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LAUGHING MATTERS: A BAKHTINIAN READING OF ESTHER

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ABSTRACT

Most biblical scholars agree that irony and humor pervade the book of Esther, however, there is little consensus on the identification of its genre or how humor functions within it. Despite a variety of generic classifications ascribed to the book, most scholars agree that the book functions as instruction for diaspora Jews in how to survive and prosper in a dangerous foreign land by partial assimilation into the foreign culture and participation in its power structures. When the humor in Esther is viewed as satire, the target of critique is usually identified as the Persian authorities and imperial law. Kenneth Craig and André LaCocque have identified Esther as an example of what Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin calls carnivalesque literature. Using Bakhtin's theory, they both identify a binary opposition between official imperial culture, represented by Ahasuerus and Haman, and unofficial Jewish culture, represented by Esther and Mordecai. LaCocque reads Esther as an example of what Bakhtin calls the first stylistic line of novelistic literature. As a first line novel, Esther can only have a single language and single style that gives expression to official or centripetal forces that work toward centralization and ideological unification. According to LaCocque, the diasporanovelle of Esther provides a new worldview and identity for diaspora Jews. In contrast to previous scholars, this dissertation builds upon the work of Danna Nolan-Fewell, who emphasizes in her work the dialogic and heteroglossic nature of Esther. This thesis proposes that Esther belongs to what Bakhtin calls the second stylistic line of novelistic literature which incorporates heteroglossia (multiple social voices or

perspectives) and emerges out of decentralizing and centrifugal forces. The book of Esther is viewed as the unofficial (carnivalesque) response to Israel's official texts produced during the re-establishment of a post-exilic community in the Persian province of Yehud. For those social groups who experience oppression and hardship as a consequence of identity constructions in Israel's official literature, the production of carnivalesque literature is a means to deride, oppose, and undermine the serious and authoritative word that legitimates them. This dialogic approach resists any final word or resolution to the story and puts emphasis on the ethics of biblical interpretation.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The history of scholarship surrounding the book of Esther can be described as controversial and contentious. For centuries debate within both Jewish and Christian circles surrounded the question of whether or not the book of Esther should be included in the canon of scripture. Likely contributing to the debate is the fact that unlike the majority of canonical books, the Masoretic text (MT) of Esther has no mention of Israel's god, the temple cult, Sabbath observance, or prayer. Esther is the only book of the Hebrew Bible not found among the extant texts discovered at Qumran, is not cited in the New Testament, and is absent in many early Christian canonical lists.[1]

It is difficult to deny that the book of Esther does stand out as unique due to its apparent secular disposition. The abundance of exaggerations, incongruities, contradictions, and improbabilities incline most contemporary scholars to doubt the historicity of the story and to choose a literary approach to interpretation. The exaggerations, incongruities, and contradictions have led the majority of scholars to identify some degree of irony and/or comedy in the story. Many suggest that the author used intentional marks of irony and satire to mock and criticize a particular target. The target of Esther's satire is often identified as the Persian authorities and institutions, since Mordecai and Esther are typically considered to be representative Jews and models to be emulated. In spite of the diverse generic classifications ascribed to the book of Esther (historicized wisdom tale, historical novel, diaspora story, festival etiology, festival

[1] David J.A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story, JSOT Supplement Series, 30* (Sheffield: The University of Sheffield, 1984), 255.

lection, short story, farce, satire, burlesque, and carnivalesque), there has been little diversity relating to the book's supposed main purpose to construct Jewish communal identity in diaspora and to strengthen group solidarity among the Jews. The purpose of Esther is frequently understood as instruction for diaspora Jews in how to survive and prosper in an unpredictable and dangerous foreign land, if necessary by partial assimilation into the foreign culture and participation in its power structures. A few scholars who employ an intertextual approach to interpretation propose that allusions in Esther to Israel's national and cultural literary traditions are intentional marks of satire aimed at criticizing diaspora Jews who assimilate into the foreign culture and neglect the distinct practices of the Jews. In other words, the intertextual allusions in Esther to texts from the Second Temple period serve as marks of irony and satire functioning to critique and mock the diaspora Jews whose practices deviate from official literary traditions circulating in post-exilic Judea. The diaspora Jews who assimilate into the foreign culture ostensibly abuse imperial power and engage in licentious practices.[2]

Scholars who classify the book of Esther as comedy identify features understood as characteristic of comedy. These features may include literary devices such as stock characters, a comic-style plot line, and rhetorical strategies such as word-play, exaggeration, understatement, repetition, reversal, irony, and caricature. The various genres of comedy include parody, farce, and carnivalesque (among others). The main purpose of the book of Esther by those who classify it as comedy does not differ much from those who ascribe to it other generic classifications. Esther is still viewed primarily as a critique of Persian officials, laws, and institutions and as supportive of diaspora Jews who assimilate into foreign cultures as a means to survive. Although in comedy, the focus is often upon flat stock characters, Esther and Mordecai are still frequently characterized as representatives of the Jews who bring about their salvation and strengthen group

[2] Carolyn J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 74.

solidarity. The ethical issues surrounding the excessive killing by the Jews at the end of the story are presumably mitigated by the survival functions of the book and its comic nature or by the justified defense of the Jews who are threatened with genocide.

Timothy Beal's use of post-structuralist theories relating to gender, ethnicity, and social agency and his definition of farce lead him to a very different understanding of the purpose of Esther. He defines farce as "the aggregation of the many identity convergences, shifting alignments, ambivalences, and marginal locations in the story that leads, ultimately, to the profound disaggregations of other subjects and the order of relations of 'us' and 'them' upon which they rely."[3] Contrary to those who view the book of Esther as functioning to strengthen group identity among the Jews, Beal focuses upon the ambiguity of ethnic and gender identities throughout the book and how they can be used to undermine politics of anti-Judaism and misogyny.[4] Although Beal identifies intertextual allusions in Esther as satire ridiculing characters such as Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews and as exposing the ambiguous and unfixed nature of identity, he stops short of reading the book of Esther as a parodic critique of official social and political institutions or the identities constructed by Israel's authoritative or canonical texts.

Several scholars who view Esther as comedy classify the book as carnivalesque literature based upon the work of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Celina Spiegel identifies a carnival spirit in Esther, a vision of the world remade or turned upside down. She perceives the satire in Esther as directed primarily against the Persian government, officials, and laws.[5]

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[3] Timothy Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (New York: Routledge, 1997), ix.

[4] Ibid., 2-3.

[5] Celina Spiegel, "The World Remade: The Book of Esther," in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. Christina Buchmann and Celina Spiegel (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994), 202.

Assimilation of Jews into the foreign culture is viewed as a paradox. It is a threat to Jewish identity, but also a means of survival.[6]

In *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque*, Kenneth Craig makes a compelling argument that Esther is an example of what Bakhtin calls the carnivalization of literature. He supports his case by identifying in Esther carnival forms, images, and language as described by Bakhtin.[7] Craig focuses upon the opposition in the book of Esther between the "official" and "unofficial" realms characteristic of carnival. Mordecai and Esther ostensibly represent the "unofficial" culture and Jewish law is considered part of this "unofficial" realm. Ahasuerus and Haman represent the "official" culture and imperial law belongs to this realm. According to Craig, the book of Esther expresses the viewpoint of the common folk, the Jews, as a means to critique the oppressive and serious "official" point of view.[8]

André LaCocque in *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading* builds upon the work of Craig by reading the book of Esther using Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque literature.[9] Like Craig, LaCocque considers Mordecai and Esther as representatives of the diaspora Jews and of the "unofficial" culture. In his reading of Esther, he does not identify any ridiculing laughter directed toward Mordecai, Esther, or the Jews. Haman ostensibly represents the opposing serious and "official" culture.[10] In his reading, the opposition between good and evil is represented by the Jews and Amalekites respectively.[11]

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[6] Ibid., 202.

[7] Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque*, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

[8] Ibid., 33.

[9] André LaCocque, *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

[10] Ibid., 17.

[11] Ibid., 30.

LaCocque proposes that the book of Esther belongs to what Bakhtin identifies as the *first stylistic line* of novelistic literature.[12] The *first line* of novelistic literature knows only a single "ennobled" language and style and does not incorporate heteroglossia (multiple competing social viewpoints or voices) into the work.[13] As monologic literature, the author's voice dominates over all others so that there is essentially only one voice and one point of view.[14] According to Bakhtin, the unitary language and style of *first line* novelistic literature "gives expression to centripetal forces [official forces] working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization."[15] LaCocque's view of Esther's primary function resembles that of many other scholars. The book gives the Jews hope that they can survive the threat of genocide and even prosper in a foreign land by assimilating into the foreign culture and participating in its power structures.[16]

LaCocque does recognize the importance of intertextuality in reading the book of Esther. He identifies the Purim festival as a parody or carnivalization of the Passover and Exodus narratives.[17] The parody is a means to adapt a narrative about Jewish identity from one of "leaving" to one of "staying" within a foreign land.[18] The breaking of rules associated with the celebration of Purim does function to relativize the absolute truth associated with imperial law and Torah. But by classifying Esther as belonging to Bakhtin's *first stylistic line*, LaCocque fails to identify how parodic stylizations or citations may represent various social voices and

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[12] Ibid., 45.

[13] Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 345-346.

[14] LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 46, 68 and Mikhail Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," *Theory and History of Literature*, vol 8, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 203.

[15] Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Tx.: University of Texas Press,1981), 271.

[16] LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 35.

[17] Ibid., 108.

[18] Ibid., 107.

viewpoints functioning to critique and challenge traditions in Israel's authoritative texts. As theorized by Bakhtin, parodic language is oriented toward the same object, but it is also aimed at the direct word about the object in the official literature. The monoglossic language of national myths and epics becomes the represented image and target of the laughing word.[19] As stated by Bakhtin:

> Parodic-travestying literature introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly too contradictory and heteroglot to be fit into a high and straightforward genre. The high genres are monotonic, while the "fourth drama" and genres akin to it retain the ancient binary tone of the word. Ancient parody was free of any nihilistic denial . . . The genre itself, the style, the language are all put in cheerfully irreverent quotation marks, and they are perceived against a backdrop of a contradictory reality that cannot be confined within their narrow frames. The direct and serious word was revealed, in all its limitations and insufficiency, only after it had become the laughing image of that word—but it was by no means discredited in the process.[20]

When Esther is seen through this lens, we might view the establishment of a temple-state community in the post-exilic imperial province of Yehud led primarily by elite nobles, scribes, and priests returning from exile in Babylon to be the impetus for production or adaptation of Israel's "official" national and cultural traditions. Israel's "official" literary traditions serve to advance *centralization* and *construct group identity* in a manner that benefits the elite and permits them to lead the temple-state under Persian imperial authority. The text of Esther represents the "unofficial" response to a canonical culture that has the potential to oppress, exploit, and create suffering and hardship among various social groups. These social viewpoints are orchestrated into the book by the creative author as social heteroglossia. The centrifugal forces of social heteroglossia become an active force that works toward *decentralization* and

[19] Holquist, *Dialogic Imagination*, 60.
[20] Ibid.

disunification and thus contributes to shaping culture history.[21] Instead of a dichotomy of "unofficial" Jewish culture in opposition to the "official" imperial culture, this Bakhtinian approach views the "official" as Israel's authoritative texts and the hierarchical authorities and institutions legitimated in them. The "unofficial" text of Esther as carnivalesque literature is the laughing word that exposes the insufficiency and limitations of the serious word in light of the contradictory experiences of the present reality.[22]

In the introduction to *Reading between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, Danna Nolan Fewell recognizes that the book of Esther is in a dialogic relationship with other texts from Israel's traditional literature. She proposes that the intertextual allusions in Esther function to destabilize and expose the limitations and insufficiency of Israel's authoritative texts. Allusions in the book of Esther to the Exodus and Passover stories challenge and destabilize identities as constructed in Israel's Torah.[23] In her carnivalesque Purimspiel, "Nice Girls Do," Fewell draws attention to the heteroglossic nature of the Esther text and the universal spirit of carnival laughter.[24] The Purimspiel dramatizes the story of Esther using a diverse cast that includes a female rabbi, a female Christian minister, and teenage girls belonging to the synagogue and church of the respective leaders. As the cast of the drama prepares for the ecumenical celebration of Purim by discussing the characters and text of Esther, a variety of voices and perspectives respond to serious issues facing teenage girls in the text of Esther and the contemporary world with a ridiculing laughter that questions, critiques, and challenges. The universal nature of carnival laughter is apparent since no character in the text of Esther, in the

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[21] Holquist, *Dialogism*, 72.

[22] Holquist, *Dialogic Imagination*, 55-56.

[23] Danna Nolan Fewell, "Introduction: Writing, Reading and Relating," in *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, Edited by Danna Nolan Fewell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 12.

[24] Danna Nolan Fewell, "Nice Girls Do," in *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of our Children* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

cast of the Purimspiel, or in contemporary society is exempt from ridicule and critique, including God and leaders of the church and synagogue.[25]

This thesis builds on the work of Fewell by applying Bakhtin's theories of dialogism and heteroglossia to the text of Esther itself. A detailed linguistic analysis can expose the various double-voiced constructions and allusive connections to a wide range of other texts showing the book of Esther to be in critique of many traditions and social attitudes lauded elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Unlike LaCocque who considers the book of Esther to be an example of Bakhtin's *first stylistic line* of novelistic literature, I will argue that Esther belongs to the *second stylistic line* that incorporates social heteroglossia into the work. The theme of identity as constructed in Israel's official traditions is one that occupies the characters throughout the book of Esther. The incorporation of social heteroglossia into the book of Esther permits official ideologies of identity (especially those presented as stable, unchanging, complete, and perennial) to be questioned, opposed, and challenged within the context of other intracommunity perspectives. Rather than viewing the book of Esther as functioning to strengthen Jewish identity in diaspora, this Bakhtinian reading argues that the social heteroglossia orchestrated throughout the book functions to question, challenge, and subvert identity constructions and hierarchical structures found in Israel's authoritative or canonical texts. Bakhtin theorized that *all* ancient serio-comical literature is counter-posed to serious and epic genres as a means to challenge their monologic (single voiced) approach to truth with a dialogic approach that resists resolution and emphasizes the ethics of interpretation.[26] Carnivalesque literature acts as a centrifugal force that works to undermine centralizing authorities and national myths by exposing the serious word to the conflicting experiences of the present and the insufficiencies and limitations of the

[25] Ibid., 183.
[26] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 188. .

authoritative word.[27] This Bakhtinian reading of Esther is palpably unsettling for those who accept a final resolution to the story. The centrifugal nature of carnival opposes any satisfying conclusion or tidy resolution; however, Esther, as carnivalesque literature, anticipates a response, perhaps multiple responses. As part of a social dialogue that is ongoing and inclined toward the future, the book of Esther is, in Bakhtin's terms, *unfinalizable*.[28] It is the contention of this thesis that more substantive attention to Bakhtin's concepts of social heteroglossia and dialogism, in addition to his understanding of the worldview and values undergirding carnivalesque literature, will result in a more nuanced and radical reading of the book of Esther in terms of its content, composition, and rhetorical functions.[29]

[27] Craig, *Reading Esther*, 37.

[28] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 12.

[29] "The theory of heteroglossia provides a different theoretical frame for viewing the complex reconstructions of the Esther text and the various versions demonstrate the "unfinalizability of a dialogic text" (Fewell, in her critique of an earlier draft of this paper).

CHAPTER 1

IRONY AND COMEDY IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Irony in the Book of Esther

Esther is a book filled with exaggerations, incongruities, contradictions, and improbabilities. These characteristics are what have led many modern scholars to question the historicity of the book and to employ literary approaches to interpretation. L. B. Paton argues that Esther has no historical basis and was written to explain how the feast of Purim originated.[1] He classifies Esther among Jewish romances such as Tobit, Judith, Daniel, and 3 Ezra.[2] After examining evidence for and against the historicity of Esther, Carey A. Moore identifies Esther's genre as a historical novel. In his view, statements in Esther which seem improbable, contradictory, exaggerated, repetitious, inconsistent, and even ridiculous, "argue against the book being taken at face value."[3] The author's intent was to provide a historical basis for the festival of Purim and the structure of the plot and the actions of the characters were influenced by the author's penchant for irony. Moore identifies irony in Esther as the plot structured according to the principle of retributive justice and as the contrasting consequences of the characters'

[1] L. B. Paton, *The Book of Esther*, A Critical and Exegetical Commantary (New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1916), 31. Paton had a contemptuous view of the morality of the book's author, narrator, and characters, even agreeing with the hostile estimation of Luther (39).

[2] Ibid., 30.

[3] Carey A. Moore, "Esther," in *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1971), L, LII. Moore argues that Esther has a historical core "the story of Mordecai, and possibly the story of Esther---to which have been added legendary and fictional elements" (LIII).

actions throughout the story.[4] He is content to identify simple or local ironies in the text, stopping short of recognizing more complex ironies in the story and of exploring the implications of how irony complicates the reading process and the determination of meaning.

Edwin M. Good's book, *Irony in the Old Testament*, is one of the first thorough attempts to explore irony in the Hebrew Bible. Good states: "Irony is a hallmark of sophisticated subtlety. If, in fact, Old Testament writers sometimes express their ideas by irony, the possibility opens that they have said something different from, or more complex than, what we had supposed."[5] Irony can be a mode of speech whereby the intended meaning is opposite of what was expressed in words or the words can be an understatement of greater meaning. Good traces the term *irony* to its origin in Greek comedy, dramas that portray conflict between two stock characters, the *alazōn* or boaster who pretends to be more than he is, and the *eirōn*, the shrewd trickster who undermines the former.[6] Comic irony, according to Good, functions as criticism achieved through exposure of falsehood, deception, and pretense. Comic irony uses the grotesque, absurd, and ridiculous to be funny and elicit laughter from the audience. It ridicules those who think more highly of themselves than they ought.[7] Tragic irony is another type of irony involving *hybris*, the overstepping of moral bounds that causes the truly great to fall and thereby elicits pity and terror in the audience. Tragic irony has its impact on the audience

[4] Ibid., LVI. Moore gives the examples of Esther who is rewarded for disobedience, while Vashti was deposed for her disobedience. Haman is hung on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai (LVI).

[5] Edwin M. Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, Bible and Literature Series, ed. David M Gunn (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1981), 10.

[6] Ibid., 14.

[7] Ibid., 17.

because they have more knowledge than the tragic hero and they already know the plot of the story.[8]

Irony, in Good's analysis, can be present in both comedy and tragedy. In order for comedy or tragedy to be ironic, there must be some perceived incongruity between pretense and reality and it must aim to amend the incongruity based on some *vision of truth*.[9] Although irony and satire criticize or take aim at a target, satire is only considered ironic if it has a remedial purpose based on the ironist's *stance in truth*. Irony in satire is the incongruity between what *is* and what *ought to be*, and the irony in tragedy is the incongruity between what *is* and what the object of criticism *believes* the situation to be.[10] The ironist's stance in truth is one of the two characteristics that distinguish irony from other perceptions of incongruity. The other is the use of understatement or the suggestive method (as opposed to direct statement) that the ironist uses to present the incongruity.[11]

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[8] Ibid., 19.

[9] Ibid., 27. Good asserts that irony is distinguished from sarcasm in that it seeks to amend what is being criticized, while sarcasm aims to wound and destroy. Parody is understood as a form of sarcasm that seeks to evoke laughter, but this laughter produces a victim. It is defined as "a form of satire that imitates its object by exaggeration in order to ridicule it" (27).

[10] Ibid., 30. The ironist's truth stance and criticism come from "a more or less explicit 'ought,' or a more transcendent 'is,' which if it is not an integral part of the ironic discourse, is an implicit background to it" (31). In the epilogue of his book, Good proposes that the vision of truth is grounded in Israel's covenant with God and the ethical imperatives or laws that govern a style of living (242).

[11] Ibid., 31. The ironist's method of suggestion may be through "use of words with opposite or contrasting meanings. It may be the simple juxtaposition of the 'is' and the 'ought,' leaving the moral to the reader's perceptiveness. It may use the techniques of double-edged speech, in which a character says one thing and his audience, with a wider context of knowledge, understands another . . . The ironic criticism requires of its hearers and readers the burden of recognition, the discovery of the relation between the ironists 'is' and 'ought.' And to use the ironic method is to risk the failure of this recognition, the misunderstanding of the ironist's criticism" (31). Good's understanding of irony thus presupposes an author's intention of ironic meaning, textual markers that point to ironic intention, and reader agency in recognizing or perceiving the incongruity, criticism, and corrective 'ought.' The reader, however, may detect irony in a text that was not intended by the writer. Good states, "the work stands before us, not as an antiquated object to which we apply analysis as to a cadaver, but as a living voice whose accents we hear and with which we enter conversation . . . What happens is a new relationship between reader and writer, a conversation (I would say 'dialogue' had the word not lately been overused) in which each acts upon the other" (32-33).

Incongruities, inaccuracies, and contradictions in Esther are not always perceived as an author's intentional marks of irony. Repetitions, changes in literary style, and incongruities within the book, especially chapters 1-8, prompt several scholars to posit that Esther is a composite work influenced by various biblical and extra-biblical traditions and sources.[12] There is general agreement that the traditions of Exodus, Joseph, and Saul have influenced the Esther narrative. Scholars (such as H. Cazelles, H. Bardtke, and D.J.A Clines) also speculate that extra-biblical traditions such as individual stories of Esther, Mordecai, and Vashti were used to compose the book.[13] Scholars who employ a diachronic approach to the story of Esther compare the three extant forms of the story, two Greek texts (the LXX or B-Text and the A-Text) and one Hebrew text (MT). The Greek texts of Esther have additions, omissions, inconsistencies, contradictions, and overt religious content not found in the Hebrew texts.[14] Carey Moore proposes that the A-Text is a translation of a Hebrew Vorlage different from the MT.[15] David J.A. Clines combines redaction-criticism with literary criticism to propose a five stage development of the Esther story that includes stories of Esther and Mordecai, a pre-Masoretic story, a proto-Masoretic story, a Masoretic story, and the Septuagint.[16] Michael Fox has a modified version of the story's development, suggesting that an original Hebrew form of the story

[12] Frederic W. Bush, "Ruth, Esther," in *Word Biblical Commentary*, Edited by David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas:Word Books, Publisher, 1996), 279-280. Gerleman argues that Esther is adapting the plot and characterizations of the Exodus story and A. Meinhold suggests that Esther is an adaptation of the plot and structure of the Joseph story. Bush disagrees that Esther is an adaptation of the Exodus or Joseph narratives, but he does concede that the author of Esther has been influenced by the traditions and drew upon the language of the stories (280).

[13] Ibid., 281.

[14] Moore, LXI.

[15] Ibid., LXII.

[16] David J.A. Clines, "The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story," *JSOT Supplement Series, 30* (Sheffield: The University of Sheffield, 1984).

(Proto-Esther) was modified to form the proto-AT and the MT.[17] He argues that the MT redactor adds five items to proto-Esther: 1) the inalterability of Persian law; 2.) expanded battle reports; 3.) a second day of fighting and celebration; 4.) the Purim etiology; and 5.) the Epilogue of chapter 10.[18] In the view of Clines, Fox, and Bush, chapters 9-10 (of the MT) were added to an earlier version of the Esther story (proto-AT or proto-Esther) in order to provide a foundation for the institution of Purim.[19] The addition of chapters 9-10 ostensibly changes the genre of the MT to a "festival etiology."[20]

Scholars who employ synchronic methods to interpret the book of Esther address to varying degrees the author's use of irony and satire. The increasing view that Esther is a fictional creation has led to a number of scholarly works that examine the book's literary characteristics, including genre, plot,[21] characterization,[22] literary structure,[23] themes and motifs,[24] point of view, and literary style, especially the prevalent use of irony and satire. Since identification of irony in a text involves readers' assumptions

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[17] Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* Second Edition (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 255.

[18] Ibid., 263.

[19] Ibid., 265. For Clines, chapters 9-10 were developed in stages, while for Fox they form a literary unity (p. 293).

[20] Ibid., 293.

