the present situation, I agree with Fox.

⁴³Although a measure of narrative suspense has resulted from Esther’s delay in complying with Mordecai’s directives, I hope to have shown that her hesitation has not solely been the product of a literary move to heighten dramatic suspense. *Contra* A. Meinhold, “Die Gattung der Josephsgeschichte und des Estherbuches: Diasporanovelle, II,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 88 (1976) 82.

⁴⁴Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 18.

⁴⁵See Baldwin, *Esther*, 92.

⁴⁶While Esther’s statement is generally clear, the specific nature of the last clause is unclear, and thus, disputed. *Contra* Paton (*The Book of Esther*, 258) and Moore (*Esther*, 70).

⁴⁷Fox analyzes Esther’s rhetorical tactics (*Character and Ideology*, 85).

⁴⁸Literally, the king asked, “Who [is] he, this (one)? and where [is] this he who has filled his heart to do thus?” (7:5b). Here, “form and content unite with dramatic effect” as the king’s “highly charged feelings” of rage are expressed with staccato syllables. For a literary discussion of this (purposefully?) awkward syntax, consult Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 426; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 86; and Dommershausen, *Die Estherrolle*, 95.

⁴⁹Possibly for political or psychological reasons, Esther leaves aside the

culpability of the king in the edict condemning the Jews (*cf.* 3:10). See Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 92.

⁵⁰Bush notes a dramatic ellipsis here. The reader is not sure why the king bolts from the room, or to whom his rage is directed. The latter question is actually answered before the former one, for Haman’s actions reveal against whom the king is furious. Concerning the former question, Bush supposes that the king “was at a loss to know what to do” and needed some time to decide (*Ruth, Esther*, 423, 430). Clines is a bit more certain about the matter. He submits that the king stormed into the garden to decide between his publicly promoted vizier and his beautiful queen (*The Esther Scroll*, 15). The text leaves the reader to use her or his imagination.

⁵¹Moore supposes that instead of being afraid Haman “was dumbfounded” or “taken by surprise” by this proclamation. He bases his rendering on the use of *ba’at* in Daniel 8:17 and 1 Chronicles 21:30 (*Esther*, 71). If the fact that the queen was Jewish dumbfounded Haman, then Moore’s suggestion carries some weight. Yet, contextually, the translation “was terrified” fits better because of Haman’s ensuing fearful grovelling before the queen in the subsequent verse. In both cases the vizier knew exactly what the situation was, so he acted quickly out of fear (*cf.* *BDB*, 130; R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, Jr., and B. K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* 1:122; and Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 127). This reading is widely supported in commentaries.

⁵²Paton, *The Book of Esther*, 263.

⁵³Moore notes that this designation, which comes from Judges 4:17-22, has come from scholars because of Esther’s inaction in 7:9 to come to Haman’s aid when wrongly accused, and because of her requests in 9:13. He comments that this kind of conclusion takes Esther’s acts in isolation with disregard to “her inner motives” and “without full knowledge of the external circumstances” (*Esther*, 88).

⁵⁴*Contra* H. Gevaryahu, who submitted that Esther called the second day of battle in Shushan because “there was not a clear victory for either side.” See “Esther is a Story of Jewish Defense not a Story of Jewish Revenge,” trans. G. J. Gevaryahu, *JBQ* 21 (1993) 9.

⁵⁵Paton, *The Book of Esther*, 287.

⁵⁶Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 112. Clines comments that although Esther’s first request “lacks any narrative motivation,” it could have been in the service of promoting “Jewish supremacy at the heart of the Persian empire” (*The Esther Scroll*, 48; *cf.* *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 324).

⁵⁷For example, see Paton (*The Book of Esther*, 287); Fox (*Character and Ideology*, 112); Levenson (*Esther*, 122); and Baldwin (*Esther*, 106).

⁵⁸*Cf.* Joshua 8:29, 10:26 and 1 Samuel 31:10. On the practice of hanging/impalement in particular, see Herodotus, *The Histories*, rev. ed., trans. A. de Sélincourt (London: Penguin Books, 1996) 3:125 and 6:30.

⁵⁹*Contra* J. Magonet’s developed explanation that the paranoid king is the real power and impetus behind the call for more bloodshed.

See "The Liberal and the Lady: Esther Revisited," *Judaism* 29 (1980) 174.