[21] Bush focuses on the 'problem-based plot structure' that *reveals the quality of a situation* (not *the development of a situation or the quality of the character*): *the dangerous and uncertain nature of life in diaspora for Jews* (Bush, 306). The theme of this problem-based plot is that "a viable life for diaspora Jews is possible even in the face of such propensity for evil," and the theme of the denouement is the obligation for the Jews to celebrate Purim in perpetuity (Bush, 326). Fox recognizes that the plot of Esther is structured by the theme of peripety, or the idea that events turn out the opposite or reverse of what was expected (Fox, 158).

[22] Moore sees the characters in Esther as flat, stereotyped representations of people from wisdom traditions (Moore, xvi). Mordecai is the 'quintessential (loyal) Jew' (Moore, 318) and Esther is an ideal model (Moore, 321).

[23] Jon D. Levenson, *Esther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997). Levenson sees two narrative structures in the book of Esther, the ten banquets (highlighting the book's purpose of authorizing the Feast of Purim), and a chiastic structure (highlighting the theme of reversal from a time of grief and mourning to one of joy and celebration) (6-8).

[24] Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure* (Missoula, Mont.:Scholars Press, 1979). Berg refrains from identifying a genre for the book of Esther (16). She focuses on recurrent motif's (banquets, kingship, and obedience/disobedience) found throughout Esther and the themes which are conveyed by these motifs (power, loyalty to the Jewish community, inviolability, and reversal) (17). In her reading of Esther, meaning is carried in the themes conveyed by recurrent motifs.

about the intentions and worldview of the author and the intended audience, the presuppositions of the reader will influence the ironies identified in the story of Esther. For example, Michael V. Fox concludes that Esther is a "fictional creation with strongly legendary features."[25] In his introduction to *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, he proposes that the author uses characterization as a means to impart values, ideas, and teachings based on the realities of living in exile.[26] The story is intended to teach Jews how to live successfully in diaspora.[27] The characters in the story set examples for the readers.[28] Mordecai is held up as an ideal representative Jew, whose wise, loyal, benevolent, and stable behavior is to be emulated by Jews living in diaspora.[29] Esther as a character is distinguished by her growth and development through the story from passive to active and authoritative.[30] She is less of an ideal figure than Mordecai, but the development of her character can set the example for diaspora Jews who can rise up during a time of crisis or need.[31] According to Fox, the Jews function as a single character in the book with an absolute unity and consensus and "complete assent to the guidance of their leaders."[32] Vashti sets an example of how not to behave in relation to the gentile powers that rule according to "personal influence, irrational impulses and selfish desires" and not "true law and order."[33] The evil character Haman is

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[25] Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* Second Edition (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 131.

[26] Ibid., 2-3.

[27] Ibid., 5.

[28] Ibid., 217. The term "gentiles" or non-Jews is distinguished by Fox from the Jew haters and those who seek to do harm to the Jews (218).

[29] Ibid., 185.

[30] Ibid.,196.

[31] Ibid., 205.

[32] Ibid., 212.

[33] Ibid., 177. According to Fox, the Jews and other subjects must manipulate gentile powers for their own existence and ends (p. 177).

the anti-Semite driven by pride and need to confirm his personal power.[34] Although tribal conflict between Haman's and Mordecai's ancestors is in the background, Fox sees the conflict in Esther as primarily personal and anti-Semitism is an instrument for Haman to achieve revenge against Mordecai.[35] He identifies a ridiculing humor in the book of Esther which is primarily directed toward the Persian ruler and state.[36] Two voices are distinguished in the text, one that flatters the wealthy and solicitous king, and another more subtle one that satirically mocks the administration, laws, and customs of the gentile state.[37]

Esther's plot is structured according to the principle of peripety or reversal whereby the opposite of what was expected or intended results. Peripety can be tragic or comic, but it is always ironic.[38] According to Fox, the world of Esther is tidy and the neat patterns of reversals restore balance.[39] It is not surprising that Fox does not identify any ridicule or critique of Mordecai and Esther, since they are viewed as models to be emulated and their Jewish identity is not questioned. He does, nevertheless, recognize that Mordecai's edict, Esther's request, and the fighting at the end of the book raise questions about the morality of the author and the Jews within the book and even the ethics of the book itself.[40] Fox defends the fighting at the end of the book as being a "necessary, defensive, and justified" response to Haman's edict and to those afflicting the

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[34] Ibid., 180.

[35] Ibid., 181.

[36] Ibid., 76. Fox states that "the book's incongruous humor is one of its strange hallmarks. It mixes laughter with fear in telling about a near-tragedy that is chillingly reminiscent of actual tragedies. We laugh at the confused sexual politicians, the quirky emperor, and above all, the ludicrous, self-glorifying, self-destructive villain. . . . Humor, especially the humor of ridicule, is a device for defusing fear" (253).

[37] Ibid, 176-177. Fox argues that the author of Esther views the Jewish community as a homogenous and unified body that has a democratic quality (226).

[38] Ibid, 251.

[39] Ibid., 252. Fox asserts the in Esther "evil is balanced by good, plot by counter-plot, attack by victory" (252).

[40] Ibid, 220.

Jews.[41] The exaggerated portrayal of the Jews defensive fighting is a power fantasy that has the moral shortcomings of brutality and overkill, but this excessive behavior is in no way meant to be humorous or critical of the Jews.[42]

Fox explicitly argues against the view of Stan Goldman who asserts that the Jewish attack at the end of Esther cannot be considered self-defense.[43] For Goldman, the ironies in Esther go beyond plot movement and simple literary tropes. He identifies three classes of irony in Esther: rhetorical irony, intuitive irony, and generative irony. These three classes of irony are differentiated by the source of the ironic reversal or incompatibility.[44] The source of rhetorical irony is the *text* itself. Rhetorical ironies are literary devices or tropes that can be found in five variations: irony of incident or plot, irony of narrative perspective or point of view, irony of characterization, irony of language, and irony of theme.[45] Intuitive irony results from *the author's* deliberate creative choices and narrative strategies. This irony is not intended to critique or pass judgment. In Esther, the author's intuitive irony supports Jewish assimilation into the

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[41] Ibid, 221. Fox does recognize an allusion to the Israelite invasion of Canaan in Joshua and the law of Deuteronomy (Deut 25:19) that commands the memory of Amalek to be blotted out, but only to defend the Jews in Esther who do not have imperialist or genocidal motives (223). He also mentions God's law that commands Israelites to exterminate all men, women and children when they invade Canaan (Deut 20:16-17; Josh 6:17-24), but only to demonstrate that excluding non-combatants from hostility was not a recognized practice in ancient times. There is also no mention that the Jews killed any women or children in the fighting (225).

[42] Ibid, 226.

[43] Stan Goldman, "Narrative and Ethical Ironies in Esther," *JSOT*, 47 (1990), 23.

[44] Ibid,. 15. Goldman states that Esther is "written foremost as an ironic exploration of Jewish-Gentile relations, not merely as an explanation for a minor Jewish holiday" (23). Goldman notes that "the conflict in the story is between Haman and Mordecai, helped by a foolish king, not between Persians and Jews" (23).

[45] Ibid. The pivotal reversal in Esther 6 is an example of irony of incident. Irony of narrative perspective is when the reader has more information than the characters and the characters are unaware of the other characters' points of view (18). Goldman states more than once that inferences can be made by gaps of silences in the text (19). In irony of characterization, Esther undergoes metamorphosis from a 'submissive obedient daughter to an aggressive, manipulative monarch,' and Esther 4:26 is the turning point for this reversal of literary expectations (20). Irony of language is especially evident in the story's hyperbole or exaggeration and ironic reversal is one of its central themes (21). Goldman does not identify any rhetorical irony that might undermine the Jewish identities and behavior of Mordecai or Esther. The instability and ambiguity of identity is discussed more under his category of generative irony.

Gentile culture as a means for Jewish survival in Diaspora.[46] Generative irony is *the reader's* ethical response to the author's intuitive irony and thus it is more of a metanarratological perspective of irony. It is the reader's self-critical reflection upon his or her own ethical or unethical values.[47] Ironies that combine both positive and negative ethical values, such as the killing of Persians by the Jews at the end of Esther, prompt readers to reconstruct their initial determination of meaning. Goldman proposes that the exaggeration and hyperbole used to describe the killing of Persians by the Jews invites readers to take up an ethical stance toward the Jewish attack. This excessive attack against the Persians can be understood as an example of Jewish self-criticism.[48] Furthermore, generative irony and the overall increasing complexity of ironies in Esther blur boundaries and destabilize identity. In the ending of the book, Persians behave like Jews (Esther 8:17) and Jews behave like Persians. Goldman suggests that "these subversive, all-encompassing ironies make Esther the most inclusive, elusive, and perhaps the truest of biblical texts."[49]

Goldman's approach to irony in Esther involves recognizing the increasing complexity of ironies from more simple rhetorical and intuitive ironies to complex

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[46] Ibid., 27. Goldman assumes the author of Esther to be a Jew assimilated into the Persian culture (26).

[47] Ibid., 15. The idea of a "comic safety valve" found in a dream of revenge may not be ethically harmless (22). The Jewish violence at the end of the story is "a tragically ironic expansion of vengeance" (23). According to Goldman, "The narrative of the Jewish attack on the Persians is an example of Jewish self-criticism, a bold questioning of Jewish self-image. Generative irony is an irony of an irony---in this case a negative portrayal of the Jews for a positive purpose . . . Irony, like comedy, 'mixes and confounds all rigid categories and fixed identities'" (23) The "subversive, all encompassing ironies of Esther abolish differences and promote a universal vision of humanity with both the light and dark sides of the human heart" (28). "In the comic vision the sharp lines we like to draw between ourselves and others are blurred. Instead a common humanity and a more all-encompassing perspective come into focus" (25). "The Jews are tried and convicted by irony in the end" (25).

[48] Ibid., 24. Goldman recognizes the questionable ethics of readings that see the attack by the Jews simply as a reversal demanded by the plot or as a catharsis of comedy or comic safety valve. It is also ethically questionable to respond that Esther's request for a second day of killing provides a historical basis for the second day of the Purim celebration (22). Goldman states, "the Jews are tried and convicted by irony in the end" (25).

[49] Ibid., 28.

generative ones. With generative irony the reader undercuts a prior meaning to reconstruct a new more ethical one and generative irony prompts readers to recognize that boundaries and categories of identity are ambiguous and uncertain. Wayne C. Booth proposes another classification or spectrum of ironies that ranges from overt to covert, stable to unstable, and local to infinite.[50] He acknowledges that irony can be undermining and negating, but in his book *A Rhetoric of Irony*, he primarily explores irony as a rhetorical device. Booth focuses upon the task of reconstructing the meaning of what he calls *stable ironies*. He lists four marks of stable irony: 1. It is intended by the author to be read as irony. 2. Ironic meanings are covert, so that a different meaning must be reconstructed from the surface meaning. 3. Irony can be stable, with no intention for the reader to continue to undermine the reconstructed meaning. 4. Stable irony is finite in its application with reconstructed meanings that are local and limited.[51] In stable irony, once the reconstructed meaning is made, the reader is not invited to further demolish and reconstruct. Conversely, with unstable irony, the author is not affirming any stable proposition. There is only rejection and undermining of the author's statement.[52]

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[50] Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 234. Booth's ordering is based upon "variations in how authors and readers relate" (234). The spectrum of covert to overt relates to the amount of disguise required by the author. The degree of stability relates to the readers conclusion about whether there is reason to further undermine a reconstructed meaning or not. The range of local to infinite is the "scope of 'truth revealed,' or ground covered by the reconstruction or assertion, ranging from the local through grand-but-still-finite to 'absolute infinite negativity.' How far is the reader asked to travel on the road to complete negation, and how does he know when to stop?" (234).

[51] Ibid., 6. Booth admits his presuppositions relating to the concepts of stable irony and authorial intent, that some readings are judged as more adequate than others and that limits are placed on reader agency in the production of meaning (242). Booth describes a "sequence of rising ambition or scope in unstable ironies, from (1) overt limited or local undermining; through (2) limited covert; on through (3) overt assertions of the infinity of the ironic vision; and finally to (4) covert or thoroughly disorienting implications of 'absolute infinite negativity'" (245).

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Booth describes four steps to reading stable irony. First, the reader recognizes some incongruity among or between words and rejects the surface meaning. Alternative interpretations are considered which may be contrary or undermining to the literal statement. A judgment is made about the author's intention and beliefs, and a new meaning is reconstructed based on the unspoken beliefs the reader attributes to the author.[53] The "meeting of minds" that occurs between the author and readers of irony is a community building process based on rejection of things that are said.[54] Irony can be detected by the reader through various means such as the author's direct statement of ironic intent in a title or epigraph, deliberate error, disharmonies of style, and conflicts of belief.[55]

Moshe David Simon uses Booth's theory of stable irony to understand the ideological and thematic goals of Esther. [56] According to Simon, the characters of Ahauserus, Haman, and Mordecai represent three levels of meaning or three worldviews in the book. On the surface, Shushan and the Persian Empire appear to be tightly controlled through the reign of Ahauserus and strict imperial law. Cues that Ahauserus' control of the empire should not be taken at face value include incongruity between the depiction of vast imperial wealth and power and laws that protect unrestricted drinking and pursuit of sexual pleasure, the unpredictability of the consequences to disobedience

[53] Ibid., 12. For Booth, "ironic reconstructions depend on an appeal to assumptions, often unstated, that ironists and readers share" (33).

[54] Ibid., 13. It is also noted that "in political or moral satire, the reconstruction of ironies depends both on a proper use of knowledge or inference about the author and his surroundings and on discovery of a literary form that realizes itself properly for us only in an ironic reading" (120). Booth further states: "No matter how much biographical or historical information we need or use in making our reconstructions, they are finally built into patterns of shared literary expectations---the groves of genre, the trajectories of aroused expectations and gratifications" (100).

[55] Ibid., 84-85.

[56] Moshe David Simon, "Many Thoughts in the Heart of Man: Irony and Theology in the Book of Esther," *Tradition* 31, no. 4 (1997): 5. Simon identifies verbal ironies, irony of events, irony of incongruity, and dramatic irony "in which characters speak or act in ignorance of some crucial piece of information that the reader is aware of" (11).

of royal law, and the frequent use of hyperbole.[57] Haman moves to the foreground as a potential ruler who gains power through ambition and manipulation, but proves to be another approach to be rejected. The character of Haman understands the true nature of the royal court and ostensibly should represent truth in the story. When Haman is in control, royal power shifts to a focus on darker projects such as destruction of all the Jews and Haman becomes the primary focus of the book's irony.[58] He is the *alazon* or boaster who will be exposed by the *eiron*. Haman's pretensions for power and greatness are undermined by Esther who exposes him as the perpetrator against her and her people.[59] Haman becomes the victim of the story's irony.[60] According to Simon, the character of Mordecai is beyond the reach of the book's irony. He is the one who introduces the corrective changes and represents the true meaning of the story.[61] In his dialogue with Esther in chapter 4, the reader learns of Mordecai's beliefs, and the ideological basis of the story becomes apparent.[62] When Mordecai takes leadership, the reader is able to reconstruct the worldview that represents the book's stable irony. The first two false meanings represented by Ahasuerus (the powerful king and his law rule Shushan) and Haman (Shushan is ruled by the most ambitious and adept) are rejected in favor of the one represented by Mordecai. With Mordecai in control, "kings behave like kings, laws are just and effective, wealth is truly glorious, and most importantly

[57] Ibid., 8. "The 'real' Shushan that emerges from under the façade of a tightly regulated imperial capital is a *laizzes-faire* world devoted to the gratification of impulses" (9).

[58] Ibid., 11. Haman thinks more highly of himself than he ought. He wants to be like the king. In Haman's worldview power belongs to the most ambitious and able to seize it (10).

[59] Ibid., 13.

[60] Ibid., 12.

[61] Ibid., 7.Mordecai also knows too much and the reader does not have any knowledge that Mordecai does not have himself (14). Furthermore, the law issued by Mordecai is just, whereas, the one issued by Haman is not (19). "The author never does anything to undercut Mordecai or his opinions" (23).

[62] Ibid., 14.

everything runs according to the divine plan."[63] In Simon's reading of Esther, there is no ridicule, incongruity, or inconsistency in the behavior of Mordecai and this intentional characterization by the author makes the irony stable. Since Mordecai's motives and inner thoughts are not revealed, he is always "deeper than the reader," thus the reader is not in a position to challenge him.[64] Mordecai also knows too much and therefore is not subject to dramatic irony.[65] It is understandable that Simon prohibits the identification of irony in the characterization of Mordecai since he ostensibly represents the true meaning or worldview reconstructed by the reader. In stable irony, the reader is not invited to further undermine the reconstructed meaning. In the book's stable irony, the reader can even be certain the providence of God is behind all the apparent coincidences in the story. In Esther 4:13-14, Mordecai affirms his belief in divine providence. God will in some way save the Jews. The ending of the book is the result of the plot reversal whereby the opposite of what was intended or expected occurs. All other ironies cease after Mordecai assumes leadership. According to Simon, Mordecai's edict is just and his royal regalia represent true majesty.[66]

All of the ironic readings discussed so far make assumptions that relate to authorial intention. In *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible*, Carolyn J. Sharp discusses the current debates surrounding the concept of authorial intention and its importance in reading irony:

> The vexed matter of authorial intention lies at the heart of current debates about reading. Many interpreters consider the "author" to be long dead and rightly unmourned. But for many others—myself among them—a nuanced notion of author remains essential, even as our view of textual meaning becomes enlivened by an

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` [63] Ibid., 19. In the end the reader has reconstructed a correct ideology and a real empire (19).
[64] Ibid., 14.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid., 19.

> increasingly sophisticated understanding of contextual factors that shape interpretation. True, the inevitability of textual decoding toward which Alter gestured can no longer be taken for granted. These days we see more clearly the unconstrainable nature of intertextuality and cultural bricolage, the dynamic roles played by readers and reading communities in every act of interpretation, and the ways in which texts contradict and erase their own claims even as they are making them. Notions of authority and intention are inevitable functions of discursive strategies and power relations. Yet the question of author cannot be ignored when irony is seen to be involved, however complex our idea of author may become, even if "author" is broadened to include readers' interactions with texts and communities rather than being strictly identified with the intentions of a single historical person.[67]

Reading texts as ironic assumes that an author gives cues or marks in the text that can be recognized by perceptive readers.[68] But reader response also plays a key role in reading texts ironically. Sharp acknowledges arguments made by Stanley Fish that readings of irony are influenced by communities with reading practices that are in line with their own cultural assumptions and interpretive priorities. Readers also make their own assumptions when reconstructing the historical context.[69] Sharp responds to these observations:

> Reader response plays an inevitable role in constructing and perceiving ironies, but it is both intellectually unsound and unethical to argue that the testimony of authors and texts is fully and only constructed by the reader. Further, it is amusing but disingenuous to suggest that the scholarly interpreter is no more than a witless pawn of whatever literary-critical conventions happen to be current. Every reading constructs the voice of the author, and thus in practice, every reading will, to a certain degree, erase or revoice that author according to the critic's own goals and cultural assumptions. But it is still meaningful to say that in various kinds of interpretation and at the hands of various interpreters, there are lesser and greater degrees of attentiveness to the "Otherness" of textual voices.[70]

Sharp's observations highlight the complexity of interpreting biblical texts and the multitude of voices that are involved in the production of meaning. In her view, ignoring the voice of the author may be considered unethical.

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[67] Carolyn J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009), 2.

[68] Ibid., 15. Sharp states this "pragmatic observation holds even if one concedes that both marking and the perception of marking are subjective, culturally construed, and provisional, and thus that the processes of 'marking' and decoding apparent markers can never be wholly determinative for meaning" (15).

[69] Ibid., 16.

[70] Ibid., 17.

An article written by Elsie R. Stern illustrates how readers' assumptions about Esther's author and intended audience can influence the understanding of an ironic text. Most scholars assume that Esther is a Diaspora story and the book's general purpose is to construct communal identity in diaspora. The purpose of Esther is frequently understood as instruction for diaspora Jews in how to survive and prosper in an unpredictable and dangerous foreign land, if necessary by partial assimilation into the foreign culture and participation in its power structures. Esther and Mordecai are considered models for successful living in diaspora. Conversely, Stern reads the Hebrew text of Esther with the presupposition that it is a Judean text critical of diaspora living that is not grounded in particularist practice and not oriented toward Jerusalem and Judea.[71] Her strategy involves reading Esther in the context of the Greek versions of Esther and other (biblical) texts circulating in Judea during the Persian and Hellenistic periods. Esther is ostensibly written from a post-exilic Judean perspective of diaspora to an audience familiar with Second Temple period texts and it is infused with anti-diaspora markers. Esther is a comedy or satire that critiques diaspora practices that are portrayed as a meticulous reversal of a fantasy life propagated in Judea through its national and cultural literature.[72] This fantasy relates especially to the three tropes of law, kingship, and Israelite identity.[73] Law in Esther is a parodic and hyperbolic reversal of the law in Ezra-Nehemiah, the Pentateuch, and the Deuteronomic history. In Esther law is tied to the will of the king

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[71] Elsie R. Stern, "Esther and the Politics of Diaspora," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 100, no. 1 (2010): *26.*

[72] Ibid., 31. Stern makes the point that the Greek versions of Esther were more likely written for a Greek-speaking diaspora audience (32). The major "anomalies of the Hebrew version are absent in the Greek versions" (33). She notes that if the authors of the Greek versions of Esther thought that Mordecai was pious, Esther prayed, and God was present in the Masoretic text, they would not have had to add them to their versions (33).

[73] Ibid., 32.

rather than God and there is often no consequence to disobedience.[74] Kingship in Esther is a satiric reversal of kingship as portrayed in the deuteronomic history, Chronicles, Psalms, and some prophetic books. In the latter, kingship is highly valued and royal authority is held tightly. In Esther, kingship and royal authority are treated lightly and are delegated freely, even to women and foreigners. In contrast to Simon, in Stern's ironic reading Mordecai and Esther are lampooned. Stern reads the genealogy of Mordecai and his association with the Saulide dynasty ironically concluding: "In Esther then, not only do horses wear crowns but descendants of Saul wear royal garb and are granted the authority to use the king's name and ring. When read within the context of the texts that were transmitted and produced in the land of Israel during the post-exilic period, the resumption of royalty or even para-royalty by a Saulide figure is striking and counter-normative and resonates strongly as a sign of the disorder of the Diaspora."[75]

Stern's intertextual approach and her presupposition that Esther is a Judean text written for a Judean audience influence her ironic reading of Israelite identity throughout the book. Israelite distinctiveness is reinforced in Ezra-Nehemiah by Sabbath observance and forbidding Israelite men to marry foreign women. The conquest narratives of Deuteronomy also reinforce the ideology of a distinct identity for the Israelites within the land of Israel.[76] Conversely, in the book of Esther, Jewish identity is not readily apparent and can be hidden. The Jews act like Persians and peoples of the land assume a Jewish identity (Esther 8:17). There are no Jewish practices that make the Jews distinct and there

[74] Ibid., 36.
[75] Ibid., 40.
[76] Ibid., 41. The book of Ezra-Nehemiah describes the conflict between the Samaritans and peoples of the land with those who returned from exile who claimed to be the holy seed. Stern notes that this conflict bears "witness to a fluidity and ambiguity of ethnic boundaries in post-exilic Yehud. However, the *rhetoric* of Ezra denies this ambiguity and persistently identifies 'true Israel' as 'Judah and Benjamin,' 'Israel, the priests, and Levites,' or 'the holy seed,' while the other people who claim inclusion in Israel are identified as the 'adversaries of Judah and Benjamin,' or 'the peoples of the land'" (41-42).

is no mention of their god. Only Haman's enmity distinguishes the Jews from the other peoples of the empire.[77]

Another satiric reversal in Esther is the absence of God and the complete unpredictability of history. Stern suggests that God's absence in Esther is a reversal of the covenantal paradigm of God's control of history through reward or punishment according to the behavior of Israel. In Esther, the comic plot structure is driven by a series of coincidences that are completely unpredictable and not at all connected to Israel's god. This ironic view of God's role is virtually the opposite of the one proposed by Simon.

In stark contrast to the readings of Fox and Simon, Stern sees an intentional ironic characterization of Mordecai that is a reversal of other Diaspora heroes such as Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. These characters hold imperial positions, but remain devoted to the god of Israel and oriented toward the land of Israel. Ezra and Nehemiah value the Temple, Torah, and Sabbath observance. Mordecai is the inverse of these Diaspora heroes who ostensibly shape the readers expectations.[78] Stern states:

> Unlike Daniel, Ezra, and even Tobit, Mordecai is a voluntary Diaspora dweller, descended from a delegitimized monarch, who is so disconnected from the Judean center that he does not have a Hebrew name and seems unaware of how to behave toward an unmarried, orphaned cousin. This initial sabotage of Mordecai's character is reinforced throughout the book where Mordecai embodies and acts out the various forms of instability that characterize Esther's fantasy of Diaspora.[79]

Mordecai as an anti-hero of Diaspora is closely aligned with the character of Haman. They are both foreigners in the imperial court who use royal power to issue murderous

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[77] Ibid., 43-44.

[78] Ibid., 47. Stern notes that Mordecai's identification in Esther 2:5-8 is deeply suspect. He is a Judean living in Shushan and has not emigrated back to Yehud. He has no Hebrew name, only a Babylonian one. He is associated with the failed Saulide dynasty. Finally, against cultural practices, he takes Esther as his daughter, when the semantic structure of the sentence in 2:7-8 and the cultural norm leads the reader to expect him to take her as his wife. By adopting her as his daughter, she becomes eligible for the foreign king's harem (48).

[79] Ibid., 49.

laws and appear to be in rivalry for the same position. Haman and Mordecai replacing one another is a major theme throughout the story.

In her conclusion, Stern offers suggestions to explain why so many readers may miss the satire in Esther directed against characters such as Mordecai and Esther and the book's anti-diaspora stance. Satire involves a meeting of minds between the ironist and the audience. It requires sympathetic readers who share the ironist's point of view and frame of reference and who also can recognize intertextual allusions used to mark the text as satire. For most of Esther's after-life, a context where diaspora Jewish identity threatened a Judean-centered one did not exist. A post-exilic audience would be more sympathetic to a view that criticized oppressive empires without ridiculing its Jewish residents.[80]

As noted above, Sharp, too, considers notions of authorial intention and reader agency in her theory oriented approach to reading irony. She admits, however, that irony ultimately "lies in the eye of the beholder" and that "one reader's irony is another reader's earnest assertion."[81] Sharp recognizes that a reader's reconstruction of the historical and cultural context of the author and implied audience and the reader's own historical and cultural background can influence whether or not a text is perceived as ironic.[82] She advocates a rigorous contextualization of the implied audience that can account for the unspoken rhetorical aims that shape an ironic text.[83] Admitting the obscure nature of irony, Sharp offers her own definition:

> Irony is a performance of misdirection that generates aporetic interactions between an unreliable 'said' and a truer 'unsaid' so as to persuade us of something that is

[80] Ibid., 52.
[81] Ibid., 241.
[82] Ibid., 22.
[83] Ibid., 32.

> subtler, more complex, or more profound than the apparent meaning. Irony disrupts cultural assumptions about the narrative coherence that seem to ground tropological and epistemological transactions, inviting us into an experience of alterity that moves us toward new insight by problematizing false understandings.[84]

Irony can function in multiple ways, including to affirm and undermine, to deconstruct and construct, and to liberate and indict.[85] *Multiaxial cartography* is the name Sharp gives to her methodology that attempts to hold together notions of author, text, and reader agency. With this dynamic approach, reading is likened to a map making process whereby the reader journeys through the deceitful landscape of the text, being responsive to *marks of irony* such as incongruity and exaggeration in either content or tone.[86]

Sharp identifies narratological excessiveness as the key or tonality of the book of Esther in the form of hyperbole, overstatement, extravagance, and reversal in the story's rhetoric, characterization, and plot development.[87] The irony in Esther functions to mock the Persians, the Jews, and even the implied audience whose expectations are repeatedly reversed by twists in the plot. The excess throughout the story is a satirical weapon that aims at hubris, abuse of power, and licentiousness, and for Sharp, there are no innocent excesses in Esther.[88] Hyperbole in characterization can be perceived as marks of irony that undermine a straight reading of Esther's and Mordecai's Jewish identities. The hyperbolic representation of Esther's sexuality and her assimilation into the Persian imperial regime suggests that deeper unspoken meanings are being signified through larger scale ironies, ones that question the stability of her identity.[89] Mordecai is also

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[84] Ibid., 28.

[85] Ibid., 34.

[86] Ibid., 26. Sharp states: "the apprehension of tone, without which irony is inevitably missed, requires literary analysis of plot, characterization, and tropes such as hyperbole or understatement (28).

[87] Ibid., 65.

[88] Ibid., 74.

[89] Ibid., 67. Sharp summarizes the characterization of Esther as "an assimilated Jewish woman in diaspora who compromised her sexual integrity in order to gain access to the ear of a foolish and despotic

marked by excess in his characterization. When he is promoted in the Persian hierarchy, he becomes associated with a king who plunders his own people. Sharp suggests that his characterization in Esther 10 may be an intertextual allusion to Joseph's advisor relationship to Pharaoh in the book of Genesis.[90] The hybrid identities of Esther and Mordecai are perceived as mockery that targets their complicity in abuse of imperial power.[91]

Sharp points to narratological excess in the ending of the Esther story, especially the three "disturbing" happy endings that can be considered marks of irony: "the slaughter of Persians, the promulgation of Purim as if it was handed down from Sinai, and the elevation of Mordecai in the annals of foreign kings."[92] In her reading, the slaughter of Persians by the Jews is not justifiable. The phrase "to defend their lives" in Esther 8:11 may be read ironically due to other indicators in the text that the slaughter is an atrocity.[93] Marks of irony may include the excessive fear of Mordecai that falls on the imperial officials and the Jews' alliance with imperial power at the time of the pogrom. The semantic excess used to describe the fighting and mention that the Jews did as they pleased (Esther 9:5) may also be perceived as excesses that mark an ironic intention.[94]

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foreign ruler and who achieved success through political machinations and the slaughter of over 75,000 people" (75).

[90] Ibid., 77. Even the festival of Purim and Mordecai's legislation of it are perceived as ironic by Sharp. Purim is legislated "in language that would seem to place it higher than the Shema in importance. But this law was based on the throwing of lots rather than divine decree, ratified by a Jew in exile who was not a priest, and intended to celebrate a deliverance that had nothing to do with God's actions on behalf of God's people in antiquity" (75).

[91] Ibid., 78.

[92] Ibid., 79. Sharp also identifies intertextual allusions and incongruences between Esther and the Exodus, the institution of Passover, and the giving of Torah at Sinai that are intended to be ironic. The Purim legislation is the best that assimilated Jews can come up with in their mimicry of Torah (76).

[93] Ibid., 68.

[94] Ibid., 69. Sharp postulates that the holy-war traditions are being ironized in the ending of Esther (70).

Sharp proposes an alternative to a "straight" reading that views the fighting at the end of Esther as justified and defensive. The "unspoken" of the text implies that the Jews are no different than the Persians. A third meaning can be extracted from the interplay between the "said" and "unsaid" that is the main point of the irony when the reader turns back to the character of Vashti. Vashti is perceived by Sharp as a model for the other characters in the story. In her refusal to come before the king, she models resistance to abuse of imperial power and refusal to overreact and participate in excess.[95] Sharp concludes:

> Assimilated Jews may survive in diaspora without God, but only at the cost of their moral integrity, and at the cost of rewriting the Torah, and at the cost of inducting their own leaders into the annals of despicable foreign rulers. Diaspora dilutes identity. Assimilation renders one and one's people unrecognizable. In the absence of Law—in the impossibility of the full observance of Mosaic Torah in actual cultic praxis and in ethos in Persia—the Jews in the Book of Esther have created another writing, a new 'second writing' or neo-Deuteronomy that is dangerous, for it is not the word of God.[96]

Sharp's third meaning is based on the presupposition that Vashti is a model character who does not participate in excess or abuse of imperial power. However, another reader might find this perception untenable due to Vashti's repeated association with royalty (*malkût* and *hammakâ*) and because she hosts her own banquet for women in the royal palace. Furthermore, if the irony in Esther is functioning to criticize Jews for assimilation into the foreign culture, how would Vashti function as a model character when her identity in the story is so ambiguous? Although Sharp advocates a rigorous contextualization of the implied audience that can account for the "unspoken" of the story and the rhetorical aims of the author, her interpretation lacks any thorough socio-

[95] Sharp views Esther's plotting and strategizing to overturn Haman's decree as an overreaction that is excessive and thus ironic and her assimilation in the Persian culture recreates "Jewish identity in the image of the Persians" (80).

[96] Ibid., 80.

historical contextualization or reconstruction of the targeted audience. She does not discuss who is expected to perceive the irony or what effects the author intends to elicit. Unlike Stern, who considers the MT of Esther to be a post-exilic text directed to a Judean audience, Sharp considers the book to be a diaspora story. Both scholars do, however, consider intertextual allusions as marks of irony in the text and both conclude that the MT of Esther is critical of Mordecai, Esther, and the assimilation practices of the Jews.

Ze'ev Weisman is another scholar who understands the book of Esther as satire. In *Political Satire in the Bible*, Weisman argues that the book of Esther is political satire. In his view, satire can be both a particular genre and a characteristic feature within various genres. It is distinguished from comedy by the response it evokes; satire uses "wit" to provoke disdain and contempt, while comedy uses it to provoke laughter and fun. Satire is political and polemical by nature.[97] The mood of satire is created by a "witty criticism" aimed at social institutions and individuals.[98] The satirist employs the grotesque, paradoxical, and absurd, and literary devices such as puns, antithesis, alliteration, ambiguity, allusion, wordplays, and double entendres as a means to mock and condemn. The identity of the target may be camouflaged by use of nicknames, metaphors, allegory, and parody.[99] Weisman describes the tone of satire as one of hostility and affront, while the mood of irony and humor is more one of forgiveness.[100]

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[97] Ze'ev Weisman, *Political Satire in the Bible*, Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies, ed. Vincent L. Wimbush (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 2-3.

[98] Ibid., 3. "Wit" is a verbal and literary means "for imparting double entendre and even paradoxical meaning to ordinary words"(3).

[99] Ibid., 8.

[100] Ibid., 8.

The two main factors that point to the satirical nature of Esther are the literary device of antithesis and its connection to the festival of Purim.[101] Reversal structures the book and is the primary theme and plot of the story. Weisman sees three cycles of reversal within the story. The first is a chronistic one that begins with the feast of Ahasuerus and ends with the feast of Purim, the latter being a reversal of the former. The second cycle, one of Jewish historiography, begins with Mordecai exiled from Jerusalem and Judea and ends with him promoted and supporting the Jewish people. Mordecai replaces Haman and acts conversely by supporting the Jews and destroying their enemies. The satire is thus aimed at the mobs or "haters of the Jews," but an element of irony or self-criticism is detected in the Jews who act like gentiles.[102] The third cycle is an inner cycle of plot whereby Haman advances and then dies when Esther and Mordecai are promoted to greatness. This cycle overlaps with the theme relating to the fate of the Jews.[103] In terms of characterization in Esther, the king is the main character, but not the main hero. The satire is more aimed at the monarchial regime (more likely the Hellenistic rather than the Persian imperial regime) than at the king himself, who is easily influenced by his servants and courtiers.[104] Esther, Haman, and Ahasuerus are all open to satirical criticism. Weisman is not certain whether the author intended for Esther to be a target of satire, but he acknowledges that her request for an additional day of killing by the Jews in Susa and hanging the sons of Haman may be interpreted as satirical elements.[105] He does

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[101] Ibid., 139.

[102] Ibid., 145. Weisman notes that the Jews act like gentiles when they obey a royal decree that calls for them to destroy, to slay, and to annihilate any armed force of a people in addition to children and women (145). He does not seem to connect the decree to Israel's Torah which contains very similar language.

[103] Ibid., 146.

[104] Ibid., 149. Mordecai and Esther are viewed by Weisman as representatives of the Jews (150).

[105] Ibid., 152. When Weisman discusses the conflict between Mordecai and Haman, he does recognize that a private conflict becomes national. Haman sees Mordecai's rebellious behavior as being related to his being a Jew. Haman is ostensibly a wicked representative of the Jew's enemies (152). Mordecai is

not see satirical criticism directed toward Mordecai who has no personal ambitions for power or status and only acts like a father to Esther and to the Jews. Weisman will only raise the issue as a question that a redactor may have intended some satirical element when Mordecai is praised at the end of the story.[106] As indicated previously in the work of Stern, other readers might find it untenable that Mordecai is not ridiculed in the book of Esther. Weisman himself proposes that the identity of a target may be camouflaged by use of nicknames, and the name Mordecai could be a word-play on the name of the Babylonian god Marduk.

In *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible*, David Marcus admits that since irony is fundamentally interpretative, its identification depends upon the stance of the reader. The reader makes interpretive judgments based on the facts related in the text and from what he or she knows from experience.[107] In his reading of Esther, Randall C Bailey uses a minority criticism to examine ethnicity in Esther, including how the race/ethnicity of readers influences and limits the questions posed during interpretation and how gender and sexuality are used as signifiers for ethnicity and the racialist politics of the narrator of the book."[108] Bailey admits that the depiction of Jews and Persians as ethnic groups in Esther is ambiguous, however, he still identifies ethnocentric and heterocentric ideologies embedded within the text that must be

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representative or a personification of the Jews in the Persian Empire. He is dedicated to the struggle for the Jews' survival and well-being (154). Mordecai is not motivated by greed for status and power and he did not initiate Esther's entrance into the king's palace (156). Weisman does not recognize or employ intertextual allusions in his reading of Esther.

[106] Ibid., 157.

[107] David Marcus, "From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible," Brown Judaic Studies, ed. Ernest S. Frerichs, Shaye J.D. Cohen, and Calvin Goldscheider (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 16.

[108] Randall C. Bailey, "'That's Why They Didn't Call the Book Hadassah!' The interse(ct)/(x)ionality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender and Sexuality in the Book of Esther," in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, Edited by Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 227.

recognized and resisted by readers. He also points to how this negative critique can be missed due to the reader's own heterocentric, androcentric, and ethnocentric leanings.[109]

Bailey dates the book of Esther to the Greco-Roman period due to his understanding of the narrator's critical view of the Greco-Roman lifestyle and the characters' assimilationist practices and the narrator's depiction of interethnic conflict within the story. [110] Although Bailey does not primarily aim to identify irony in the book of Esther, he does mention the narrator's intentional marks of ethnic conflict in the introductions of Mordecai and Haman and the irony of the way most interpreters understand this conflict. He observes that most scholars appeal to the longstanding enmity between the Amalekites and Israelites in their explanations of Haman's decree to kill the Jews (especially 1 Samuel 15), but in these explanations they ignore the genocidal practices of Israel against Agag and his people.[111] Using intertextual allusion to read Esther, Bailey notes that the language used by Haman to destroy the Jews is strikingly similar to that used by YHWH in commands for Israel to destroy non-Israelites during conquest of the land (Canaanites and Amalekites) and to destroy Israelites who assimilate into foreign cultures. Bailey asserts that to recognize Israel's genocidal practices "would require the acknowledgement that ethnic designations in the book are multivalent and ethically ambiguous."[112]

Unlike many scholars, Bailey observes that at the end of the book of Esther, the only ethnic signifier is "the Jews."[113] Scholars such as Levenson and Fox refer generally to "the enemies of the Jews," "those who sought their ruin," and "any armed force of any

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[109] Ibid., 227-228.
[110] Ibid., 228.
[111] Ibid., 231.
[112] Ibid., 231. Bailey cites Deuteronomy 4:26, 7:20, and 12:2 and Numbers 24:20.
[113] Ibid., 232.

people or province that might attack them" as Gentiles.[114] In Bailey's view, privileging of the Jews over other ethnic groups within Esther is embedded within the ideology of the text and many commentators seem to accept this ideology due to their own ideological commitments.[115]

Sexuality and sex are also ideological signifiers used by the narrator as a means of ethnic critique. Bailey understands the sexualization of Ahasuerus, Mordecai, Esther, and Haman as a literary device employed by the narrator to criticize the Persians (Greeks) and the Jews who assimilate into the colonizer's culture.[116] The sexualization of Ahasuerus seems to be a negative caricature of the colonizer's sexual practices as a means to critique oppressive imperial powers.[117] Rather than a model to be emulated, Esther uses her sexuality as her "modus operandi" to get whatever is needed. Since the narrator never portrays her as resisting the instructions of Mordecai or Hegai, she appears to be a willing participant in the sexual practices.[118] Esther is ostensibly a Jew who acts like a non-Jew

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[114] Ibid., 232. Levenson argues that the main purpose is to strengthen Jewish identity (232). Fox argues that the reason ethnic groups are not specified is to highlight that those killed were attackers of the Jews (232). Fox alludes to all the intertexts that relate to "the holy-war motif and conquest narratives of Numbers through Joshua. While he notes these genocidal references there in the text he claims that the actions to "destroy . . . kill . . . annihilate . . . plunder" mentioned in Esther 8-9 should not be interpreted with these past 'historical' references (2001, 222-225). Similarly Craig moves beyond his dis-ease with the actions, which he terms 'massacres' by comparing them to Haman's plan (1995, 125)." (232).

[115] Ibid., 232. Bailey notes: "As Masenya and Wong have noted, these final chapters speak of violence against indigenous members of the empire who end up paying the price for conflicts of people at the top of the government. In essence, the colonial powers and their surrogates, be they ethnic/racial members of the colonizing group or from other groupings, often engage in and develop policies that lead to physical extermination of the indigenous peoples. This raises both an ethnic and a class dimension to the struggles described in the text." "Ethnicity is given value not only by the narrator but also by the interpreter and plays an important part in the ways in which characters and plot are valued and evaluated by readers" (233).

[116] Ibid., 233-234.

[117] Ibid., 237. Bailey recognizes the homoerotic/queer portrayal of Ahasuerus in the first chapter, where he is hosting an all male drinking party. He also notes that Ahasuerus is attended (*mᵉšārēt*/ a term used in P to refer to tabernacle ministries) by 7 eunuchs who attend him. Although eunuchs are often understood as non-sexed, based on his understanding of the meaning of *mᵉšārēt* in 1 Kings 4, he concludes that the eunuchs are attending to the king's sexual activity (237).

[118] Ibid., 240. Many scholars seek to protect Esther and pass over Hegai's relationship with the king. Esther learns from Hegai what pleases the king and she is the one who is able to sexually please the king

using sex to get what she wants, including national liberation. These androcentric and misogynistic ideologies embedded within the text are often missed or ignored by interpreters due to their own ideological stance that will only view the Jews in a positive light.[119] Furthermore, Haman and Mordecai are also sexualized as a means to portray them negatively. Haman is characterized homoerotically when he comes to the king's bedroom during his insomnia and Mordecai, having no wife or children, is frequently associated with the eunuchs. This negative sexualization of Mordecai may function as a critique of Jews who assimilate into the colonizer's culture.[120]

Incongruities, contradictions, exaggerations, and improbabilities in Esther have led many scholars to conclude that the author left intentional marks in the text that can be recognized by perceptive readers who understand that it is meant to be read ironically. Some scholars identify intertextual allusions as intentional marks left by the author that point toward an ironic meaning. There are at least two meanings in ironic texts, the apparent meaning or "said" and the "unspoken" meaning which is perceived by the reader. The unspoken meaning is often related to notions of truth, such as Good's theory that the ironist is attempting to amend the incongruity based on a vision of truth. In Sharp's definition of irony, the "unspoken" is more true than the unreliable "said," but a more subtle or complex third meaning may be extracted from the aporetic interaction of the two.[121] In some ironies, such as Booth's unstable ironies, the author is not affirming any stable proposition. There is only rejection and undermining of some more or less

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more than all the virgins gathered throughout the empire. After receiving advice from Hegai, Esther is able to "arouse" the king's favor. Bailey also recognizes the sexual connotation when Mordecai tells Esther to make supplication or find favor in 4:8 (240).

[119] Ibid., 241.

[120] Ibid., 244.

[121] Sharp, *Irony and Meaning*, 28.

overt statement. Goldman's theory of generative irony suggests that irony can be an ethical response to other ironies in the text in the form of a self-critical reflection upon one's own ethical and unethical values. Bailey sees irony in the way some scholars recognize the author's use of intertextual allusion to mark ethnic conflict between the Israelites and Amalekites in the book of Esther, but then fail to discuss or recognize the genocidal practices of the Israelites in the intertexts or the implications of these practices on potential meanings in the Esther story. In Bailey's perspective, the reader thus becomes complicit in the narrator's ethnocentric and heterocentric biases.

Comedy in the Book of Esther

Scholars who explore irony admit that it is extremely difficult to define and that it can function in multiple ways. Irony can be intended to destabilize, to affirm, to negate, to construct, to deconstruct, to criticize, and to liberate. As seen in Good's analysis, there is a great deal of overlap between the topics of irony and comedy and at times the two terms are used interchangeably. Good traces the origin of the term irony to Greek comedy and tragedy. He asserts that in order for comedy or tragedy to be ironic there must be some perceived incongruence between pretense and reality. Comic irony uses the grotesque and absurd to elicit a ridiculing laughter that is meant to criticize and expose falsehood and pretense.[122]

In *Redeeming Laugher: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*, Peter Berger explores the comic experience that he argues is universal to all humanity. He differentiates between the subjective and objective aspects of the comic experience. Sense of humor is an individual's subjective perception of an objective thing or reality

[122] Good, *Irony in the Old Testament*, 32.

outside of the mind that is comical. Through a sense of humor some form of incongruence or mysterious component of reality is perceived that could not be sensed through a serious attitude. Berger does add that not every perception of incongruity or alternative reality is equally valid. "Put simply, laughter can be an opening for truth, but there are instances when this opening is deceptive."[123] Berger notes that the perception of something comic is influenced by one's culture, social location, and historical experiences, even though the perception of humor is universal. All cultures have a sense of humor and experience the comic.[124]

In Part II of his book, Berger discusses various genres or literary forms of the comic. The first one, benign humor, is a harmless or innocent humor. It does not threaten the social order or the dominant reality of ordinary life; rather, it provides a diversion that evokes pleasure, relaxation, and good will.[125] Tragicomedy is another expression of the comic that functions to console. It temporarily suspends the tragic by provoking laughter through tears. Tragicomedy does not eliminate the sorrow of tragedy or function as a catharsis, but it does make the sadness more bearable.[126] Wit involves use of the intellect to perceive the comic, but in pure wit, there is no practical agenda. Pure wit utilizes paradox and irony in order to join together realities that are separated in a serious outlook. Irony is understood as saying one thing, but meaning another; and thus wit is a "game of intellect and language."[127] The last genre of the comic discussed by Berger is satire. This literary form is considered a weapon that is primarily intended to attack.

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[123] Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (Walter De Gruyer: Berlin, 1997), 135.
[124] Ibid., 208.
[125] Ibid., 99, 114.
[126] Ibid., 117-118.
[127] Ibid., 136.

Unlike wit, satire cannot be innocent or benevolent. Berger argues that in order for a work to be satire, it must have the essential elements of fantasy (often grotesque), a moral standard, and a target for the attack, and satire always involves use of irony. The audience and the satirist must share a common social context, but the audience does not have to agree with the satirist's standpoint. Satire can be educational.[128]

J. William Whedbee also explores comedy in his book *The Bible and the Comic Vision*. Whedbee admits that comedy is difficult to define, but he argues that there are recurrent features of comedy. The first is a U-shaped plot that begins with a harmonious society facing some challenge, tragic complications subsequently develop, but the situation turns and there is a happy ending.[129] Another feature is the use of conventional character types such as the clown, buffoon, rogues, and tricksters. Comedy makes use of typical linguistic and stylistic devices such as word-play, parody, hyperbole, pun, repetition, reversal, irony, and incongruity.[130] Comedy evokes a complex and ambivalent laughter that may be satirical, functioning to mock and subvert, or that may be celebratory and rejoicing. "Comedy perennially takes up arms against the forces that stifle life and laughter, though even here its barbed arrows generally only sting, not kill. If satire fails to move on to the genuinely restorative and celebrative, it is questionable whether it still remains in the domain of comedy."[131] The fourth feature of comedy relates to its functions and intentions to subvert and bring revolution or to conserve and maintain the status quo.[132]

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[128] Ibid., 158.