⁶⁰Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 203.

⁶¹Ibid. To be fair in my use of Fox at this point, I must also include his views on chapter 9 (MT) as a whole. He is not sure that this vindictive picture of Esther is intended.

⁶²Fox continues, "Yet whatever the author's intentions, the effect of 9:13 is to introduce a note of harshness and even bellicosity into the picture" (Ibid). This is the uncomfortable textual reality that has prompted my comments in this section. *Contra* B. W. Jones, one does not have to be a literalist or act as if he/she were to raise serious questions concerning the moral actions in the book of Esther. Even if one regards the book as fiction and realizes the obvious comic intent underlying much of the narrative, that does not necessarily imply that all moral inquiry is abandoned. Humor can carry serious messages and implications ("Two Misconceptions About the Book of Esther," *CBQ* 39 [1977] 180-81). For comment on the relationship of the comic to irony and ethics, see S. Goldman, "Narrative and Ethical Ironies in Esther," *JSOT* 47 (1990) 30 n. 18.

⁶³Goldman's claim is that the "ironic exploration of Jewish-Gentile relationships" is foremost in the author's mind here and not "an explanation for a minor Jewish holiday." He also believes that Esther's request in 9:13 is "a literary device" operative in a "deliberately overdrawn revenge scene" which sets forth the Jews' "tragically ironic ex-

pansion of vengeance" ("Narrative and Ethical Ironies," 23).

⁶⁴Knowing what we can about Esther's character and the circumstances of the Hebrew story, it might be unfair *not* to admit that the queen's conduct in the book is less than wholly upright. Perhaps the character traits suggested in this section attest to an aspect of the Hebrew Esther's *true* moral complexion, one whose apprehension demands a reader's imagination and willingness to have an open and perceptive mind.

⁶⁵J. F. Craghan, "Esther, Judith, and Ruth: Paradigms for Human Liberation," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 12 (1982) 13.

⁶⁶B. W. Jones thinks Mordecai's loyalty progressed in line with one of the main purposes of the book—i.e., that Jews can and should work well within foreign environments ("The So-Called Appendix to the Book of Esther," *Semitics* 6 [1978] 38).

⁶⁷That Mordecai held some sort of official capacity by nature of his "sitting in (at) the gate of the king" is a common view. The precise character of that capacity is not fully known. For more detailed general and specific studies, consult O. Loretz, "*sr hmlk*—'Das Tor des Königs,'" *Die Welt des Orients* 4 (1967) 104-108; H. P. Rüger, "'Das Tor des Königs'—der königliche Hof," *Biblica* 50 (1969) 247-250; H. Wehr, "Das Tor des Königs in Buche Esther und verwandte Ausdrücke," *Der Islam* 39 (1964) 247-260; D. J. A. Clines, "In Quest of the Historical Mordecai," *Vetus Testamentum* 41 (1991) 129-136; and E. M. Yamauchi,

"Mordecai, the Persepolis Tablets, and the Susa Excavations," *VT* 42 (1992) 272-275.

⁶⁸Although the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship are not necessarily in view in this context, the legal action of a subject in the service of another (in this case, a sovereign) here supports the use of this anachronistic analogy.

⁶⁹It is puzzling that the king did not immediately reward Mordecai (see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 40, in his citation of Herodotus). But in the greater narrative framework, this delay makes more sense (*cf.* 6:1-11).

⁷⁰It is interesting to notice the relational solidarity between Mordecai and Esther as they seek to bring the conspirators to justice in 2:21-23 (*cf.* Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 105; and Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 187-189). This collaboration on behalf of the Jews is evident throughout the narrative, even if at certain points the action of one hero is emphasized over the other. In this vein, Fox comments on the possibility of the two Jews' cooperative efforts in the service of promoting the "importance" of Esther within the court (*Character and Ideology*, 40). In a narrative link, Levenson notices the foreshadowing that this partnership provides for their joint foiling of "an infinitely larger assassination plot—Haman's attempted genocide of the Jewish people" (*Esther*, 64).

⁷¹Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 185.

⁷²The common biblical idiom, "after these things," does not even have to have a temporal element. It can also "join loosely together different episodes in a story (e.g., Gen. 15.1)." See

S. P. Re'emi, "The Faithfulness of God: A Commentary on the Book of Esther," in *Israel Among the Nations: A Commentary on the Books of Nahum, Obadiah, Esther*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 121.