[129] J. William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7.

[130] Ibid., 8.

[131] Ibid., 9.

[132] Ibid., 10. Comedy may function to subvert oppressive political and social institutions "in order to institute a new society built upon traditions that foster liberation and life. Hence such comedy can

Whedbee argues that Exodus and Esther are both comedies of deliverance that share similar plot lines, characterizations, and rhetorical strategies. These rhetorical strategies include use of incongruity, irony, hyperbole, repetition, and satire.[133] He recognizes the theme of reversal as central to the drive of a U-shaped plot-line. The story of Esther begins in a harmonious banquet scene, plunges down into a crisis of potential genocide instigated by the wicked Haman, and an upturn occurs when the Jews are delivered due to the efforts of Mordecai and Esther.[134] The characters are ostensibly flat and stereotypical, such as the foolish king, a wise and beautiful heroine, a loyal courtier, and wicked villain.[135] Stylistic features of comedy can be seen in the hyperbole of the opening banquet scene. The opening scene is a satirical portrait of a vast empire marked by wealth and power governed by a king who proudly displays his excessive prosperity, but who rules the kingdom like a buffoon.[136] Whedbee also sees Persian law as satirized in Esther, since the king is victimized and thwarted by the irrevocable nature of Persian law.[137] The excessive slaughter and subsequent celebration at the end of the book are considered part of the comic spirit that animates the story. For Whedbee, this comic spirit mitigates the moral problem of the book's conclusion. "The scene continues its comic

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ultimately be transformative, not just restorative" (10). Comedy has an energy of life and laughter that "revels in liberation and relishes the drive for the creation of a new community" (134).

[133] Ibid., 130. Whedbee suggests that there are intertextual linkages between Exodus and Esther, in addition to Genesis and other biblical narratives (130). He states that he prefers "to subordinate the satirical elements to a more comprehensive vision of comedy" (172).

[134] Ibid., 173. Whedbee recognizes the ambiguity in the identity of Moses as Egyptian, Israelite, and Midianite, but does not discuss ambiguity in the identities of Mordecai and Esther. He also does not discuss the use of irony in the story. He does recognize irony in such situations as Haman being hung on the gallows he constructed for Mordecai (179). Another reversal of expectation is Haman's plan for his own honor which ends up as the plan to `honor Mordecai (180). Ironic is the reversals of Haman and Mordecai and the Jews and their enemies (181).

[135] Ibid.

[136] Ibid., 174.

[137] Ibid., 182.

face, even if 'serious' themes of death and destruction are being treated."[138] Only in the conclusion of his discussion on Exodus and Esther as comedies of deliverance does Whedbee mention that there could be subtle parody of Mordecai and Esther as reincarnations of Marduk and Ishtar in the Jewish heroes, but he does not go further into how this satire may be functioning. His overall conclusion is that the satirical humor in Esther is a weapon for Jewish surivial in diaspora.[139] The target is primarily the Persian Empire and its administrators.

Melissa A. Jackson is a feminist scholar who explores the subject of comedy. In *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible* she seeks to use a comic reading of biblical texts to inform a feminist critique.[140] Jackson acknowledges that comedy is very difficult to define and that the term "comedy" is often used interchangeably with terms such as "laughter," "humor," and "the comic." She attempts to differentiate the term "laughter" from "comedy" and "humor." Laughter can be a spontaneous and uncontrollable response to something comic or humorous. John Morreall's three theories of laughter, the Superiority Theory, Relief Theory and Incongruity Theory, are utilized to understand laughter as a response.[141] According to

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[138] Ibid., 185. Esther and Mordecai are twin heroes of this comedy of deliverance. There is no identification by Whedbee of ambiguity in their identities or of their relationship to one another. Although Whedbee sees Exodus and Esther as 2 comedies of deliverance, he does very little intertextual work in his analysis of Esther as comedy. Exodus and Esther both use ridicule and satire to undermine the authority of kings in the foreign lands in which Jews were living. Exodus does use satire against Moses, Aaron, and the Israelites (and even God), but there is no recognition of satire against Esther and Mordecai (187).

[139] Ibid., 188. Whedbee quotes Fox's conclusions about humor and ridicule as a means for defusing fear and recognizing powers that are both trivial and threatening. The U-shaped plot line shows the dangers of living as an oppressed minority and the potential for survival (189). Whedbee seems to see the Jews as a homogenous group with Mordecai and Esther as their heroic leaders who act to bring deliverance and group solidarity (189).

[140] Melissa A. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2012)

[141] John Morreall is an American philosopher who wrote the book *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York, 1987). The three philosophical theories of the comic point to the longstanding debate over how to define and understand the nature of humor. Philosophers since

Superiority Theory, laughter comes from a feeling of superiority over another perceived as inferior. In Relief Theory, laughter is a response to pent-up tension that needs release. In Incongruity Theory, laughter is the response to experiencing something unexpected.[142] Not all laughter occurs in response to something humorous, and comedies such as satire, black comedy, and gallows humor do not necessarily aim to elicit laughter.[143] Ultimately, Jackson admits that because most scholars do not agree on how to differentiate between terms such as "humor," "laughter," and "comedy," they typically operate according to their own understanding and definitions. She follows those who use the terms "humor" and "comic" interchangeably.[144]

Jackson and Berger agree that comedy and tragedy most likely originated in the cult of Dionysus, the god known for violating normal boundaries and whose followers "become satyr-like creatures, a grotesque hybrid of humans and animals."[145] According to Berger, the comic experience retains the ecstatic and orgiastic nature of the Dionysian rites in the sense that it involves a stance outside (*ek-stasis*) the assumptions and practices of everyday life and it involves the joining together (orgiastic) of what customarily would be separated. The comic is thus dangerous to the status quo because it "debunks all pretensions."[146] Jackson notes that in ancient Greece, dramatic comedy developed as a companion to tragedy. Satyr plays were performed as a postlude to three part tragedies, providing a form of comic relief. The satyr plays often parodied and inverted the

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ancient times have theorized and debated about what it is that makes something humorous. To the present time, no single theory can adequately explain all comic or humorous phenomena. Adrian Bardon in "The Philosophy of Humor," [*Comedy: A Geographic and Historical Guide*, ed. by Maurice Charney (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2005)] claims that Morreall favors and develops his own theory from the Incongruity Theory (13).

[142] Ibid., 9.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Ibid., 13.

[145] Berger, *Redeeming Laughter*, 16.

[146] Ibid., 16.

preceding tragedy. From its beginning, comedy functioned to expose and subvert things pretentious and serious. As comedy developed, it retained this parodic and inverting nature, often satirically mocking things solemn and sacred.[147] Comedy as a genre is thus inextricably related to what precedes it. Jackson states:

> Comedy and tragedy provide differing perspectives on the same world, differing attitudes toward the same events. Any given situation can be utilized to produce either comedy or tragedy. . . . The writer shapes the material tragically or comically, which in turn cues the audience to respond appropriately. However, while the audience is led by the writer, the audience's pre-formed and developing expectations of the piece they are witnessing also contribute ultimately to its categorization as comedy or tragedy.[148]

Jackson describes literary devices typical of comedy. One literary device commonly employed in comedy is the use of stock characters such as the fool, the rogue, the clown, the braggart, and the self-deprecator. Other literary devices include irony, reversals, repetition, and the hiddenness and surprise of trickery. Plot movement is often U-shaped with the story ending in harmony and integration of the anti-hero of the story. The happy ending is frequently marked with celebration and festival. Linguistic devices include puns, double entendre, word play on names and places, hyperbole, and understatement. There are several literary modes or expressions of comedy. Parody is a mocking imitation of something, usually employing the literary device of exaggeration. Farce also uses exaggeration, but it also tends to mix elements of sexuality, horseplay, and buffoonery and places its characters in ridiculous situations. Satire is using comedy as a weapon against some target.[149]

Jackson also discusses psychological and social features and functions of comedy. She lists several psychological features of comedy including its high tolerance for

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[147] Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 14.
[148] Ibid., 16.
[149] Ibid., 19-20. Jackson also discusses the comic literary mode of joke.

disorder, ambiguity, and multiple meanings and its encouragement of flexible, divergent, and critical thinking. Comedy is not concerned with determining absolute truth and does not require closure with neat endings and without loose ends. Comic characters are adaptable and imaginative, and their primary concerns are usually pragmatic, related to obtaining necessities for physical well-being and survival. The social features of comedy include its exposure of pretense in tragedy and epic. Comedy has an egalitarian view of society and values diversity in character and thought. It challenges and questions established traditions and authorities. Because comedy is characterized by psychological and social features that value flexibility, imagination, and diversity, it "prefers situation ethics because unique situations may require unique response."[150]

The social and psychological functions of comedy are also explored. Comedy functions to *draw boundaries* that can build communities among those who laugh together, but it can also segregate when people laugh at or without others and thus exclude them. Comedy is also *revelatory* in two senses. It acts as a mirror so that the audience can see themselves as they really are and it can reveal society as it is or ought to be. There is thus a corrective and instructive function of comedy. When an individual or society faces the reality revealed by comedy, the insight can inspire correction and change.[151]

As in the case of irony, comedy can function to *subvert* or *conserve* established traditions and political, social, and religious institutions and hierarchies. Comedy can undermine official institutions and authorities by ridicule and mockery, but those in power can also use comedy to denigrate the weak and thus uphold the status quo.

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[150] Ibid., 22-23.
[151] Ibid., 24-25.

Established authorities often attempt to *contain* comedy as a means to control the threat it creates to their power structures. Carnivals and jesters are examples of comedy contained by establishment. On the other hand, the containment of comedy still provides those weaker with the opportunity to express their thoughts and emotions. Comedy can function as a weapon against the strong or the weak, but for the oppressed, weak, and endangered it can provide a means to aid survival. Comedy may aid survival by providing a means of escape (*ek-stasis*). In addition, "features of comedy such as its flexibility, rejection of fate, focus on now, and violence without injury all teach endurance and enable survival for those who find themselves embattled in some way—physically, psychologically, personally, or socially. Comic tales and comic characters model, in their world, a reality that may be aspired to in this one."[152]

Jackson classifies the book of Esther as both farce and carnivalesque, two comic forms that hold together the frightening and funny elements of the story. She bases the former genre distinction on Timothy Beal's understanding that farce is "stuffed with improbabilities, accidents, and exaggerations. Farce relies on a fast-paced, intricate plot, in which the 'long arm of coincidence' stretches far and in which characters are caricatures, so that human life . . . is horribly attenuated."[153] Farce also involves stock characters, reversals, surprise elements, hyperbole, repetition, wordplay, bawdiness, and physical conflict or violence.[154] According to Jackson, Esther contains all these farcical elements. The book is filled with repetition, wordplay, and hyperbole. The stock characters in the book include Haman the knave, Ahasuerus the fool, Mordecai the hero,

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[152] Ibid., 27-28.

[153] Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routeledge, 1997), ix.

[154] Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 199-200.

and Esther the trickster and heroine. The ending of the book is the ultimate reversal in the story when the Jews destroy, kill, and annihilate those who sought to do the same to them. In Jackson's view, the violence in the book's ending is a sweeping mass murder, but the violence is not real. It is *story violence* that functions, not as a model for enactment, but as a form of escape.[155]

The second classification of Esther according to Jackson is the carnivalesque genre. She refers to the study of carnival and the carnivalizaiton of literature in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. The world of carnival is outside officialdom. "It is a world inside out, upside down, back to front, and marked by the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Reversals abound, rank is broken, all are equal, and—for the duration of carnival—this second life is both ideal and real."[156] In carnival officialdom is mocked, the fool is crowned, and an egalitarian view of humanity is portrayed through focus on bodily functions such as eating, sex, excreting, birthing, and dying. Esther has all the elements of carnival including reversals, the theme of crowning and uncrowning, and a focus on things grotesque and carnal.[157]

The book of Esther ostensibly functions to establish ethnic boundaries between the Jews and Persians. Jackson asserts that the genre of farce exploits boundaries differently than the genre of carnivalesque. Esther as farce exposes boundaries and ridicules those who cross them, while the carnivalesque tends to expose and erase ethnic and hierarchical boundaries through the second world created in carnival. The survival

[155] Ibid., 213.
[156] Ibid., 214.
[157] Ibid., 215-216.

function of Esther can be seen in its message that supports working within the system as a means to survive, because direct resistance would not succeed.[158]

Kathleen O'Connor has a similar approach to comedy in the book of Esther. She views the humor in Esther as a scathing critique of the Persian Empire that functions as a survival tactic for Diaspora Jews who are confronted with genocide and exclusion in the post-exilic period.[159] The book helps Jews living in an alien culture to overcome fear and gives them hope when faced with destruction.[160] O'Connor admits that there is ambiguity and complexity in the portrayal of the Jewish characters, but she contends that the book of Esther is primarily a political satire aimed at the Persian government, its officials and its laws. She identifies the comic features in Esther as irony, exaggeration, and reversals or turnabouts.[161]

Exaggeration can be seen in the violence at the end of the book when the Jews retaliate against their enemies. This hyperbolic violence is not to be understood as literal, but instead should be understood in light of the book's tragicomic genre. O'Connor states:

> The violence of the Jews mirrors the violence Haman intends to perpetrate against hem, but the Jews do it one better. For one thing, the permission for violence is in defense of their lives' but it is also more thorough, more exaggerated by being permitted for a second day to exceed Haman's plan for one such day. The extra day manifests the Jews indisputable victory over Haman and the terrifying forces he set in motion. But the victory also involves restraint on the part of the Jews, revealing them to be of superior character to the Persians. Despite permission to plunder the goods of their enemies, they did not touch the plunder. Violence against enemies is one thing, but the Jews are not greedy.[162]

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[158] Ibid., 217.

[159] Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Humor, Turnabouts, and Survival in the Book of Esther," in *Are We Amused? Humor about Women in the Biblical Worlds*, Edited by Athalya Brenner (New York: T&T Clark International, 2003), 62.

[160] Ibid., 53.

[161] Ibid.

[162] Ibid., 55.

The violence at the end of Esther gives Diaspora Jews hope that good people can defeat evil and the weak can triumph over the strong. O'Connor's reading of Esther harks back to the view of Goldman who proposes going beyond what he calls the author's intuitive irony that supports Jewish assimilation as a means of survival in Diaspora. He proposes a generative irony that is the reader's ethical response to the author's intuitive irony that involves a self-critical reflection to his or her own ethical or unethical values.

Adele Berlin recognizes numerous features of comedy in the book of Esther including hyperbole, caricature, mockery, improbabilities, absurd situations, comic misunderstandings, repetitions, and reversals. [163] She sees a comic style in the setting and plot of the story. The plot of comedy begins with a climactic event that turns on a series of unlikely events.[164] Berlin classifies Esther's comedy as farce due to its caricatured and exaggerated character types and absurd settings. It is also classified as burlesque because it handles lofty material in a vulgar manner and treats the mundane with a mocking reverence.[165] The vulgarized lofty material is the Persian Empire and court, but this comedy is not meant as a critique. In her view, the comedy in Esther functions primarily to amuse or entertain, not to critique or attack.[166] Berlin sees a link between comedy and carnival, especially due to the carnival-like Purim celebrations that involve drinking,

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[163]Adele Berlin, "Esther," in *JPS Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2001), xvi. The comic story's purpose is to "model and to authenticate the celebration of Purim" (xvi).

[164] Ibid., xxi.

[165] Ibid. For Berlin, "Ahasuerus is a caricature of a pampered and bumbling monarch, a ruler ruled by his advisors; Esther is a paragon of feminine heroism; Mordecai is the model of a wise courtier; Haman is the archetypal comic villain---a knave, but, in keeping with farce, not darkly evil" (xx). Furthermore, Berlin sees "a striking resemblance to the stock characters in Greek comedy: the *alazon*, an imposter or self-deceiving braggart (Haman); the eiron, the self-deprecatory and understanding character whose contest with the alazon is central to the comic plot (Mordecai); and the *bomolochos*, the buffoon whose antics add an extra comic element (Ahasuerus)" (xx).

[166]Ibid.

eating, disguises, combat, violence, revelry, and processions.[167] She states plainly that Esther is carnivalesque literature; its "secret identities, gross indulgences, sexual innuendoes, and nefarious plot against the Jews are part and parcel of the carnivalesque world of madness, hilarity, violence, and mock destruction. There is a similarity to ancient Greek comedy with presentation of impossible events, plots that defy reality, and depiction of the world upside-down."[168]

For Berlin, Esther is a Diaspora story similar to the books of Daniel, Judith, and Tobit. The heroes of the story, Mordecai and Esther, are representatives of the Jews and present models for successful living in Diaspora. They inspire pride in Jewish identity and traditions and promote solidarity within the Jewish community.[169] The book of Esther also functions as a basis for the festival of Purim, a Jewish holiday to be celebrated in perpetuity.[170] When Esther is understood as a comedy associated with a carnival type festival, the problem with the violent ending is ostensibly resolved. The reversal at the end of the book functions as a safety-valve that relieves the pressures associated with living as a subservient and insignificant minority group. The story "confirms the belief that the power at work in the universe favors life and favors the success of the Jews."[171]

Celina Spiegel argues that the historical improbabilities, exaggerations, distortions, coincidences, and ironies in Esther direct the reader to recognize the book as a satire structured to mock existing social orders while simultaneously strengthening

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[167] Ibid., xxi. Berlin identifies similar elements in carnival celebrations such as the Greek Dionysia, the Roman Saturnalia, and the English May Day (xxi). "Carnival permits the release of one's urge for violence and revenge in a way that channels the violence so that it is not actually destructive" (xxii).

[168] Ibid., xxii. Comedy functions as a safety-valve to release pressure, functioning to offer "a utopian vision of revolution" but ultimately reinforcing the existing order (xxii).

[169] Ibid., xxxiv.

[170] Ibid., iv.

[171] Ibid., xxii.

Jewish identity and empowering the Jewish community.[172] The book's purpose is to address the fears of Diaspora Jews whose identity is threatened. [173] Esther's satire, according to Spiegel, has a carnival spirit. It is a vision of the world remade or turned upside down. The relationship of satire to tragedy can be seen throughout Esther, where the critical issues of identity and survival are in continuous tension with comic lightness and exaggeration.[174] Ultimately, the Jews owe their salvation to Esther's sexuality, which is "the embodiment of Jewish virtues" and "harkens back to an unselfconscious, unfallen female sexuality."[175] Mordecai is a stock figure of satire, the wise fool, who is characterized as insubordinate and obsessed with making a buffoon out of Haman. Mordecai (like a true satirist) intentionally antagonizes Haman in order to triumph over him.[176] He is a representative of the Jewish community, as indicated by his epithet, Mordecai the Jew.[177] Haman is the court fool who relies on the law for his own devious schemes that eventually rebound on his own head.[178] In Spiegel's reading of Esther, Persian law is has a questionable moral authority that is not directed toward the interest of society. She states:

> The unnatural, imposed order of Persian life is in constant tension with the triumphant natural moral sense of Mordecai, Esther, and the Jewish people, whose laws, it is implied come from a higher, unquestionable authority. The artifice inherent in satire, its overt narrative manipulation, contributes to our understanding that almost everything in the Book of Esther's vision of life in Babylonian exile is unnatural—from its laws, to its sexuality, to its extravagant materialism, to its exaggerated sense of proportions, to its contrived use of time itself.[179]

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[172] Celina Spiegel, "The World Remade: The Book of Esther," in *Out of the Garden: Women Writers on the Bible*, ed. Christina Buchmann and Celina Spiegel (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994), 193.

[173] Ibid., 193

[174] Ibid., 193.

[175] Ibid., 202.

[176] Ibid., 198.

[177] Ibid., 196-197.

[178] Ibid., 199.

[179] Ibid., 200-201. Spiegel recognizes that the name Esther is a variant of Ishtar, the Mesopotamian goddess of love and war (195). She states "Mordecai's determination that she conceal the name of her

Assimilation into the foreign culture is viewed as both a threat to and a means of survival for Jews in Diaspora. The fighting at the end of the book shares this paradox. It is meaningless because it is authorized by Persian law, yet it provides a way for the Jews to defend their lives. When Esther orders a second day to impale Haman's sons, it keeps alive the memory of the "just irony of Haman's hanging on the stake he built for Mordecai" and "Esther's canny ability to turn the unnatural Persian order against itself—to the advantage of her people."[180] Spiegel concludes that the edict to celebrate Purim in perpetuity replaces the traditional commandment that the Israelites blot out all memory of Amalek from generation to generation.[181] Although she mentions this intertextual allusion, there is no discussion of Israel's genocidal practices against other people groups or Yahweh's commandments to do so.

Most scholars who classify the book of Esther as comedy identify certain features that they see as being characteristic of comedy. These features include literary devices such as stock characters, a comic-style plot line, and rhetorical strategies such as word-play, hyperbole, understatement, repetition, reversal, irony, incongruity, and caricature. A number of literary modes or genres of comedy have been distinguished including parody, farce, carnivalesque, satire, wit, tragicomedy, and benign humor. As noted above, not all scholars agree on how to differentiate between terms and classifications of comedy and consequently scholars typically operate according to their own understanding and

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people seems more the ploy of a narrative strategist intent on dramatic revelation than the request of a fearful or assimilated Jew" (196). The paradoxical words in Deuteronomy, that the Jews must not forget to forget Amalek (you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget [Deut. 25:19], is played out as well in the reading of the scroll of Esther during Purim" (197). Esther's identity as a Jew is not really questioned by Spiegel.

[180] Ibid., 202.

[181] Ibid.

definitions.[182] Scholars such as Weisman, Whedbee, O'Connor, and Spiegel view the book of Esther as political satire that functions primarily as an attack against and critique of the Persian government, its officials and its laws. The critique of imperial structures and powers functions as a means of survival for Diaspora Jews by providing a form of escape and a message that supports working within the imperial system, since direct resistance would be unsuccessful and dangerous. These scholars may or may not see satirical elements aimed at Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews. When satirical or ridiculing elements are recognized, they are quickly passed over with attention given to identification of flat and stereotypical stock characters. The king is the fool, Haman is the wicked villain or rogue, Mordecai is the loyal courtier, and Esther is the trickster or beautiful and wise heroine. Mordecai and Esther are viewed as representatives of the Jewish people who act to bring salvation and group solidarity. The moral and ethical issues related to excessive killing by the Jews at the end of the book are ostensibly mitigated by the comic spirit and survival functions of the book. The story violence is not real and is not intended as a model for enactment.

Berlin and Jackson both identify Esther as farce. For Berlin, the comedy in Esther is meant to amuse and entertain, not to critique or attack. Mordecai and Esther are ostensibly heroic representatives of the Jews who bring solidarity to the Jewish community and provide models for successful living in Diaspora. The violent ending of Esther is to be understood according to the comic nature of the story. The reversal at the end of the book provides a safety-valve to relieve the pressures of living under imperial domination.[183] Jackson understands the farcical quality of Esther as establishing ethnic

[182] Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 13.
[183] Berlin, *Esther*, xxii.

boundaries between the Jews and Persians. As farce, the book exposes boundaries and mocks those who cross them. Because she views Esther and Mordecai as heroic stock characters, they are not targets of critique or mockery. The story functions as an aid to survival for a minority group living under imperial oppression.

In her feminist critique of Esther subsequent to its comic distinction, Jackson is ambivalent in viewing Esther as a role model for women. Feminist scholars do not always agree on whether or not Esther is a model to be emulated. Nicole Wilkinson Duran acknowledges that Esther is a heroine who saves her people, but because she uses her gender role as a means to act, she ultimately reinforces the patriarchal structures that oppress women.[184] According to Sidney Ann White Crawford, the story of Esther must be understood in light of the cultural setting in which it was produced.[185] In the dangerous foreign environment, Esther had no choice but to work within the power structures. White-Crawford states: "Esther, precisely because she was a woman and therefore basically powerless within Persian society, was the paradigm of the diaspora Jew, who was also powerless in Persian society. Because she was successful in attaining power within the structure of society, she served as a role model for diaspora Jews seeking to attain a comfortable and successful life in a foreign society."[186] Jackson has an ambivalent stance on Esther as a role model. She acknowledges that Esther acts for her people in a manner that does not confront the established powers and hierarchies,

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[184] Nicole Duran, "Who Wants to Marry a Persian King? Gender Games and Wars and the Book of Esther," in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible,* Edited by Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan (Atlanta: SBL, 2004), 81.

[185] Sidnie Ann White Crawford, "Esther," The Women's Bible Commentary, eds. Carol A Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 133.

[186] Ibid., 133.

including patriarchy. Esther is admirable for saving those of her own ethnicity, but she does not do enough for those of her own gender.[187]

Timothy Beal is another scholar who classifies Esther as farce, but he challenges scholars who presume that characters such as Mordecai and Esther are models to be emulated. He defines literary farce as "stuffed' with improbabilities, accidents, and exaggerations. . . It is the aggregation of the many identity convergences, shifting alignments, ambivalences, and marginal locations in the story that leads, ultimately, to the profound disaggregations of other subjects and the order of relations of 'us' and 'them' upon which they rely."[188] Beal focuses primarily upon representations of the Jew and the woman as "other," and how ambiguity in ethnic and gender identities can be used to subvert the politics of anti-Judaism and misogyny. His discussions relating to identity construction involve readings of the Esther text and expositions of post-structuralist theories relating to gender, ethnicity, and social agency.[189] Use of post-structuralist theory underscores the ambiguities inherent in ethnic and gender identity constructions and ostensibly allows for the subversion and transformation of authority and power structures. Beal also discusses the problematics of self-representation and the ambiguity in defining one's self over against another and the need for self-critical reflection when thinking about representations of otherness.[190]

Beal's approach to reading Esther as farce differs markedly from Berlin and Jackson. Rather than identifying flat stock characters or role models to be emulated, he

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[187] Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 220.

[188] Timothy Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (New York: Routledge, 1997), ix.

[189] Ibid., x.

[190] Ibid., 4.

focuses on the impossibilities and challenges to defining and fixing identity and the ways in which these ambiguities can promote political transformation.[191] Beal states:

> Esther elicits a sense of hope grounded in failure: the failure of political strategies aimed at marking and consigning the other woman and the other Jew to oblivion. In Esther, sur-viving, or over-living, such limits depends precisely on this failure, and his hoped-for failure is, in turn, grounded in the ambiguities and excesses of otherness.[192]

In Beal's analysis, excess in the characterization of Esther relates to her exceeding any single social location within existing social and political orders. By the end of the book, there is a convergence of mutually incompatible identities in her character. Another convergence can be seen in the characters of Vashti and Mordechai who have a striking solidarity in that they are both abject and disturb the present order and system. Vashti refuses to be object or subject of the patriarchal system. She disturbs the borders of the patriarchal system and is consequently pushed outside. Although Vashti is exscribed from the story, the new law that inscribes the sexual-political order also inscribes her transgression and the threat it poses to that order. The opening of Esther thus makes a farce of imperial power and the reinforcement of that power through constructions of sexual identity. The story of Vashti's excription provides an opening for critical reflection upon the identity constructions that sustain social and political structures and possibilities for subversion and transformation.[193]

The story of Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman has parallel elements to the story of Vashti. After Mordecai's refusal, Haman seeks to annihilate and excribe the Jews and their particular laws and inscribe a homogenous national identity based upon people who follow imperial law. Beal notes that Esther 3:2-15 moves through a plot

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[191] Ibid., 2.
[192] Ibid., 3.
[193] Ibid., 32.

progression similar to that in chapter one. The plot moves from a public exhibition of status and greatness, to an "other's" refusal, to a proposal for restoring the status quo, and finally to drinking and pleasure.[194]

The character of Mordecai is also perceived by Beal to be complex and ambiguous. He points to intertextual allusions in the introduction of Mordecai in Esther 2:5 that may function as negative markers. Identifying Mordecai with the tribe of Benjamin, the Saulide dynasty, and those exiled with the Judean King Jeconiah highlights the ambiguity of his identity. The tribe of Benjamin is sometimes associated with Judah and sometimes the northern kingdom of Israel. Beal also points to the ambiguity in the term *yᵉhûdî* used in Mordecai's epithet. He questions whether this term means *Jewish* or *Judean* and how it relates to Mordecai's designation as a Benjaminite and descendent of Shimei, the Benjaminite who cursed the Judean King David.[195] Mordecai's introduction complicates and blurs his own personal identity in addition to Jewish identity throughout the book of Esther.[196] Mordecai's identity is also complicated by his identification with Haman. Both characters are mutual outsiders competing for status and power within the imperial hierarchy.[197]

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[194] Ibid., 54.

[195] Ibid., 33.

[196] Ibid., 33. Beal also mentions the mix of sexual attraction and lack of family in Esther's introduction makes Mordecai's motives for "taking her" as a daughter ambiguous and raises the question of why he does not marry her when marriage would be permitted in the ancient culture (34). He also questions Mordecai's motives for his concern about Esther's welfare when she is taken into the harem. Mordecai may be concerned for his own investment in her and what he stands to gain from her rise in status (36).

[197] Ibid, 58.

Conclusions

Beal's reading of Esther as farce and his focus on ambiguities in ethnic and gender identities in the book contrast significantly with most of the previously discussed comic readings. It seems likely that focus on flat stock characters and a structured plot line in comedy hinders perception of the ambiguities, convergences, excesses, and improbabilities which Beal recognizes in the identities of characters such Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews. Beal's reading differs, not only due to his extensive use of critical theory, but also because of his attention to textual detail and intertextual allusion in characterization and plot development.[198] For most scholars, Mordecai and Esther are heroic representatives who bring solidarity to a homogenous Jewish community and who provide models for successful living in Diaspora. Conversely, Beal states:

> Because scholarship has tended to approach the book of Esther as moral literature, focusing on evaluation of its images of Jew and woman as models, there has been only accidental attention to the problematic of either ethnic or gender identity, let alone to the problematic convergences of the two. Yet the book of Esther is riddled with such convergences, ambivalences, and ambiguities. As the narrative progresses, they do not disappear or fall out into some neat and tidy resolution, but rather compound and complicate to such an extent that one must ask whether the book of Esther is less about the definition and fixation of identity and more about its problematization.[199]

Beal's conclusion that as the Esther story progresses, ethnic and gender identities become even more ambiguous and ambivalent corresponds with the view of Goldman in his discussion of the book's irony.[200] Much of the theoretical work done by Berger and Jackson on comedy also lends support to an ambiguous and ambivalent perspective of identity in the book of Esther. Both scholars trace comedy to the ecstatic and orgiastic

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[198] Ibid, 53.
[199] Ibid, 48.
[200] Goldman, *Narrative and Ethical Ironies*, 23.

cult of Dionysus, the god who violates ordinary boundaries and the assumptions and practices of everyday life.

The psychological and social features and functions of comedy identified by Jackson also support the ambiguous and complex portrayal of identity in Esther maintained by Goldman, Beal, and Bailey. Comedy purportedly has a high tolerance for disorder, ambiguity, and multiple meanings. It values diversity, has an egalitarian view of society, and is not concerned with determining absolute truth. As already noted, it challenges and questions established traditions and authorities. Jackson also recognizes that comedy is inextricably related to what precedes it, as satyr plays would invert and parody preceding tragedies. Comedy ostensibly retained this parodic and inverting nature, satirically mocking things solemn and sacred. It also functions to expose pretense in tragedy and epic. Although scholars such as Beal, Stern, and Bailey identify marks of intertextual allusion which function to ridicule or critique characters such as Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews, they do not necessarily view the book of Esther as parodying or mocking official social and political institutions and identities as constructed in Israel's authoritative (biblical) texts. Stern, Sharp, and Bailey view the intertextual allusions that ridicule Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews as a critique on the assimilation practices of Diaspora Jews. The parodying, mocking, and undermining function of Esther in relation to Israel's official literature is not discussed in any comprehensive way.

Several scholars who classify Esther as comedy associate the Purim festival with ancient carnivals and classify the book as carnivalesque based on the work of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Spiegel identifies a carnival spirit in Esther, a vision of the world remade or turned upside down. The satire in Esther is perceived as directed

primarily against the Persian authorities and structures.[201] Berlin also identifies features of carnivalesque in Esther, including a depiction of the world upside-down, impossible situations, hilarity, violence, and mock destruction.[202] The comedy in Esther is ostensibly intended only to amuse and entertain. In the view of Jackson, the carnivalesque genre of Esther affects how identity is understood in the book. She acknowledges that in the upside-down and inside-out world of carnival, hierarchical ranks and ethnic boundaries are exposed and erased. In carnival all people are equal. Bodily functions such as eating, drinking, excreting, having sex, birthing, and dying are integral to the common humanity perspective of carnival. Although in theory Jackson admits that carnival laughter is universal, she only discusses the story of Esther as ridiculing the pompous and foolish Persians. Mordecai and Esther join them temporarily in the second world in order to rule over them, if only for a limited time.[203] Joining the Persians temporarily is part of the survival strategy of the book. Diaspora Jews are able to maintain their identity by ridiculing and "othering" the Persians. The humor is an outlet for the fantasies and hostilities of an oppressed minority. The book of Esther functions to subvert the establishment so that the Jews can prevail over it. Esther also supports joining the power structures in order to work them toward the advantage of Jews.[204] Each of these scholars identifies carnivalesque features and a carnival spirit in Esther, but they stop short of fully exploring how the theoretical work of Mikhail Bakhtin can provide another means to understand and address intertextual allusions, notions of truth, multiple meanings, attentiveness to the voices of "others," identity constructions, and ethics as they relate to

[201] Spiegel, *The World Remade: The Book of Esther*, 193.
[202] Berlin, *Esther*, xxii.
[203] Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*, 214-215.
[204] Ibid., 218.

the book. Bakhtin's theories of carnivalesque literature, heteroglossia, and dialogism may provide new insight into how the book of Esther responds to issues of identity and hierarchical structures, especially as they relate to *Israel's official traditions and institutions*. Bakhtinian theory may also provide a means to explore the book of Esther as a parody and critique of Israel's authoritative literature and social and political structures. An emphasis on the social heteroglossia incorporated into the text of Esther provides a way to explore multiple voices and opposing perspectives of identity in the post-exilic period. Furthermore, a dialogic approach to truth resists any final word or resolution to the story and puts emphasis on the ethics of biblical interpretation.

CHAPTER 2

THE LITERARY THEORY OF MIKHAIL BAKHTIN

The literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, the Soviet-era Russian literary theorist and philosopher has been increasingly applied to biblical literature, including the book of Esther. Bakhtin is probably one of the most important and complex thinkers of the 20th century. His theories are especially attractive to post-modern biblical scholars who value heterogeneity, plurality, difference, recognition of multiple perspectives and voices, and the ethics of interpretation.

In contrast to the Russian formalists who based their literary approaches on the work of Saussure and the concept of language as a system of signs, Bakhtin had a philosophical and sociological approach to language.[1] For him, verbal discourse is a living and thoroughly social phenomenon; thus, the historical and social contexts of discourse are essential to its analysis. Bakhtin states: "We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a *maximum* of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life.[2]

As pointed out by Krystyna Pomorska in the forward to *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin's ideas relating to the ontology and context of art and his view of the relationship between art and communication are fundamental to his approach to language

[1] Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Tx.: University of Texas Press,1981), xv.

[2] Ibid., 271.

and literature.[3] Bakhtin saw form and content (ideology) as inseparable in communication and viewed form as active in transmitting a system of values.[4] Art, including the verbal art of discourse in the novel, is the transformation of already organized material (including language) into something new that expresses new values.[5] Language in this sense is deemed as alive and continually in the process of becoming.[6]

Dialogism

Language for Bakhtin is constitutively intersubjective and the meaning of an utterance or speech is inextricably related to its social and historical context, making every utterance unique and nonreiterative. Each utterance arises out of a dialogue and becomes an active participant in an ongoing social dialogue. Every word has an internal dialogism; the word encounters an alien word in the object itself. Single words have conflicting meanings that result from the context of their use in dialogues throughout history. Every word is also directed toward an anticipated answer and is influenced and structured by the listener's subjective belief system. The responsive understanding by the listener is a force that shapes the formulation of discourse. The speaker's utterance is formulated against the background of other contradictory points of view and value judgments.[7] Inquiry or the search for meaning relates to this dialogue between subjects; it is foundationally social and involves a complex interrelationship between the given text

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[3] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), viii.

[4] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, viii.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Holquist, *Dialogic Imagination*, xix.

[7] Ibid., 281. Holquist notes that "the utterance is shaped by speakers who assume that the values of their particular community are shared, and thus do not need to be spelled out in what they say" Michael Holquist, Dialogism, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge, 2002), 61.

and the responding text subsequently created.[8] Since understanding involves the context of the utterance and re-interpretation in a new context, it is always personal and historical. Understanding for Bakhtin is active; it searches for a creative response or counter-discourse to the utterer. Therefore, understanding discourse involves evaluation and it is only realized in an active response by the listener. Active understanding requires the listener to assimilate the word into a new conceptual system, enriching it with new elements. Thus, "a text for Bakhtin is a locus of verbal interchange, and he denies text, reader, or author a place of priority."[9] Furthermore, the context of addresser and addressee is fundamental to interpretation or understanding.

Ethics for Bakhtin is the obligation of responsibility that arises and responds to each particular situation.[10] This view of ethics holds for the speaker or addresser who creates an utterance and for the listener or addressee who responds with a counter-discourse. Bakhtin's concept of reality or truth is at its foundation relational. "Human persons, their deeds and words, are not tightly bounded, sovereign monads, but creatures with porous boundaries."[11] Ethical decisions are generated from living wisely in every moment and in light of the particularities of every interaction, not from a general or systematic philosophy.

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[8] Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 23.

[9] Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque*, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 19.

[10] Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 26. Dialogism emphasizes the concept of addressivity and expressivity.

[11] Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction*, Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies no. 38, ed. Danna Nolan-Fewell (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000),30.

The concept of dialogue is foundational to all of Bakhtin's works.[12] He considered both language and the self as dialogic. Bakhtin insists on the non-identity of the self and others. Dialogue is a differential relation, but it is also a relation of simultaneity. Simultaneity involves ratios of same and different in time and space.[13] According to Bakhtin's theory of dialogue, differences which cannot be surmounted and simultaneity are foundational to existence.[14]

> Dialogism argues that all meaning is relative in the sense that it comes about only as a result of the relation between two bodies occupying simultaneous but different space, where bodies may be thought of as ranging from the immediacy of our physical bodies, to political bodies, and to bodies of ideas in general (ideologies). In Bakhtin's thought experiments, as in Einstein's, the position of the observer is fundamental.[15]

For Bakhtin, meaning is related to the unique position of existence from which something is observed. But this perspective is always in relation to others' perspectives as in a figure-ground relationship.[16] Dialogism assumes a multiplicity in perception. Holquist notes:

> For the perceivers, their own time is forever open and unfinished; their own space is always the center of perception, the point around which things arrange themselves as a horizon whose meaning is determined by wherever they have their place in it. By contrast, the time in which we model others is perceived as closed and finished. Moreover, the space in which others are seen is never a

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[12] Michael Holquist, *Dialogism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), 15.

[13] Ibid., 19. Holquist discusses the various levels of simultaneity: "Words in literary texts are active elements in a dialogic exchange taking place on several different levels at the same time (it is this overriding feature of simultaneity that seems most difficult to grasp for those just coming to dialogism). At the highest level of abstraction, this dialogue is between the two tendencies that energize language's power to mean: the Manichaean opposition between centrifugal forces that seek to keep things apart and the centripetal forces that make things cohere. At another level, it is between language at the level of code, i.e. the level of prescribed meanings (where "tree" means any tree), and language at the level of discourse (where "tree" means *this* tree here and now with all the cultural associations that cling to trees in this time and in this place). At still another level, simultaneity is a dialogue between the different meanings the same word has at different stages in history of a given national language, and in various situations within the same historical period. And, of course, simultaneity is found in the dialogue between an author, his characters, and his audience, as well as in the dialogue of readers with the characters and their author" (69).

[14] Ibid., 21.

[15] Ibid., 21.

[16] Ibid. Dialogism also assumes a multiplicity of meanings (41).

> significance-charged surrounding, but a neutral environment, i.e. the homogenizing context of the rest of the world. From the perspective of the self, the other is simply in the world, along with everyone and everything else, one that "manifests itself as a series of distinctions between categories appropriate to the perceiver on the one hand and categories appropriate to whatever is being perceived on the other."[17]

Meaning, in Bakhtin's view, is unique in the sense that it is related to the position of the observer, but the perspective of the individual is never in isolation from the perspective of others.

The self, like language, exists in order to mean. The self's drive to meaning is always in the process of creation and inclined toward the future. Bakhtin insists that this drive to meaning is not toward a single meaning, as in a unified higher state of consciousness; rather, the world is heteroglossic or a conglomeration of contesting meanings.[18] The self is never alone; it is in need of others to provide structure for the perception required to have meaning. The self or perceiver and other or perceived do not exist as separate entities, but rather exist as relations between two coordinates in space and time. "Being is an event that is shared; it is essentially 'co-being.'"[19] "Outsidedness" is the term that Bakhtin uses for the spatial and temporal position that allows the self or other to be perceived in categories that can bring fixation and completion in time and space.[20] Holquist states:

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[17] Ibid., 22.

[18] Ibid., 24. Holquist states: "In sum, dialogism is based on the primacy of the social, and the assumption that all meaning is achieved by struggle. It is thus a stern philosophy. This fact should surprise no one, given dialogism's immediate source in revolution, civil war, the terror of the purges, and exile. But the very otherness that makes it at times a version of Stoicism is also what insures that we are not alone. Dialogism is ultimately an epistemology founded on a loophole, for 'there is neither a first word nor a last word. The contexts of dialogue are without limit. They extend into the deepest past and the most distant future. Even meanings born in dialogues of the remotest past will never be finally grasped once and for all, for they will always be renewed in later dialogue'" (39).

[19] Ibid., 25.

[20] Ibid., 31.

> The particular corner (really an angle of refraction) in apperception where such authoring can take place, the self's workshop, as it were—Bakhtin calls vnenakhodimost' (вненаходимость), or "outsidedness (sometimes rendered into English—from French rather than from Russian—as "extopy").The term, as always in dialogism, is not only spatial, but temporal: it is only from a position of outside something that it can be perceived in categories that complete it in time and fix it in space. In order to be perceived as a whole, as something finished, a person or object must be shaped in the time/space categories of the other, and that is possible only when the person of object is perceived from the position of outsidedness. An event cannot be wholly known, cannot be seen, from inside its own unfolding as an event. As Bergson, and important source of ideas for Bakhtin, puts it: 'in so far as my body is the center of *action* [or what Bakhtin calls a deed], it cannot give birth to a representation.[21]

It is from this position of "outsidedness." that the creation of meaning occurs. Meaning cannot be created by the self in isolation. Since existence is essentially co-being, the perception required to create meaning must done from a position relative to an "other" or "others" in a fixed point of time and space.

When this position of outsidedness is so extreme that (almost) the whole existence of others can be perceived, one has the vantage point of "transgredience." It is the artist who treats others in a text from this vantage point, a perspective that contrasts with one who authors from a position of lived experience.[22] The artist who authors from a point of transgredience permits an other or character in a novel to have the status of self or "I." Bakhtin used the term polyphony to describe artistic works that permit characters to have perspectives and voices that stand over against the claims of the author.[23] In dialogic texts, the author's voice does not dominate; rather, a polyphony of challenging and opposing voices interact, addressing the reader and anticipating a response. Thus, in

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[21] Ibid., 30-31.

[22] Ibid., 33.

[23] Ibid., 34. Holquist discusses how some authors treat their characters as mere things, lacking subjectivity. He states that this art "makes explicit the connection of transgredience to power. For not only is snuffing out the 'I' of other subjects bad aesthetics, it is bad politics. Dialogically conceived, authorship is a form of governance, for both are implicated in the architectonics of responsibility, each is a way to adjudicate center/ non-center relations between subjects" (34).

dialogic literature, the reader is not expected to harmonize or resolve the contradictions, tensions, inconsistencies, and gaps throughout the text.

Dialogic Truth

Bakhtin's sense of truth or reality requires a plurality of voices. In order to better understand his concept of dialogic truth, Carol Newsom describes three features of monologic truth. First, monologic truth can be understood as a propositional statement that does not depend on the speaker for its truthfulness. It is truth no matter who speaks it. The second feature is the tendency for monologic truth to seek unity and be part of some system. Finally, monologic truth, no matter how complex, can be comprehended and thought by an individual intellectually and thus can be expressed by a single voice.[24] Monologic truth does not anticipate a response because it is assumed to be the final word.

Bakhtin's dialogic sense of truth, by contrast, requires a multiplicity of voices. Dialogic truth or conversational truth can be found at the intersection point of the unmerged voices. These voices, unlike the propositions of monologic truth, are personal and embodied and represent a point of view. Dialogic truth, therefore, does not incline toward a system. Rather, it can be understood as an *event* constituted by human voices and perspectives. Bakhtin's concept of *unfinalizability* represents the openness of dialogic truth. People are free and open to speak another word. In dialogic or polyphonic literature, one reads the dialogues and thus participates in them, and since the dialogue is never completed, there is no final resolution.[25]

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[24] Carol Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible and Dialogic Truth," *Journal of Religion* 76, no. 2 (1996): 292. In monologue, "the author's intentions and evaluations must dominate over all the others and must form a compact and unambiguous whole" (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 204).

[25] Ibid., 293.

Newsom uses the book of Job to illustrate a polyphonic conclusion to a literary work. Job's ending thwarts any attempt to form a monologic propositional truth. The multiple voices, points of view, or truths in the book of Job resist any harmonizing or unity. Thus, the meaning or truth of Job cannot be given in a summary statement. Its dialogic truth cannot be uttered by one voice.[26] Furthermore, the dialogues in some books are not produced as a consequence of the plot; rather, the plot results from the working out of ideas and questions that repeatedly preoccupy the characters.[27] Bakhtin makes the point another way:

> A plot-dependent dialogue strives toward conclusion just as inevitably as does the plot of which it is in fact a component. Therefore dialogue in Dostoevsky is, as we have said, always external to the plot, that is, internally independent of the plot-related interrelationships of the speakers—although, of course, dialogue is prepared for by the plot.[28]

In novelistic literature, the creative author uses social heteroglossia or the stratification of language as a means to orchestrate themes and express values and intentions.[29]

The idea of identity is an especially important issue or question which preoccupies the characters of biblical narratives. Newsom notes that the "ideology of identity, one that answers the question "Who are we?" is one that most definitely has to make its utterance in the context of other words, under the scrutiny of other perspectives. Such an utterance has to be made in reply to and in anticipation of other people's claims about who they are, who they say that we are, and so on. It also has to be made in the context of *intracommunity* claims, objections, questions, and counterclaims about

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[26] Ibid., 298.
[27] Ibid., 301.
[28] Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," *Theory and History of Literature*, vol 8, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 252.
[29] Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination*, 292.

identity."[30] In the patriarchal narratives, the perspective of the alien is used to express the identity of the patriarchs. Although the perspective in the story might not necessarily be the exact thoughts of the alien (Pharaoh, Esau, Ishmael), it does seem to represent how the Israelites imagined the alien's perspective to be. Israel's claims of identity are apparently made in response to these imagined viewpoints. The utterances that have come before and the ones that are anticipated both influence the way that Israel shapes identity in a biblical book. Bakhtin's nonabstract and nonreductive concept of dialogical truth emphasizes the open and unfinalized nature of these identity claims.[31]

Prose Discourse

Bakhtin argues that analysis of dialogic speech must employ the results of metalinguistics because "in language as the object of linguistics, there are not and cannot be any dialogic relationships."[32] Dialogic relationships involve utterances that become the position of various subjects expressed in discourse.[33] The notion of author becomes essential in dialogue because every utterance has its author or creator. "Of the real author, as he exists outside the utterance, we can know absolutely nothing at all. And the forms of this real authorship can be very diverse. A given work can be the product of a collective effort, it can be created by the successive efforts of generations and so forth—

[30] Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible and Dialogic Truth," 302. Bakhtin argues that characters and various voices in novelistic or dialogic literature represent various perspectives, ideological positions, and embodied points of view on life and the world. When he discusses Dostoevsky's work he concludes, "all that matters is the choice, the resolution of the question 'Who am I' and 'With whom am I?" (*Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 239).