⁷³The text explicitly reveals Mordecai's refusal: "but Mordecai did not bow down and did not do obeisance."

⁷⁴E. L. Greenstein notices that the repetition of the negative particle in 3:2 highlights Mordecai's disobedience ("A Jewish Reading of Esther," in J. Neusner, B. A. Levine and E. S. Frerichs, eds., *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 233.

⁷⁵This patience is made evident in the editorial comment: "And it was in their saying to him daily—but he would not listen to them." *Contra* B. Goodnick, the king's servants do not appear to have become "resentful" of Mordecai and thus informed Haman ("The Book of Esther and its Motifs," *JBQ* 25 [1997] 102). Instead, their persistence suggests that they sought Mordecai's welfare and survival in the court.

⁷⁶See Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 43.

⁷⁷Paton, *The Book of Esther*, 197.

⁷⁸For a good summary of the main suggestions, see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 43-45.

⁷⁹Paton, *The Book of Esther*, 196-197, 213.

⁸⁰Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 14.

⁸¹*Cf.* Ge 36:12; Ex 17:8-16; Nu 24:7, Dt 25:17-19; 1 Sa 15. Note also the apparent conclusion of the Israel-Amalekite struggle in 1 Chronicles 4:42-43 in the days of Hezekiah. Fox

notes that the Amalekites as a nation appear to disappear at this point, yet the possibility of an Amalekite diaspora is not out of the question (*Character and Ideology*, 42). For support for the adherence to this position see Bardtke, *Das Buch Esther*, 316-317; Moore, *Esther*, 36; Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 67-68; Meinhold, *Das Buch Esther*, 42-43; Dommershausen, *Ester*, 20; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 294; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 385; and Levenson, *Esther*, 66-67.

⁸²*Cf.* A. LaCocque, "Haman in the Book of Esther," *Hebrew Annual Review* 11 (1987) 216.

⁸³See Berg's discussion of Esther's emphasis on loyalty to the Jewish community (*The Book of Esther*, 98-103).

⁸⁴D. J. A. Clines, "Reading Esther From Left to Right: Contemporary Strategies for Reading a Biblical Text," in Clines, S. E. Fowl, and S. E. Porter, eds., *The Bible in Three Dimensions*, JSOTSup 87 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990) 44.

⁸⁵See Fox (*Character and Ideology*, 279-280) followed by Bush (*Ruth, Esther*, 381) for the idea that the Pual of *parád* (here the active participle) carries the sense of "being isolated, unassimilated" religiously, culturally, etc. This reading fits Haman's argument in that there will be no reason to deny his request once the otherness of this one people is established and it is realized that they are not integral to the kingdom (*cf.* Moore, *Esther*, 39).

⁸⁶Paton offers this interpretation (*The Book of Esther*, 214), as does Ringgren (*Das Buch Esther*, 406).

⁸⁷See Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 299; and Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 394.

⁸⁸Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 299. Berg argues that 4:2 suggests that the prohibition is "a Persian, not Jewish, custom" (*The Book of Esther*, 75, 89 n. 66). There is little to support this practice save the possible references in Herodotus, *The Histories*, 8:99 and 9:24. Mordecai's acts of mourning appear to be in line with the conventional Jewish rites of mourning commonly seen in the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Ge 37:29; 2 Sa 13:19; 2 Ki 18:37; Job 2:8, 7:5; Da 9:3; *et. al.* That this kind of posture and appearance was not allowed in certain areas of the Persian court is not entirely surprising (*cf.* the dubious reference in Herodotus, *The Histories*, 3:117). But *contra* P. Cassel, the "historical originality" of Esther cannot be established by "this casual remark" (*An Explanatory Commentary on Esther*, 145).

⁸⁹See S. Talmon, "'Wisdom' in the Book of Esther," *VT* 13 (1963) 427. *Cf.* W. L. Humphreys, "The Motif of the Wise Courtier in the Old Testament," Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1970.

⁹⁰For a discussion of the syntactic and interpretive issues in these verses, see S. E. Loewenstamm, "Esther 9:29-32: The Genesis of a Late Addition," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 42 (1971); Bush's excursus, which surveys past interpretation and outlines the three main difficulties (*Ruth, Esther*, 469-471); the comprehensive and lucid treatment of Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 123-128; and most recently, Levenson, *Esther*, 125, 129-132.