[31] Newsome, *Bakhtin, the Bible and Dialogic Truth*, 304.

[32] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 182.

[33] Ibid., 183.

but in all cases we hear in it a unified creative will, a definite position, to which it is possible to react dialogically."[34]

In order to facilitate analysis of dialogic literature, Bakhtin devised classifications for prose discourse. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he describes three classes of prose discourse: unmediated object-oriented discourse (the author's direct speech or speech of a narrator), represented or objectified discourse (character speech or discourse of a represented person), and double-voiced discourse where two utterances or voices directed toward a referential object come together.[35] In double-voiced discourse, the author inserts his or her own intentions into someone else's discourse, which retains its own semantic intention. This discourse, therefore, has two semantic intentions. Double-voiced discourse can be further broken down into three sub-classes. The first, unidirectional double-voiced discourse, occurs when the author uses someone else's discourse in the direction of his or her own intention. Two examples of this type are an author's use of stylization or a narrator's narration.[36] The second type of double-voiced discourse is vari-directional. Parody is an example of this discourse type. In vari-directional double-voiced discourse, the author's intention is directly opposed to the original semantic intention of the other's initial discourse. The discourse then becomes a struggle or battle between two voices. The third type of double-voiced discourse is an

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[34] Ibid., 184.

[35] Ibid., 188. The first two classes are single-voiced discourses, but character speech, a narrator's narration, or discourse of a represented person can have various degrees of objectification and can thus become more or less double-voiced discourse (199).

[36] Ibid., 199. Bakhtin states that "stylization presupposes style; that is, it presupposes that the sum total of stylistic devices that it reproduces did at one time possess a direct and unmediated intentionality and expressed an ultimate semantic authority. Only discourses of the first type can be the object of stylization. Stylization forces another person's referential intention to serve its own purposes, that is, its new intentions. The stylizer uses another's discourse precisely as other, and in doing so casts a shadow of objectification over it. . . . After all, what is important to the stylizer is the sum total of devices associated with the other's speech precisely as an expression of a particular point of view" (189). Furthrmore, according to Bakhtin, "style presupposes the presence of authoritative points of view and authoritative, stabilized ideological value judgments" (192).

active type such as found in a hidden polemic. In a hidden polemic, the words of someone else actively influence the author's speech. The author's speech is directed toward the referential object, but at the same time it is shaped with the intention of striking a blow to someone else's discourse without directly using it. The discourse clashes within the object itself.[37]

Literary and Speech Genres

Bakhtin's concept of an utterance in speech also applies to the genre of a literary work. Influenced by Pavel Medvedev, Bakhtin understands literary genre, a collective phenomenon, as an utterance that has a specific worldview (form of thought) and set of values. Genre shapes how the world is seen and perceived and thus can provide new insights into reality. Bakhtin considers genre to be the most important carrier of memory and wisdom as it consists of the "residue of past behavior" and of values that influence and shape future behavior.[38] Although Bakhtin recognizes the memory and conservatism of genres, he also acknowledges that they undergo continuous transformation.[39] Genres are transformed and developed in response to changing social experiences or reality. Consequently, both speech and literary genres record shifts in social experience and values.[40] Since genres paradoxically have memory and yet undergo continuous

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[37] Ibid., 195. In the hidden polemic, "the other's thought does not personally make its way inside the discourse, it is only reflected in it, determining its tone and its meaning. One word acutely senses alongside it someone else's word speaking about the same object, and this awareness determines its structure" (196).

[38] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 283. Morson and Emerson note that in the polyphonic novel this form-shaping ideology entails "a dialogic sense of truth realized by a change in authorial position" (Morson and Emerson, 283).

[39] Roland Boer, *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies*, Semeia Studies 63, ed. Gale A Yee (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 28.

[40] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 272. This is a contrast to the formalists who see new genres as recombinations of existing elements. Bakhtin and Medvedev see struggle between genres as reflecting struggle over conceptualization of reality through history (Morson and Emerson, 278).

transformation, they tend to accumulate conceptualizations over time.[41] The memory of genre and accumulation of conceptualizations also apply to the words typically used in them. In Bakhtin's view, the connotations of words probably relate to the typical contexts that adhere to them from their use in certain genres.[42]

Heteroglossia and Novelistic Literature

In the essay *Discourse in Novel*, Bakhtin analyzes human language, especially as it is transcribed in the novel.[43] For Bakhtin, the novel is set apart from other genres, but not because he saw its organization as random. Conversely, the novel is considered an "an orchestration of the diverse languages of everyday life into a heterogeneous sort of whole."[44] This fundamental multi-layered nature of language in verbal discourse he termed "heteroglossia." The various languages within a language may include social dialects, professional jargons, generic languages, languages of generations and authorities, and languages that function for various socio-political purposes.[45] Each language has a different point of view and the languages within the novel interanimate each other ideologically. Bakhtin notes, however, that there is a verbal-ideological center for the novel created by the author found at the point where all the various languages intersect.[46] The novel is understood as a stylistic unity that orchestrates its themes using a diversity of *social speech types* and *opposing voices* including authorial speech, the

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[41] Ibid., 293.
[42] Ibid., 294.
[43] Holquist, *Dialogic Imagination*, xviii.
[44] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics, 17.*
[45] Holquist, *Dialogic Imagination*, 263. Holquist notes that "from the point of view of genre formation, the norms governing professional languages (or other forms of institutional argots) are secondary to another set of constraints that are even more fundamental: those genres that legislate language usage in all its spoken, everyday, transinstitutional variety. The obligatory forms that govern everyday speech communication Bakhtin calls 'primary speech genres,' because they come into being before they are specified into institutional forms" (*Dialogism*, 71-72).
[46] Ibid., 49.

speech of the narrator and characters, and inserted genres. Although heteroglossia is often personified in individuals with disagreements and oppositions, these individual wills are ultimately "submerged" in a *social* heteroglossia.[47] Social heteroglossia exists within the novel in both impersonal stylizations of various generic and socio-ideological languages that allude to real social groups and through narrators, posited authors, and characters in the work. According to Bakhtin, this variety of discourses in novelistic literature can become an active force that shapes cultural history.[48]

Official or high genres such as epic, lyric, and tragedy are contrasted with the genre of the novel by the unified and individualized language or 'monoglossia' in most poetic works. The opposition that Bakhtin perceives between the novel and other more official genres reflects the ongoing struggle that he sees in life itself between centripetal forces that work toward unification and coherence and centrifugal forces that seek to separate. Significantly, Bakhtin theorizes that the centrifugal forces of heteroglossia are more powerful and ubiquitous than the centripetal or unifying forces of a unitary language or monoglossia. If heteroglossia is understood as the more natural state, monoglossia or a unitary language can be understood as culture's (delusional) attempt to create order and place boundaries around the potential for chaos and for promoting maximal understanding.[49] The superior power of heteroglossia and the genre of the novel over the other genres can be seen, according to Bakhtin, in the eras of history when the novel becomes the dominant genre. During these periods, all literature, including

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[47]Ibid., 326.

[48] Holquist, *Dialogism*, 72. Holquist states: "Literature, when it enacts novelness (which it does, of course, not only in the form of the novel), is a loophole through which we may see a future otherwise obscured by other forms of discourse. . . . Literature is a particularly potent means by which consciousness transmits itself in form of coherent and durable patterns of culture. Literature enables the future of culture to be exploited as a zone of proximal development" (83-84).

[49] Ibid., xix.

canonized poetic genres, become "novelized" in the sense that their conventional language is transformed and stylized and they are characterized by a greater flexibility and freedom. They become permeated with dialogue, laughter, parody, and most importantly "the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)."[50] This influence is possible because the novel is understood by Bakhtin as the only *genre* that continually develops over time and thus reflects the realities, tendencies, and developments of the changing world.

Bakhtin contrasts novel with epic as a means of characterizing the novel as a genre. Epic, associated with the more official genres, is seen as completed and finished; there is no room for openendedness, indecision, or indeterminacy. The focus of epic is on the world of the absolute and inaccessible past, a world of national beginnings and ideal times. This valorized (hierarchical) past and sacred national tradition become the standard of good against which all people, things, and phenomena are evaluated. This epic world, constructed in the distant and inaccessible past, is beyond the temporal present where contact and investigation are possible and which is developing, incomplete, and continually re-evaluating.[51] Thus, while there is reliance upon *memory* with the epic, the novel emphasizes *inquiry and knowledge*.

[50] Ibid., 7. According to Holquist, "dialogism conceives history as a constant contest between monologue and dialogue, with the possibility of reversions always present. The novel is the characteristic text of a particular stage in the history of consciousness not because it marks the self's discovery of itself, but because it manifests the self's discovery of the other" (*Dialogism*, 75).

[51] Holquist, *Dialogic Imagination*, 15.

Folkloric Roots of the Novel: Serio-Comical Literature

In contrast to the official genres, the novel is associated with an eternally living and developing unofficial language. Because the human orientation in the novel is the temporal present, time and the world become historical, unfolding and becoming in continuous movement toward the future. According to Bakhtin, the folkloric roots of the novel are found in ancient serio-comical genres such as the Socratic dialogues, Roman satire, and Mennippean satire. The people's ambivalent laughter in the serio-comical genres, in contrast to the seriousness of the complete and absolute past of epic, is associated with contemporaneity, transitoriness, and the present. In serio-comical genres, the official genres are parodied; the heroes and gods of the past are brought into the present using contemporary low language. The straightforward and serious official word of the epic is ridiculed. The official monoglossic truth and unitary meaning is opposed by a dialogic form of truth with a multiplicity of meanings. The distance of epic is destroyed by laughter, drawing the images close, to maximal proximity and familiar contact where they can be fearlessly and freely examined, exposed, and subject to experimentation. The destruction of this epic (hierarchical) distance that allows an object to be exposed (removed of hierarchical ornaments and clothing) and examined from many perspectives is referred to by Bakhtin as 'decrowning.' As the object is examined, it is broken apart and separated in what amounts to a comical dismemberment and change of things into dead objects.[52] Laughter in Menippean satire also has an important familiarizing role that permits a freedom to degrade lofty and sacred things and worldviews. Fantastic plots and

[52] Ibid., 23. According to Bakhtin, "laughter demolishs fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it" (23).

situations are often used to expose ideas and ideologues. The tone of satire is generally critical or cynical.[53]

Bakhtin saw the laughter of parodic-travestying literature as a permanent corrective to the serious direct word of official genres. The heteroglot and contradictory nature of the serio-comical genres functions as a *critique* on the monologic and monotonic word of high genres such as epic. The serio-comical literature, as the counterpart to the official genres, critiques the serious word by exposing the unified language to the inconsistent and conflicting experience of the present. As laughter draws the heroization of the epic into the present, *the contradictions and inconsistencies* of present reality expose the insufficiency and limitations of the serious word.[54] The serious word is not discredited; rather, it is supplemented and complemented.[55] It is not the heroes or the heroes' actions that are parodied; rather, it is their tragic heroization that is parodied. The hero thus becomes pregnant with potential for growth and change.[56] For Bakhtin, this *corrective* aspect of ancient laughter to the serious official word is related to the development of discourse.[57]

The focus of ancient serio-comical literature on the subject matter of language itself is an important unifying element that relates the genres. Parodic-travestying literature functions to overcome myth's homogenizing power over language and to liberate the consciousness from the control of the direct word (monoglossia). This view presupposes that consciousness was imprisoned within its own discourse and that this new freedom allows linguistic consciousness to form for the creative artist *outside* from

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[53] Ibid., 25.
[54] Ibid., 56.
[55] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 434.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Holquist, *Dialogic Imagination*, 58.

the perspective of another, from the point of view of another language and style. According to Morson and Emerson, "laughter becomes the sound *outsideness* makes."[58] Polyglossia is thus a necessary precondition for liberation of the consciousness from the control of one's own language. It is by the use of another language and style that the objectivized meaning of the direct word and its style are parodied. The language of parody is oriented toward the same object, but at the same time it is aimed at the direct word about the object within the serious literature. Bakhtin states:

> The incorporated languages and socio-ideological belief systems, while of course utilized to refract the author's intensions, are unmasked and destroyed as something false, hypocritical, greedy, limited, narrowly nationalistic, inadequate to reality. In most cases these languages—already fully formed, officially recognized, reigning languages that are authoritative and reactionary—are (in real life) doomed to death and displacement.[59]

Thus the monoglossic *language and word* of myth or epic also becomes a *represented image.*[60]

Both polyglossia (the existence of two or more national languages operating with a culture) and heteroglossia (the stratification of languages within a national language) are conditions that influence the centralizing or decentralizing forces on language as it develops over time.[61] Bakhtin observes that a unitary language represents forces that work toward ideological unification and centralization, forces intimately associated with the processes that work toward socio-political and cultural centralization. The centrifugal forces of heteroglossia tend toward decentralization and disunification and act to stratify language into linguistic dialects and socio-ideological languages. It is within the individual utterance that these forces intersect. Each utterance, therefore, is a unity made

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[58] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 435.
[59] Ibid., 312.
[60] Holquist, *Dialogic Imagination*, 60.
[61] Ibid., 67.

up of tensions and contradictions that reflect the processes of socio-political and cultural life.[62]

Organization of Heteroglossia in Novelistic Literature

The *dialogized* heteroglossia of serio-comic genres and novels contain various socio-linguistic points of view.[63] A sociological stylistics of these genres requires establishment of the social context or *chronotope* of discourse since this is the force which determines both form and content. Chronotope refers to the interrelationship of time and space as artistically expressed in literature and is associated with the interconnection between the fictional world of the novel and the real world of the author.[64] The creative author becomes positioned within the work by the way in which the other voices and languages are organized against the background of the social context.[65] "The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions."[66] The author expresses his or her socio-ideological position in the midst of the multitude of view-points of his time.[67] In novelistic literature, a diversity of social speech types, languages, and individual languages are artistically organized by the creative author. The author introduces social heteroglossia into the novel through fundamental compositional unities that allow for a multiplicity of social voices and a variety of their links and

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[62] Ibid., 272.
[63] Ibid., 273.
[64] Roland Boer, *Bakhtin and Genre Theory in Biblical Studies*, Semeia Studies 63, ed. Gale A Yee (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 2.
[65] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 300.
[66] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 263.
[67] Ibid., 300.

interrelationships.[68] Examples of such compositional unities include "a comic playing with languages, a story 'not from the author' (but from a narrator, posited author, or character), character speech, character zones, and various introductory or framing genres."[69]

Within the comic novel, play with languages may occur in a number of ways. The author may use the common language of a specific social group that is perceived as the average norm of spoken and written language and the common point of view and values held by that sphere of society.[70] The author becomes distant to that point of view to some extent, allowing his or her intentions to interact with it. The author can *exaggerate* elements of the common language in order to show its inadequacy in relation to its object. The author may also, against this background of the common language, use *parodic stylization* of other socio-ideological languages and genres. This parodic stylization of another language can incorporate the appropriation of another's speech using direct quotes or speech in half-hidden or completely hidden forms. The boundaries between the artist's speech and another's speech are often ambiguous, with the artist deliberately distorting and confusing them. The unmasking of another's hidden speech or language that differs from the author can be used to expose hypocrisy, falsehood, greed, and ideas inadequate to reality. These double-accented or double-styled constructions are called *hybrid constructions*.

A *hybrid construction* is defined as the utterance of a single speaker according to its syntactic and compositional markers, but that contains two speech styles, languages,

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[68] Ibid. Bakhtin notes that traditional scholars often analyze in a novel only "one or another of its subordinated stylistic unities" (263).

[69] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 323.

[70] Ibid., 301.

and belief systems. Sometimes a *hybrid construction* is found in a single word that belongs to two systems, with the word having two contradictory meanings.[71] At the other extreme, an author can parody and destroy an entire work, including another novel. This is the case with Rabelais and other comic novels that parody almost all of the ideological languages and genres to the point that conceptualizing anything at all in language is deemed inadequate for representing reality or expressing an alternate truth. Because the truth cannot be expressed in words, it becomes the unmasking and destruction of all that is false.[72]

Heteroglossia is also organized in a novel by the creation of *character zones.* *Character zones* are the authorial speech that surrounds the speech of characters. These zones of authorial speech are often formed using methods that characterize the hero in ironic ways, using hidden sayings from the speech of others or even fragments of the character's speech in the form of the hero's inner speech. These invasions into authorial speech may take the form of ellipsis, questions, or exclamations. *Character zones* are spaces where the author can create dialogue with the characters.[73]

The *speech of characters* is also used by the artist to organize heteroglossia in a novel in the form of direct speech, indirect speech, and quasi-direct speech. Humans within the novel speak, but this speech is artistically represented by the author as discourse. The speech and fates of individual characters within the novel and their language and belief systems are always oriented toward a social significance. According to Bakhtin, a speaking character within the novel is always, "to one degree or another, an

[71] Ibid., 304.
[72] Ibid., 309.
[73] Ibid., 317.

ideologue, and his words are always *ideologemes*."[74] Linked to characters' speech is also their behavior. A character's actions also reveal its ideology, an ideology that can be compared to that of its discourse. This comparison may function to expose hypocrisy, inconsistency, or deceit.

Creative authors can use a variety of forms to incorporate quotations or the speech of others into a novel. Bakhtin points out that the authors of medieval literature set quotes from the Bible within a variety of contexts, thus varying the relationships toward the 'word.' Sometimes it was set apart as pious, respected, and revered. Other times the context set it up to be ridiculed and disrespected. The variations at times made the distinction ambiguous and difficult to distinguish. Bakhtin describes parody as an intentional hybrid of the poetic language and the low prosaic language that parodies. The two languages, styles, and points of view are crossed, with the parodying language invisible but present as an actualizing background for perceiving. The intentional hybrid of parody is thus dialogic and polemical between two languages and styles. The Latin 'parodia sacra' is described as a dialogized hybrid that constitutes a folkloric dialogue or argument between a serious sacred word and a jolly folk-word. Thus, "another's sacred word, uttered in a foreign language, is degraded by the accents of vulgar folk languages, re-evaluated and reinterpreted against the backdrop of these languages, and congeals to the point where it becomes a ridiculous image, the comic carnival mask of a narrow and joyless pedant, and unctuous hypocritical old bigot, a stingy and dried up miser."[75]

The *insertion of genres* into a novel is another way to organize heteroglossia. Bakhtin notes that incorporation of other genres in the novel may provide a structuring

[74] Ibid., 333.
[75] Ibid., 76-77.

role in the novel. They are often used because they provide alternative verbal and semantic forms for representing other aspects of reality.[76] The use of genres in the novel can be one of the primary means for appropriating reality through words.

An important feature of the contemporary field of representation within the novel is the author's new relationship to the represented world. In the novel, the authorial image can appear on the field of representation. Since the language of the author and the language of the hero are on the same plane, they can enter into a dialogic contact or relationship. Bakhtin emphasizes the importance of this new position of the author for stylization and composition. In the novel, the author can employ surplus knowledge which is unknown or unseen by the hero so that the image of the hero can be manipulated by the author's surplus of knowledge. The image of characters in the temporal present of the novel can be depicted according to more than one worldview or truth. When laughter destroys epic distance, allowing familiar contact and proximity, the hero can be depicted with the authenticity of *inconsistency, contradiction, and incompletion*. The artistic structuring of the mask (and clothing) allows the character to assume any destiny, but there is always a happy surplus of possibilities in the hero's own developing and renewing face under the mask. The author can also manipulate tension between the internal and external dimension of the hero, experimenting with integrity and subjectivity on a familiarizing and humorous plane.[77]

Carnival

In addition to emphasizing the importance of dialogized heteroglossia as an essential feature of the novel, Bahktin also points to the importance of laughter and

[76] Ibid., 321.
[77] Ibid., 36.

carnival in the novel's historical development.[78] Carnival has its roots in the primordial order and thinking of humanity.[79] The folkloric heritage of laughter has been discussed above in relation to ancient serio-comical literature and parody. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin describes the original traits of carnival folk culture and its development into the Middle Ages and Renaissance. The three manifestations of carnival folk culture are the ritual spectacles, the comic verbal compositions, and genres of billingsgate.[80]

Carnival rituals, based on laughter, are in *opposition* to the official political and ecclesiastical cult forms and ceremonies, offering instead an alternative world of human relations outside of officialdom. Carnival is not something seen; it belongs to the borderline between art and life. Carnival laughter is universal in scope; the laughter belongs to all the people and is directed toward everyone, including the participants. This second world is characterized by fearlessness, freedom, and radically inclusive and democratic relations among all people. Free familiar contact among the people regardless of hierarchical divisions, created an environment of 'rebirth' where "truly human relations' are experienced.[81] Bakhtin states, "Carnival is the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life."[82] Because carnival includes self-ridicule, it promotes

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[78] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 431.
[79] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 122.
[80] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 5.
[81] Ibid., 10. Morson and Emerson critique Bakhtin's utopian –realistic concept of purely human relations because it neglects the particularity of individual humans lives necessary for specific voices and bodies to join with other individual humans, a concept so important in Bakhtin's earlier writings. (*Creation of a Prosaics*, 451).
[82] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 123.

modesty and opposes posturing for authority.[83] The public square is symbolic of carnival because it is the place where a heterogeneous group of people can congregate and come into familiar contact. The marketplace or public square is the site where fates and appearances change and hidden calculations are exposed.[84] Carnival laughter is oriented toward things superior in the hierarchical order and privileged in terms of authority and truth. Because carnival is an environment of experience and free inquiry, it is a route to knowledge.[85] Bakhtin emphasizes the ambivalence of carnival laughter. It is gay and triumphant, but also mocking and degrading.[86]

The carnival feast is in opposition to the official political and ecclesiastical feasts which sanction the existing hierarchical order of the church and state. Official feasts, serious in their tone, emphasize all that it stable, unchanging, complete, and perennial. Hierarchy and rank are emphasized as everyone was expected to attend dressed in the 'full regalia of his calling.'[87] Official feasts represent the established truth that is eternal and irrefutable. By contrast, carnival feasts represent freedom, equality, community, unfinalizability, abundance, and potential or possibility. The symbols of carnival represent change, renewal, and relativity of truths and authorities. Bakhtin describes this logic as "inside out," "turnabout," "shifting from top to bottom," and "numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings."[88] Discrowning is symbolic of the transitory nature and instability inherent in any

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[83] Caryl Emerson, "Coming to Terms with Bakhtin's Carnival: Ancient Modern, sub Specie Aeternitatis," in *Bakhtin and the Classics*, ed. R. Bracht Branam (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2002),8.

[84] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 145.

[85] Caryl Emerson, *Bakhtin and the Classics*, 8.

[86] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 12.

[87] Ibid., 10.

[88] Ibid., 11.

hierarchy.[89] Crowning and de-crowning, so fundamental to the carnival view of the world, represents the 'joyful relativity' of all order, hierarchy, and authority. The one crowned in carnival is the very opposite of the king; it is the slave or clown. In this joyful relativity, the de-crowning always appears behind the crowning. When the king is de-crowned, he is beaten and mocked. The ambivalence in carnival can be seen in the folk humor which denies and degrades, but also renews and revives. It is seen in familiar contact of king and slave and the profanation of the lofty and sacred.[90]

Another characteristic of carnival resulting from a free and familiar attitude is what Bakhtin calls *carnivalistic mésalliances*. Things normally separate and distanced from one another in the ordered and hierarchical world are brought into contact, combining the sacred and profane, laughter and weeping, wise and foolish, lofty and low, and eminent and insignificant. Also associated with rituals of carnival are disguise, reversals of position, bringing down-to-earth, bloodless carnival wars, profanations, cursing matches, and gift exchanges.[91] According to Bakhtin, these carnivalistic 'thoughts,' surviving for thousands of years, exert a formal, genre-shaping influence on literature. The transposition of sensuous carnival forms and artistic images into the language of literature he refers to as the *carnivalization of literature*.[92] This literature tends to emerge during historical periods of decentralization when centrifugal forces of culture undermine the centralizing social and political institutions with their national myths and languages.[93] Bakhtin summarizes the function of carnival-grotesque literature: "To consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different

[89] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 443.
[90] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 125.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid., 122.
[93] Craig, 37.

elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things."[94] According to Bakhtin, carnivalized literature has an indestructible vitality and a life-creating and transforming power.[95]

[94] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 34.
[95] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 107.

CHAPTER 3

BAKHTINIAN APPROACHES TO THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Kenneth Craig: Esther as an Example of Literary Carnivalesque

Kenneth Craig defends the application of Bakhtin's theories to the ancient Hebrew text of Esther by pointing to the emphasis Bakhtin placed on the historical development of literature over time and his extensive knowledge of literature in general. Bakhtin's expertise extends well beyond literature of the Renaissance. Craig states:

> Bakhtin is a master comparatist. The Russian theoretician drew from ancient grammarians and rhetoricians, and he was as familiar with Hellenistic romances and medieval fabliaux as with classic works from the Baroque and Enlightenment areas. His knowledge of Greek and Latin is evident on many pages of his oeuvre. He moves from Ion of Chios and Macrobius to a host of eighteenth and nineteenth-century writers of Russia, England, France, and Germany.[1]

Bakhtin traced the folkloric roots of the novel to ancient serio-comical genres such as the Socratic dialogues, Roman satire, and Mennippean satire.[2] This genre of literature provided the nucleus or folk-carnivalistic base for later works such as those by Rabelais. Craig theorizes that the Hebrew text of Esther is part of this ancient serio-comical literary foundation. Carnivalesque literature tends to emerge during periods of decentralization,

[1] Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque*, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 13.

[2] In the preceding chapter, both Jackson and Berger noted that comedy is universal among societies and cultures throughout history.

when centrifugal forces work to undermine centralizing authorities, national myths, and unifying languages.[3] Craig also notes that carnivalistic folk festivities (such Roman Saturnalia) precede the rise of Christianity, dating back to ancient times.[4] These rituals "mingle death and life in a fertility rite (or as Bakhtin calls it, 'pregnant death') in the course of which established [canonized] values and established authority are turned upside down in favor of a 'joyous relativity' that signifies the ongoing life of the community."[5]

Craig proposes that the Masoretic text (MT) of Esther is an example of what Bakhtin refers to as the *carnivalization of literature.* He identifies carnival forms, images, and language in the book to support his view that Esther belongs to the genre of literary carnivalesque. The logic of reversals (crownings and decrownings), the contrast between official and non-official culture, the themes of death and rebirth, the dissolution of reigning authorities and dominant worldviews, and most importantly, the theme of festival and feasting associated with freedom, merriment, and possibilities are found throughout the book.[6] The carnival laughter and collective gaiety in Esther provide another perspective of the world, one that opposes the serious and oppressive official view. Because it is collective, it expresses the concerns of a group, the common folk, providing an outlet for critique and fantasy and producing an atmosphere of fearlessness and freedom.[7] The folk culture and carnival laughter in Esther can be seen when hierarchy and authoritative monoglossic truth (especially law) are overturned in an

[3] Craig, *Reading Esther*, 37. Bakhtin also found "parts of the New Testament permeated by menippean carnivalization, including the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and the Apocalypse" (41).
[4] Ibid., 41.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 32.
[7] Ibid., 150.

unofficial attitude of hope for survival and freedom from oppressive socio-political structures.

Turnabout is a central feature of Esther, and the plot develops through a number of peripeties or reversals. Mordecai is honored and Haman hung on the gallows, the opposite of what Haman had expected. The men who should be ruling and speaking in their houses are later listening to the advice of their women (including Haman, Mordecai, and Ahasuerus). Finally, the genocidal decree issued by Haman is reversed when Mordecai and Esther issue a counter-decree that attempts to overturn the plight and powerlessness of the Jews. Clothing and regalia in Esther symbolize reversals and the transfer of power prevalent throughout the story. The king's signet ring is a symbol of power that is transferred from one to another during unexpected reversals. This ring also signifies the authority to write and issue official imperial laws and decrees. Other royal regalia that relate to transfer of power include the crown worn by Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai (and possibly the royal horse) and the royal robe expected by Haman, but ultimately donned by Mordecai.[8] Mordecai had previously worn sackcloth in reaction to Haman's genocidal decree to destroy the Jews. Esther also wears royal clothing when she approaches the king to intervene on the Jews' behalf.[9]

The opposition between the "official" and "unofficial" realms can be seen in the representatives of each group. In Craig's view, Esther and Mordecai represent the unofficial culture. The folk are the Jews, a certain people with laws different from the

[8] Craig notes that "uncrowning never assumes the character of personal invective; it aims at a higher level," at reversing or even destroying every aspect of the hierarchical status quo. Every official institution or authority that abuses power is a potential target for ridicule and punishment (106).

[9] Another conclusion drawn by Craig is that Haman desires royal power and authority, but Esther and Mordecai receive them without asking. They do not desire the power and status in the way that Haman does. Mordecai even receives the wealth of Haman's house by the end of the story (98-99).

other peoples. Esther and Mordecai are characterized by Craig as the powerless heroes who outwit the mastermind of the Jewish genocide, Haman.[10] Esther and Mordecai are opposed to Ahasuerus and Haman, the leaders of the official culture who are greedy for honor and power. Haman intends to destroy the unofficial culture by annihilating the Jews, and prepares to do so by writing a new official decree that is sealed by the king's signet in the king's name and sent throughout the empire to all the provinces.[11] Law in Esther is associated with official royal decisions and the oppressive rule of official hierarchies and institutions. Craig states: "Indeed, no aspect of Persian life escapes the rule of law. The empire is governed strictly according to imperial law, which is mentioned at virtually every turn of the plot, and the threat of genocide is compounded by the unalterable law."[12] In contrast to Persian law, Craig characterizes Jewish law as "unofficial" and does not associate this law with any official hierarchies or institutions.[13]

Craig further supports his view of Esther as carnivalized literature by examining the book's carnival images, especially its banquets, the market square, crowns, masks, pregnant death, parody, fools, and collective gaiety. He proposes that Esther is an inversion of canonized values and in the end has a utopian worldview.[14] Official and unofficial banquets are found throughout the book of Esther, functioning as a site for the transfer of power. The drinking banquets of Ahasuerus and Haman, celebrating the rise of Haman and the decree of genocide, are contrasted with the fasts of Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews who take unofficial counter-measures. These fasts turn into communal feasts of rejoicing as the dire situation is overturned, Mordecai becomes increasingly greater, and

[10] Ibid., 33.
[11] Ibid., 59.
[12] Ibid., 55-56.
[13] Ibid., 58.
[14] Ibid., 44.

the Jews overcome their enemies. At Esther's banquet, non-official culture uses the banquet as a means to gain power, as Haman begins to fall and Mordecai and Esther rise in power and authority. In Craig's view, the opening banquets are official feasts where the greatness and opulence of the official culture are displayed. The exaggerated imagery in the opening banquet scene is consistent with carnivalesque imagery.[15] The official hierarchy is evidenced in the titles of those in attendance, including the king, nobles, army, wise-men, and other government officials. The Jewish feasts at the end are ostensibly non-official in nature, as they symbolize the communal celebration of life in the presence of death. Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews gain life and power as Haman falls and dies. These last chapters of Esther, often considered by scholars as later additions, are a fundamental element of the book as carnivalesque literature according to Craig.[16]

The public square, the center of unofficial culture, is another carnival symbol found in Esther. It represents the space where the people gather to oppose official dogma, order, and hierarchy. The public square is "at once public yet not official, concerned with a range of social identities distinct from those imposed by the state or official society."[17] Craig identifies the concentric circles of official power with the king centered in the inner court of the citadel located within the capital city of Susa. The provinces lie outside of this center.[18] Unofficial culture is located in the city square where Mordecai laments Haman's genocidal decree and conversely, where Mordecai is honored by Haman at the order of the king. Mordecai moves toward the center of official power as he is found sitting in the king's gate and walking before the court of the harem. He appears to be a

[15] Ibid., 94.
[16] Ibid., 67.
[17] Ibid., 69.
[18] Ibid., 71.

lower official in the Persian hierarchy. When Mordecai the Jew, located in the king's gate, refuses to bow to Haman the Aggagite, the decree to annihilate the Jews is written. Just as Vashti's refusal to obey the king affected all women in the empire, Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman affects all Jews.[19] In Craig's reading, Haman, a representative of the official hierarchy, is a "demonic man" whose evil plan is to destroy the Jews, the people of the unofficial and powerless realm.[20]

Another carnival symbol discussed by Craig is the mask, which in Esther takes the form of secrets hidden from the king about either identity or plans.[21] The king does not know that Mordecai and Esther are cousins or that Esther is ostensibly a Jew. The king does not know Haman's real intentions for the planned genocide or Esther's purposes for her banquets. In Craig's view, Mordecai has Esther conceal her identity in the royal court because he anticipates the problems in chapter 3 that their people would become endangered.[22]

Craig recognizes the importance of the fool and the clown in carnival culture and theorizes that Ahasuerus and Haman are fools, but ones who do not laugh at themselves. They produce laughter by bringing close for examination what had been far off, including their monoglossic dogmatic language, depriving it of its power. This laughter in Esther functions to overcome fear. [23] The king is a fool who does not think for himself and is always asking questions about what to do. Haman is a fool because of his pride and lack of self-control seen in his boasting and anger.[24] Mordecai and Esther are ostensibly the

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[19] Ibid., 73.
[20] Ibid., 59.
[21] Ibid., 111.
[22] Ibid., 114.
[23] Ibid, 139.
[24] Ibid., 144.

opposite of the fool: "they are rational, sensible, and courageous. They know when to speak and when to sit silent."[25]

Bakhtin's carnival perspective of pregnant death is another element that Craig identifies in the book of Esther. Bakhtin argued that "death manifests itself as utter annihilation when viewed from an individual perspective, but when viewed from the community's perspective, part of a life-giving cycle whereby the community survives."[26] The story of Esther gives the Jews (the folk) hope that they will survive in the face of genocide and persecution. The communal festival of Purim is a celebration of transformation and renewal as life triumphs over death.[27] The triumph of life over death occurs several times throughout Esther narrative. The king survives the assassination plans of Bigthan and Teresh. Esther survives her unsummoned approach to Ahasuerus. Haman is hung on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Finally, the Jews destroy their enemies on the day they themselves were slated to be destroyed.

Craig asserts that the edicts in chapter 8 of Esther depict the killing in the book's conclusion as both a defensive action (8:11) and an act of revenge (8:13).[28] He acknowledges, however, that as it is carried out in chapter 9, it is a massacre committed by the Jews. The violence is mitigated by the theme of turnabout. It is the ones who sought to destroy the Jews that were destroyed by them. In addition, since the Jews do not plunder their enemies and since they kill only men in the city of Susa (not women or

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[25] Ibid., 146.

[26] Ibid., 121.

[27] Ibid. Craig states: "Death offers the greatest challenge to celebration, but it also becomes the necessitating force, the driving force for celebration. Always ambiguous, death is what is most celebrated against. It is for this reason that festivity, in literature such as the Esther story, plays such an important role in highlighting the carnivalesque concept of death as renewal. Triumph over death requires a recognition of its power and inevitability, but a larger sense of life emerges when the community affirms itself against individual mortality" (121).

[28] This vengeance is still considered by Craig to be a defensive action against a previous wrong action (127).

children), their actions are more consistent with self-preservation.[29] In Craig's view, understanding the Hebrew book of Esther as an example of the literary carnivalesque genre provides another way to read the slaughter committed by the Jews in chapters 8 and 9. The ending is part of the turnabout image prepared for in the preceding chapters. Therefore, the killing of Haman's sons is a "literary attack on the (dead) man's pride. Chapter 9 reveals the ultimate reversal: a minority threatened with annihilation because of one man, kills 75,810 without experiencing a single casualty."[30] Conversely, Haman's rage is viewed as an individual response that is unjust because it is raised to genocidal proportions.[31] Like many Esther scholars, Craig makes no direct link to the genocidal plans made against the Amalekites (or Canaanites) in Exodus, Deuteronomy, or 1 Samuel 15.[32] Craig deals with the ethical problem caused by the slaughter of Jew-haters in the final chapters by referring to it as a "literary war."[33] The exaggeration of the number killed without any Jewish casualties is part of the hyperbole present throughout the book.

Perhaps one of the strongest links that Craig makes between the Hebrew book of Esther, the literary carnivaleque, and the culture of carnival laughter is the relationship of the book to the celebration of Purim throughout history. Many scholars have theorized that the Esther story was written as a historical basis for the annual Purim festival and traditionally the story of Esther is read as a part of the holiday celebration. The association between the Hebrew book of Esther and Purim celebrations extends back to ancient times. Craig notes:

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[29] Ibid., 129. Craig mentions intertexts that relate to the conquest of Canaan, but primarily to illustrate the constraint practiced by the Jews in their slaughter at the end of the book (129-130).

[30] Ibid., 136.

[31] Ibid., 132.

[32] Ibid., 132.

[33] Ibid., 136.

> The Hebrew version of the Esther tale has been understood as part and parcel of laughter culture through the ages, and the dramatization of Purim events began long ago, possibly before the Christian era. The Purim festival had already been established by the second century C.E. when a tractate of the Mishnah was written outlining the details of its observance, and Italian carnival elements were injected during later centuries.[34]

Folk customs associated with Purim dating back to rabbinic times have traditionally included elements of pageantry, drunken revelry, grotesque masks, noisemaking, burning of effigies, costume parades, and parodic dramas and plays.[35] In his anthropological investigation, Jeffrey Rubinstein identifies rituals of status reversal, play, and other "phenomenona of liminality" associated with Purim celebrations.[36] Craig notes that customs associated with Purim celebrations reflect "a communally controlled transgression whereby ordinary identity and rules of behavior are temporarily set aside."[37] Purim celebrations and plays called *purimspiels* often include dressing in the clothing of another social role or gender and typically involve elements of parody and humor.[38] Craig states that "at its inception, Purim celebrates the conflict between order and chaos, stability and change, and the holiday gains its character from the struggle between authority and license."[39]

André LaCocque: A Bakhtinian Reading of Esther

André LaCocque in *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading* attempts to build on the work of Craig. In LaCocque's view, Craig identifies Esther as carnivalesque literature but

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[34] Ibid., 159.
[35] Jeffrey L Rubnstein, "Purim, Liminality, and Communitas," *AJS Review* 17, no. 2 (September 1, 1992): 250.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Craig, *Reading Esther*, 158.
[38] Ibid., 159.
[39] Ibid., 162.

stops short of reading the book in light of that generic distinction.[40] LaCocque determines the genre of Esther to be a carnivalesque diasporanovelle, a "low genre" influenced by folklore that allows the lower classes or minority population to respond to the contradictions of social life created by living among a hostile majority.[41] In his view, the book of Esther is one of conflicting carnivals. The carnival in the opening scene is a parody of parody whereby the imperial establishment parodies folk comedy and thus buttresses the status quo. The carnival at the end of the book subverts the official authorities and powers when the Jews use official power to triumph over their adversaries in a climactic reversal.[42] According to LaCocque, this second carnival begins when Mordecai is stripped of his sackcloth and dons royal regalia. "When the (former) slave rides a horse and the (former) prince walks on foot beside him, it is truly carnival. For Purim also legalizes license and even drunkenness (at least in the traditional perpetuation of the festival among the Jews), as was the king's order in Esther 1."[43] The carnivalesque diasporanovella provides a rhetorical vehicle that reflects the social, political, and religious changes during the Jewish diaspora of the Second Temple period.[44] For LaCocque, Esther is unique in that the story uses fiction to place the "unofficial" within the "official." The chronotope of Esther or the story's specific time and place is understood as the Persian royal palace in the 5th century B.C.E. Although Esther and

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[40] André LaCocque, *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 11.

[41] Ibid., 5.

[42] Ibid., 10.In this view, the Purim festival is subversive and breaks the status quo. Assertions of absolute truth will ultimately fail (84).

[43] Ibid., 13. LaCocque states that carnival is "the reenactment of a historically endured death that avoids letting that death have the last word. As Bakhtin insists, death in carnival is pregnant with the renewal of life" (15).

[44] Ibid., 8. The diaspornovlla is considered by LaCocque as a worldview or approach to reality apart from the religious categories associated with the land of Israel/Judea. This literary mode ostensibly competed with the scribal literature prevalent in Jerusalem during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (17). LaCocque theorizes that Esther as novelistic literature is concerned with the historical present, as opposed to epic literature that is nationalistic and traditional in nature (17).

Mordecai are described as courtiers in the royal court, they are not concerned for increased power; rather, their primary concern is for their people and they risk their lives to save them.[45] In LaCocque's view, Mordecai is indifferent to honor and is instead focused on defeating evil. He is a model to be emulated, and both he and Esther are considered representatives of the collectivity of diaspora Jews.[46]

LaCocque concludes that Mordecai's and Esther's power and authority "have been shaped to serve democracy rather than their own absolutist claim."[47] The purpose of the book is to show how Jews can survive under the threat of genocide and live prosperously in a foreign land.[48] Esther embodies the "double Jewish response to empire: assimilation and accession to government posts, on the one hand, but on the other a covert relativization of 'the truth' claimed as timeless and absolute by the political authorities."[49] Esther and Mordecai are integrated into Persian society without compromising their Jewish identity.[50] Mordecai had Esther don a mask (the Persian Queen) to hide her *true identity* as Jewish Hadassah.[51] She is forced to unmask herself when the Jews are faced with annihilation. This is an example of adaptation required in exile.[52]

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., 70. 2 In the view of LaCocque, Mordecai "counted on the hostile and murderous instinct of the Amalekite, knowing Haman's thirst for Jewish blood would push him to extremes and at one point or another would drive him out into the open where he would be exposed. If this holds, both the elements of secrecy and of civil disobedience on the part of Mordecai belong to a master plan that risks an enormous wager, namely the very lives of diaspora Jews, including Esther and himself, in order to triumphantly overcome the enemy" (66). This conclusion of LaCocque seems at odds with his view that Mordecai is a model to be emulated.

[47] Ibid., 41.

[48] Ibid., 17.

[49] Ibid., 35.

[50] Ibid., 57.

[51] Ibid., 61.

[52] Ibid., 61.4

The diasporanovelle of Esther provides a new worldview and identity for Jews living in diaspora. The old traditions that emphasized the land, temple, and Yahweh are conspicuously absent in Esther. Rather, the spatial and temporal present, the chronotope of Persia in the 5th century B.C.E., is central to the identity of Mordecai and Esther as representatives of the Jews. The background of 1 Samuel 15 brings the past into the present so that the ignominious past of Saul's confrontation with Agag can be brought to further development and redemptive closure in Mordecai's and Esther's dealings with Haman.[53] In LaCocque's reading of Esther, Haman is the villain who represents "absolute truth and determinism," while Esther and Mordecai represent the ability to transcend determinism. The Jew and the Amalekite represent respectively, "good and evil" and "polyglossia and monoglossia," and the triumph of Esther and Mordecai over Haman symbolizes the triumph of justice over injustice and good over evil.[54] Haman's chief accusation against the Jews is that their laws are different from all the other peoples, thus they are identified by an alternate truth that is not the imperial absolute truth. In the book of Esther there is a clash between *two* laws, *two* truths, and *two* worldviews.[55]

Like many commentators, LaCocque does not critique Esther and Mordecai for their association with the imperial regime and their maneuvering for power, including their imposition of the festival of Purim on the Jewish people that parallels the opening Persian banquet scene. Mordecai may have caused all Jews in Persia to be faced with annihilation, but worse is Haman, the "embodiment of the Jew-hater omnipresent in

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[53] Ibid., 66.

[54] Ibid., 30.

[55] Ibid., 39. LaCocque asserts that the secular view of the book is Esther is voluntarily subversive. "Implied is a critique of the official religiosity as incapable of helping a community under threat of annihilation and as therefore obsolete for all practical purposes"(42). He does recognize, however, the author's familiarity with Israel's literary traditions in the language used throughout the book of Esther. The author is using parody of style from Israel's traditions to ridicule imperial authorities and structures (43).

Jewish history."[56] Esther and Mordecai become the good that is opposed to the evil embodied by Haman. "Haman-the-Wicked" represents official seriousness, while Esther and Mordecai represent unofficial seriousness that is positive because it is expressed in "human compassion for suffering and weakness."[57] This conflict is, according to LaCocque, distanced from the ideology of holy war evident in 1 Samuel 15. Mordecai's civil disobedience that endangers the entire Jewish people is motivated by his desire to "triumph over the enemy," Amalek, "the symbol of the perennial presence of evil in the world."[58] Understood in this way, Saul was irresponsible and lukewarm because he didn't carry out the divine order to eradicate evil by annihilating King Agag with all of the Amalekites.[59] The Amalekites as representatives of evil must be subject to the ban, *herem*.[60] Although the Jews in the end of the book do kill 75,000 people, they were not motivated by fury or greed, since they did not plunder the victims. They were led by deliberation so that they atone for and avoid Saul's "blunder."[61] The exaggerated violence and death at the end of the book should be understood in light of Esther's carnivalesque genre. Furthermore, the second day of fighting was required to exterminate completely the enemies of the Jews and to eradicate evil.[62]

LaCocque concludes that the Bakhtinian distinction of *first line* novelistic literature applies to the book of Esther.[63] In the theoretical development of novelistic literature, Bakhtin distinguished between two stylistic lines which he called *first line* and

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[56] Ibid., 58.
[57] Ibid., 65.
[58] Ibid., 66,67.
[59] Ibid., 68
[60] Ibid., 68.
[61] Ibid., 70.
[62] Ibid., 96.
[63] Ibid., 45.

second line. In his view, the first stylistic line only approximates true "novelness." The distinction between the two stylistic lines is summarized by Morson and Emerson:

> The two lines exploit the resources of Galilean linguistic consciousness in fundamentally different ways. Basically, the first line strives for a finished, elegant style, which is studiously polished and never interrupted by heteroglot expressions from real life. Or if heteroglossia does interrupt style, the intrusions are isolated and never lie on the same plane as the elevated language that establishes the tone of the whole. The contrast between elegance and heteroglossia, if it is present at all, only serves to set off the elegance of the dominant language more palpably. By definition, then, works of the first line know only a single language and a single style (which is more or less rigorously consistent); heteroglossia remains *outside* the novel, although it does nevertheless have its effect on the novel as a dialogizing background in which the language and world of the novel is polemically and forensically implicated. Conversely, the second line incorporates heteroglossia *into* a novel's composition, exploiting it to orchestrate its own meaning and frequently resisting altogether any unmediated and pure authorial discourse.[64]

Associated with his classification of Esther as first line novelistic literature, LaCocque asserts that the characters in Esther are "more or less stereotypical and act, so to speak, by remote control" of the author.[65] The author is ostensibly engaged in a monologue that uses alternate voices.[66] In describing Esther and Mordecai as representatives of the Jewish people, he recognizes that in these two Jewish voices are echoes of a multitude of voices from ancient, present, and future times. He states:

> Esther is related to Mordecai, who is Kish, descendent of King Saul, and Haman is related to Agag, king of Amalekites. A whole world, a whole chronotope, lies in their background and in their foreground. Although we are facing characters that are less 'fleshed out' than those of Dostoevsky, we are after all, here as there, dealing with a dialogical literature."[67]

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[64] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 345- 346. Morson and Emerson point out that the first stylistic line conceives of itself in two ways. The first is that the discourse is not linked to specific contexts or genres and the second is that it is opposed to the "vulgar heteroglossia of daily life, against which it is tacitly but polemically directed. It is informd by a sense of general 'respectctability' and propriety" (353).

[65] LaCocque, *Esther Regina*., 46. LaCocque states: "First-line novels are stamped by their authors to such an extent that the characters are more or less stereotyped and act, so to speak, by remote control" (46).