⁹¹Clines supposes that Mordecai was "drawn into the king's reply" in 8:7 because he is the one who will draft

the counter decree (*Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 315).

⁹³Fox posits that “the *you* before the imperative is very emphatic, suggesting a contrast: *I* have done my part, now *you* go finish the job” (*Character and Ideology*, 95).

⁹³Cf. Baldwin, *Esther*, 96; Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 18, 67; Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 145; Gerleman, *Esther*, 128; and Dommershausen, *Die Estherrolle*, 102-103.

⁹⁴Baldwin states that Mordecai “took responsibility for drawing up the edict,” but does not comment on the implications of this (*Esther*, 96).

⁹⁵Believing there to be literary symmetry here, Fox holds that Mordecai composes and sends the counter edict in order to provide a balance for Haman’s composing and sending of his edict in 3:11-15. Although Esther had received joint authority here, it appears that she gave the reigns over to the new vizier so that he could countermand the old vizier’s edict (*Character and Ideology*, 99). This explanation appears plausible, but the official status of Mordecai as vizier is only implied at this point in the narrative. While 8:15 adds further implication as to Mordecai’s vizier role, it is really not until later that the reader can know that the king had “elevated” Mordecai (10:2) and that he was “second to King Ahashverosh” (10:3).

⁹⁶At this point in the story, Esther is the higher civil authority. In 8:15, however, Mordecai emerged from the court dressed in royal attire. It is obvious from this point on that Mordecai carries more weight in the

narrative, and possibly holds more civil authority within the empire (see 9:4, 10:2-3). Yet, in a literary move, the author might be returning to a more passive portrait of Esther like the one with which he began the narrative. These beginning and ending manifestations of passivity might form something of an inclusio around the active Esther of 4:16-8:6.

⁹⁷Levenson aptly relates that the killing of children and women is “offensive to any decent moral sensibility today” (*Esther*, 110). However, the ancient versions and Targums of the book fail to shy away from the fact that children and women were included in the scope of the Jews’ “battle jurisdiction” on 13th Adar. Indeed, only T2 adds any element to the gist of 8:11. It includes the enemies’ slaves in the group (Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther*, 185). This inclusion is likely to express the sense of total devastation that the Jews were to inflict on their enemies.

⁹⁸Gordis, “Studies in the Esther Narrative,” 51-52.

⁹⁹Levenson, *Esther*, 109.

¹⁰⁰Gordis, “Studies in the Esther Narrative,” 50.

¹⁰¹My understanding of Gordis’ position is aided by Bush’s work (*Ruth, Esther*, 447).

¹⁰²Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 99-100.

¹⁰³*Ibid.*, 284. Cf. Paton, *The Book of Esther*, 274.

¹⁰⁴Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 447.

¹⁰⁵To aid this endeavor, consult the appendix concerning Ancient Near Eastern international law found in J. Barton, *Amos’s Oracles against the Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge

Univ. Press, 1980) 51-61. Far from having in place the systemization of the Geneva Convention, it appears that at least we are able to discern to some extent what might have been “acceptable” and “unacceptable” in ANE warfare.

¹⁰⁶Cf. Dt 20:13-18 (cited in Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 100).

¹⁰⁷We cannot afford to make the same mistake as many of the rabbis did in their day. In so desiring Esther to be the ideal Jewish woman, they attributed to her the traits and motivations of pious orthodoxy and reinterpreted her behavior in an exemplary manner (cf. Darr, *Far More Precious than Jewels*, 187). Magonet submits that Esther is placed within the realms of power for a special time, and “to judge her behavior in abstract moral terms is to misunderstand the choices that she has to make” (“The Liberal and the Lady,” 174). Yet the more this contextual approach nears a criteria of relative ethics, the less satisfying it becomes.

¹⁰⁸*Contra* White’s supposition (“Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora,” 168); cf. Fuchs’ view (“Status and Role of Female Heroines,” 157).

¹⁰⁹Webb, “Reading Esther as Holy Scripture,” 34.

¹¹⁰Concerning how “dual loyalties” enter into the ethical picture of the Scroll, see Greenstein, “A Jewish Reading of Esther,” 234, 237.

¹¹¹See W. L. Humphreys, “A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel,” *JBL* 92 (1973) 211-223.