[66] Ibid.

[67] LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 72.

Bakhtin did theorize that an author can introduce multiple voices in monologic literature if the author's intentions and evaluations dominate over and control the other voices. Multiple voices can even be used by the monologist to emphasize the author's single point of view.[68] But as noted above, LaCocque also refers to the book of Esther as dialogical literature and he views the characterizations of Esther and Mordecai as dialogical. This is one of the many apparent contradictions in his Bakhtinian reading of Esther.[69]

In contrast to the ostensible dialogical characterizations of Esther and Mordecai, LaCocque concludes that Haman's personality is unidimensional and his speech monologic.[70] There is no stated basis for this conclusion. LaCocque argues that the author has "choked off" Haman's voice so that he cannot defend his truth. Haman's truth is purportedly "unworthy of being given a hearing."[71] This supposition is not surprising since, as LaCocque admits, allowing Haman to plead his case and have a voice would place Esther in the second line of novelistic literature, the line that incorporates heteroglossia.[72]

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[68] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 203-204. Bakhtin states: "For the monologic novel. . . . whatever discourse types are introduced by the author-monologist, whatever their compositional distribution, the author's intentions and evaluations must dominate over all the others and must form a compact and unambiguous whole. Any intensification of others' intonations in a certain discourse or a certain section of the work is only a game, which the author permits so that his own direct or refracted word might ring out all the more energetically. Every struggle between two voices within a single discourse for possession or dominance in their discourse is decided in advance, it only appears to be a struggle; all fully signifying authorial interpretations are sooner or later gathered into a single speech center and a single consciousness; all accents are gathered together into a single voice" (203-204).

[69] LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 72. LaCocque asserts that there is a tension between the individual and stereotypical characterizations of Esther and Mordecai. They are ostensibly dialogic both collectively and individually due to the "multidimensionality of their personalities and the polyglossia of their discourse" (72). It is also interesting that LaCocque chooses the term "polyglossia" rather than "heteroglossia," because to use the term "heteroglossia" as incorporated into the book of Esther would place it within Bakhtin's second stylistic line.

[70] Ibid., 70.

[71] Ibid., 69.

[72] Ibid.

In LaCocque's view, Esther's author employs the unitary "ennobled language" characteristic of first line novelistic literature.[73] According to Bakhtin's theory, the unitary language of first line novelistic literature is polemically directed *against* heteroglossia. This polemic is even considered the "generic task" of first line novels.[74] The unitary ennobled language of the first stylistic line is informed by respectability and propriety and is "painstakingly . . . cleansed of all possible associations with crude real life."[75] Bakhtin contends that the first line's unitary language "gives expression to centripetal forces [official forces] working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization."[76] Conversely, works of the second line, those that incorporate social heteroglossia into the literature, emerge out of decentralizing, centrifugal forces (unofficial forces).[77]

LaCocque's rationale for placing Esther within the first stylistic line of novelistic literature includes his understanding that it would be anachronistic to place Esther in the classification of second line literature.[78] Bakhtin theorized that the first stylistic line reached full expression in the ancient world and the second stylistic line achieved only

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[73] LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 117. LaCocque quotes from Bakhtin's essay in *Dialogic Imagination* (387).

[74] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 347.

[75] Ibid., 353-354.

[76] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 271. Morson and Emerson state that heteroglossia is "Bakhtin's term for linguistic centrifugal forces and their products" and that heteroglossia "continually translates the minute alterations and re-evaluations of everyday life into new meanings and tones, which, in sum and over time, always threaten the wholeness of any language" (*Creation of a Prosaics*, 30).

[77] Ibid., 273. Bakhtin theorizes that social and historical heteroglossia are centrifugal and stratifying forces and that novels are shaped "by the current of decentralizing, centrifugal forces" (272-273).

[78] LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 69.

preparatory elements.[79] But of ancient serio-comical literature such as Menippean satire, Socratic dialogues, and Roman satire Bakhtin states:

> All these genres, permeated with the "serio-comical," are authentic predecessors of the novel. In addition, several of these genres are thoroughly novelistic, containing in embryo and sometimes in developed form the basic elements characteristic of the most important later prototypes of the European novel. The authentic spirit of the novel as a developing genre is present in them to an incomparably greater degree than in the so-called Greek novels.[80]

Bakhtin argues that a carnival sense of the world is the single feature common to *all* ancient serio-comical genres. Ancient serio-comical genres are the first examples of what Bakhtin calls "carnivalized literature."[81] Bakhtin further states:

> They [serio-comic genres] reject the stylistic unity (or better, the single-styled nature) of the epic, the tragedy, high rhetoric, the lyric. Characteristic of these genres are a multi-toned narration, the mixing of high and low, serious and comic; they make wide use of inserted genres—letters, found manuscripts, retold dialogues, parodies on the high genres, parodically reinterpreted citations, in some of them we observe a mixing of prosaic and poetic speech, living dialects and jargons . . . are introduced, and various authorial masks make their appearance. Alongside the representing word there appears the represented word; in certain genres a leading role is played by the double-voiced word. And what appears here, as a result, is a radically new relationship to the word as the material of literature.[82]

It therefore seems very plausible that the ancient Hebrew text of Esther could be classified as belonging to Bakhtin's second stylistic line of novelistic literature that incorporates heteroglossia into the work by the author.

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[79] Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 345.

[80] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 22.

[81] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 107. Bakhtin asserts that this "carnival sense of the world possesses a mighty life-creating and transforming power, and indestructible vitality. Thus even in our time those genres that have a connection, however remote, with the traditions of serio-comical preserve in themselves the carnivalistic leaven (ferment), and this sharply distinguishes them from other genres" (107).

[82] Ibid. According to Bakhtin, "seriocomic forms present a challenge, open or covert, to literary and intellectual orthodoxy, a challenge that is reflected not only in their philosophic content but also in their structure and language" (107).

Serio-comical literature has three fundamental characteristics. The first is that the subject is presented without epic distance in the living present and in a zone of familiar contact. Carnival laughter destroys hierarchical distancing and eradicates fear and piety so that objects can be scrupulously investigated and exposed. The second characteristic of serio-comical literature is reliance upon experience and free invention. Because carnival is an atmosphere of experience and investigation, it is a route to knowledge. The third fundamental characteristic is the multi-styled and hetero-voiced nature of serio-comical literature.[83]

Considering the characteristics of ancient serio-comical (carnivalized) literature, it seems unlikely that Esther would fall into Bakhtin's first line category of novelistic literature. Rather than being painstakingly cleansed of associations with crude real life, the book of Esther is permeated with matters of sex, drinking, murderous and genocidal plots, and greed for wealth and power. As carnivalized or serio-comical literature, Esther would favor a multi-styled and heteroglossic quality over a unitary and monologic style. Furthermore, the official, hierarchicizing, and centripetal nature of first line novelistic literature is directly opposed to the unofficial, de-normatizing, and centrifugal nature of carnivalized literature.[84] Carnivalized genres directly oppose the rhetorical seriousness, dogmatism, and monologism of official genres by incorporating heteroglossia and orchestrating a dialogic pursuit of truth that resists resolution and singleness of meaning.[85] The first line and monologic distinction LaCocque ascribes to Esther permits

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[83] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 108.

[84] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 425. Bakhtin states about carnival life: "The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is non-carnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it—that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age)" (123).

[85] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 106.

him to offer a resolution to the book. He concludes that the book of Esther provides hope that the Jews can survive the threat of genocide and prosper in a hostile foreign land by assimilating into the imperial power structures while simultaneously recognizing the relativization of the political authorities' version of absolute truth.[86] Esther and Mordecai ostensibly assimilate into the imperial hierarchy without compromising their Jewish identity. They are representatives of the collectivity of diaspora Jews, unofficial seriousness, and the good that is opposed to the evil embodied by Haman. LaCocque does not identify laughter directed toward Mordecai and Esther, even though laughter is the force that destroys epic distance, allowing the heroes to be examined and exposed in a zone of familiar contact. Bakhtin emphasizes the importance of laughter in folklore and popular-comic sources in the process of re-structuring of a hero's image:

> Its first and essential step was the comic familiarization of the image of man. Laughter destroyed epic distance; it began to investigate man freely and familiarly, to turn him inside out, expose the disparity between the surface and his center, between his potential and his reality. A dynamic authenticity was introduced into the image of man, dynamics of inconsistency and tension between various factors of his image; man ceased to coincide with himself, and consequently men ceased to be exhausted entirely by the plots that contain them. Of these inconsistencies and tensions laughter plays up first of all, the comic sides (but not only the comic sides); in the serio-comical genres of antiquity, images of a new order emerge.[87]

According to Bakhtin's theory of novelistic discourse, one would expect Esther and Mordecai to be ridiculed by carnival laughter. It is this ridiculing laughter that permits free and familiar investigation of the story's heroes in the present.

Bakhtin lists three fundamental characteristics of carnival laughter. First, it is universal in nature. Carnival laughter is directed toward everyone; no one is excluded,

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[86] LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 35.
[87] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 35.

including those who laugh.[88] Another characteristic of carnival laughter is its festive nature. Finally, carnival laughter is ambivalent. It is gay and triumphant, but simultaneously mocking and deriding.[89] If one accepts that Esther is indeed carnivalistic literature, it seems that no character should be exempt from laughter, including Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews. Carnivalistic laughter would permit these characters to be freely and fearlessly examined and the disparity, inconsistencies, and tensions between their surfaces and centers exposed. Additionally, character speech is one of several means an author can use to orchestrate social heteroglossia and opposing points of view into a work. The author can incorporate various speech types and opposing voices through the speech of narrators, posited authors, and characters as well as impersonal stylizations of generic and socio-ideological languages that allude to real social groups.

The most ancient forms for ridiculing another's direct discourse or language are parody and travesty. Parody is a fundamental element in *all* carnivalized genres.[90] Parody mocks and derides the straightforward word of serious genres, including lofty national myths. Bakhtin insists that in ancient times, "there never was a single strictly straightforward genre, no single type of direct discourse—artistic, rhetorical,

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[88] Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 11.

[89] Ibid., 11-12.

[90] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* 127. Bakhtin states that parody "is the creation of a decrowning double; it is that same 'world turned inside out.' For this reason parody is ambivalent. Antiquity parodied essentially everything; the satyr drama, for example, was originally the parodic and laughing aspect of the tragic trilogy that preceded it. Parody here was not, of course, a naked rejection of the parodied object. Everything has its parody, that is, its laughing aspect, for everything is reborn and renewed through death. . . . In carnival, parodying was employed widely, in diverse forms and degrees; various images (for example, carnival pairs of various sorts) parodied one another variously and from various points of view; it was like an entire system of crooked mirrors, elongating, diminishing, distorting in various directions and to various degrees" (127).

philosophical, religious, ordinary everyday—that did not have its own parodying and travestying double, its own comic-ironic *contre-partie*."[91] Bakhtin states:

> Parodic-travestying literature introduces the permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word, the corrective of reality that is always richer, more fundamental and most importantly too contradictory and heteroglot to be fit into a high and straightforward genre. The high genres are monotonic, while the "fourth drama" and genres akin to it retain the ancient binary tone of the word. Ancient parody was free of any nihilistic denial . . . The genre itself, the style, the language are all put in cheerfully irreverent quotation marks, and they are perceived against a backdrop of a contradictory reality that cannot be confined within their narrow frames. The direct and serious word was revealed, in all its limitations and insufficiency, only after it had become the laughing image of that word—but it was by no means discredited in the process.[92]

Bakhtin's theory supports the notion that there is a comic-ironic counter-part to Israel's national myths and official literature.

According to Bakhtin, all ancient forms of parodic literature are united by the purpose of providing a corrective laughter that criticizes and exposes the insufficiency of official genres, languages, and voices. The laughter of parodic literature critiques the serious word by exposing its unified language to the inconsistent and conflicting experiences of the present time. This corrective laughter creates a contradictory reality to the ones portrayed in the straightforward and serious genres. This alternative reality appears as its own totality as described by Bakhtin.

> Each separate element in it—parodic dialogue, scenes from everyday life, bucolic humor, etc.—is presented as if it were a fragment of some kind of unified whole. I imagine this whole to be something like an immense novel, multi-generic, multi-styled, mercilessly critical, soberly mocking, reflecting in all its fullness the heteroglossia and multiple voices of a given culture, people and epoch. In this huge

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[91] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 53. The ancient satyr plays or "fourth dramas" that follow tragic trilogies were a type of parodic-travestying counter-part. Bakhtin notes that the ancient Greeks did not view this parodic-travestying of national myths as blasphemous or profane (55).

[92] Ibid., 55-56. Bakhtin states that there is evidence of "an enormous world of highly heterogneous parodic-travestying forms" from ancient times (57). Some examples are satyr-plays, improvised comedy, satires, plotless dialogue, among others (59).

> novel—in this mirror of constantly evolving heteroglossia—any direct word and especially that of the dominant discourse is reflected as something more or less bounded, typical, and characteristic of a particular era, aging, dying, ripe for change and renewal. And in actual fact, out of this huge complex of parodically reflected words and voices the ground was being prepared in ancient times for the rise of the novel, a genre formed of many styles and many images.[93]

Parodic literature is heteroglossic and mercilessly critical because it represents the voices of a multitude of people who experience a contradictory reality to the ones portrayed in Israel's official literary traditions.

Many scholars have identified intertextual allusions and influences from Israel's traditional literature in the Esther story. There is general agreement among many that the book of Esther has been influenced by the traditions of Joseph, Exodus, and Saul. Stern proposes that Esther is a Judean text critical of diaspora living that is not grounded in particularist practice and not oriented toward Jerusalem and Judea.[94] In her understanding, this criticism is portrayed as a meticulous reversal of a fantasy life propagated in Judea through its national and cultural literature. She identifies in Esther parodic reversals of law, kingship, and Israelite identity as described in biblical texts such as the Pentateuch, the Deuteronomic history, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles, Psalms, and some prophetic books. LaCocque also identifies in Esther allusions to the Jews' official religious traditions and practices. The reference to protection arising for the Jews from another place in 4:14, the remedy of fasting in 4:1-3 for the threat of genocide, and the practice of hanging enemies on trees are a few examples. In spite of these allusions, LaCocque suggests that the absence of God and piety in Esther is subversive and critical of official religion. The temple priests cannot save the Jews who are facing annihilation,

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[93] Ibid., 60.
[94] Stern, *Esther and the Politics of Diaspora*, 26.

but sages engaged with imperial politics can initiate change.[95] LaCocque identifies other ambiguities of language in Esther that allude to the Jews' official literary traditions. The descriptions of the royal palace allude to the Temple, Ahasuerus' and Haman's anger alludes to God's wrath, and the king's hubris alludes to his being divine.[96] These allusions where one language interanimates another are examples of what Bakhtin calls "double-voiced words."[97] Another example discussed by LaCocque relates to the festival of Purim. He understands Purim as a parody of the Exodus, Torah, and Passover.[98]

Danna Nolan Fewell: Esther as Dialogic and Heteroglossic Literature

Danna Nolan Fewell proposes that the text of Esther is in dialogue with other texts from Israel's traditional literature.[99] In the introduction to *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, Fewell discusses the dialogic nature of Esther and its potential as an intertext to destabilize and expose the insufficiency of Israel's authoritative texts.[100] She proposes that the book of Esther challenges and contests identity as constructed in the exodus and Passover stories and that reference to "the law that cannot be changed" may be a "veiled reference to Torah."[101] The Esther story

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[95] LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 42.

[96] Ibid., 43.

[97] Ibid., 63.

[98] Ibid., 93-95. According to LaCocque, the sole purpose of Israel's law is to promote values such as love, trust, hope, and justice. Although he recognizes Purim as a parody of Exodus, he explicitly states: "We should, however, stop short of considering the 'voices' thus represented as 'clash[ing] hostilely with [the] primordial host and forc[ing] [it] to serve directly opposing aims." Because Purim mocks the socio-political authorities and dismisses law and order, the book of Esther is characterized as universalistic and democratic. The feasting and rejoicing of Purim is all-inclusive because non-Jews join the Jews to celebrate the defeat of evil. In LaCocque's approach, the book of Esther achieves resolution when evil has been exterminated and the Jews are liberated.

[99] Danna Nolan Fewell, "Introduction: Writing, Reading and Relating," in *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, Edited by Danna Nolan Fewell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 12.

[100] Ibid., 11, 14.

[101] Ibid., 14.

constructs another identity that does not replace the formative traditions, but rather "decenters" and destabilizes them.[102] The additional voice offered by Esther allows the introduction of change without changing the original formative texts. As stated by Fewell, the text of Esther "keeps the canon from becoming a law that cannot change; it helps to keep the canon alive and talking."[103]

In her book *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of our Children*, Fewell also draws attention to the dialogic and heteroglossic nature of the Esther text. In the Purimspiel, "Nice Girls Do," carnivalesque multi-vocality, satire, theatre, and pedagogy combine to subvert and question issues of identity and other serious concerns facing teenage girls in the contemporary world.[104] The Purimspiel dramatizes the story of Esther using a diverse cast which includes a female rabbi, a female Christian minister, and teenage girls from the youth groups of the leaders' respective synagogue and church. Preparation for the ecumenical Purim celebration and exploration of the Esther text provides the "space to encounter and to contemplate the experiences and needs of children and the adults who try to care for them."[105] In the girls' discussion of the Esther story, they discover "dirty little secrets" that are suppressed in the text, but are nevertheless there.[106] In relation to biblical texts such as Esther in which children are either overtly or tacitly victims of war, genocide, and abuse, Fewell poses the following questions:

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[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid.

[104] Danna Nolan Fewell, "Nice Girls Do," in *The Children of Israel: Reading the Bible for the Sake of our Children* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003). Fewell's carnivalsque Purimspiel is supported by abundant footnotes that include the theories of philosophers (Levinas), literary critics (Chapman, Kermode, Foucault), anthropologists (Turner), and the sociological literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin.

[105] Ibid., 24.

[106] Ibid., 150. Examples given in the Purimspiel include the surgical violation of the eunuchs in the Esther story and of young girls in some contemporary cultures and the sexual exploitation of young girls by those in positions of power.

> How can those texts speak to how we might construct a world fit for our children? What would they demand of us as readers of the Bible and as caretakers of children? How might we read them in ways to help us think responsibly, critically, and creatively about how children are to be regarded, how they are to be treated, and the ways in which we, as adults, can work toward justice and protection and well-being of children?[107]

The reading and living strategy suggested by Fewell in her book is termed "interruption."[108] This strategy involves questioning the biblical story, imagining it being told differently, and questioning one's own life and conceiving of living it differently.[109] In the carnivalesque Purimspiel, through the voices and perspectives of a diverse group of characters, issues that concern young girls in both the Esther text and contemporary reality are raised and subsequently questioned, critiqued, and ridiculed. Examples of subjects explored by the cast include gender, ethnic, racial and self identity constructions, government, community and household leaders, social institutions, slavery, anti-Semitism, law, and issues of violence and injustice in both the Esther story and the contemporary world. All of the characters in the Esther story are subject to critique and ridicule as the teenage girls discuss assignment of each character for the play and the narrative itself. No character in the Esther story, in the cast of the Purimspiel, or in contemporary society is exempt from critique and ridicule. Even God and religious leaders are subject to critique and the coarse humor of carnival.[110] God is critiqued for not intervening during the Holocaust and vast human suffering in the present. The ambivalence of carnival laughter is evident throughout the Purimspiel as the teenage girls laugh and ridicule during their discussions of serious, revered, and disturbing subjects.

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[107] Ibid., 24.
[108] Ibid., 34.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid., 183. -

A Bakhtinian Reading of the Masoretic Text of Esther

Building on Fewell's intertextual approach to Esther and her application of Bakhtinian theory, this dissertation will focus on the Hebrew text of Esther and its dialogic and parodic relationship to Israel's more official traditional literature.[111] Entertaining the possibility that Esther de-stabilizes identity as constructed in Israel's Torah, the following analysis explores in close detail how the Esther text orchestrates different view-points related to identity as constructed in Israel's official literature. In contrast to scholars who maintain that the book of Esther functions to strengthen Jewish identity in diaspora, this Bakhtinian reading contends that the book of Esther is questioning, challenging, and (as suggested earlier by Beal) problematizing identity constructions found in Israel's traditional literature.[112] Likewise, the text of Esther does not discredit Israel's Torah and traditions; rather it is a supplement and complement to them. As Fewell has suggested, the Hebrew text of Esther destabilizes Israel's official laws and traditions so that the laws can change when their insufficiency and limitations are exposed and critiqued by carnival laughter. Furthermore, in this Bakhtinian reading of Esther (as in Fewell's Purimspiel), no character is exempt from the universal laughter and

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[111] In characterizing Esther as a parodic counter-part and its laughter corrective of the insufficiency of Israel's traditional literature, it is not assumed that this other literature is monoglossic and not heteroglossic. Bakhtin states: "It must not be forgotten that monoglossia is always in essence relative. After all, one's own language is never a single language: in it there are always survival of the past and a potential for other-languagedness that is more or less sharply perceived by the working literary and language consciousness" (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 66).

[112] Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* 13. In his essay *Epic and Novel*, Bakhtin uses the contrast between epic and novel as genres as a means to explicate his theory of the novel. He states that the "world of the epic is the national heroic past: it is a world of 'beginnings' and 'peak times' in the national history, a world of fathers and founders of families, a world of 'firsts' and 'bests.' The formally constitutive feature of the epic as a genre is rather the transferral of a represented world into the past, and the degree to which this world participates in the past" (13). Bakhtin also states: "The absolute past is a specifically evaluating (hierarchical) category. In the epic worldview, 'beginning,' 'first,' 'founder,' 'ancestor,' that which occurred earlier' and so forth are not merely temporal categories but *valorized* temporal categories, and valorized to an extreme degree" (15).

ridicule of carnival, including Esther, Mordecai, Israel's political and religious leaders, and the Jews.

In Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, the historical and social contexts of discourse are essential to analysis.[113] Meaning is understood against the background of contradictory and contested points of view and value judgments related to the same theme.[114] If the text of Esther is read as a dialogic and heteroglossic carnivalesque literary response to Israel's hierarchizing, unifying, and official national and cultural literary traditions, then a thorough historical and social context for the book must be proposed. The identification of various social viewpoints in Esther relating to the theme of identity as constructed in Israel's authoritative texts requires an understanding of the historical and social contexts that would generate such a questioning, challenging, and opposing social dialogue. The next chapter will present a suggested social and historical context for the dialogue and heteroglossia orchestrated in the book of Esther.

[113] Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Tx.: University of Texas Press,1981), 271.

[114] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 281.

CHAPTER 4

THE SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Date and Location of Composition

Reference to the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes I, 486-465 BCE) in the opening of the book of Esther helps to narrow the date of its composition to sometime in the post-exilic period, likely either the late Persian or early Hellenistic periods. Most biblical scholars agree that the book must have been written by the second century BCE due to the colophon of the LXX version of Esther which puts the copyist's writing as sometime in the late second or early first century BCE. Josephus also uses the Esther story in *Jewish Antiquities* written in the first century CE.[1] The evidence often cited to support a late Persian or early Hellenistic period composition includes the general lack of animosity towards the Jews in the story by the Persian rulers and the majority of the peoples of the empire and the conclusion that the linguistic features of Esther's prose is closely related to late biblical Hebrew sources in the later post-exilic period.[2] Those that argue for a date of composition no later than the early Hellenistic period point to the apparent sympathetic attitude toward the Gentile king, an attitude that would be unlikely during Seleucid rule.[3]

[1] Frederic W. Bush, "Ruth, Esther," in *Word Biblical Commentary*, Edited by David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Dallas:Word Books, Publisher, 1996), 295-296.

[2] Ibid., 296-207.

[3] Carey A. Moore, "Esther," in *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1971), LVII.

Most scholars would admit, however, that there is no evidence at this time for a more precise dating of the book's original composition.[4]

The location of Esther's composition is also uncertain. Although the story context is primarily the city of Susa and it appears that the writer had knowledge of Persian customs and practices of the royal court, there is no data to exclude the possibility that Esther was originally composed in Judea or another Jewish community of the Diaspora. As stated by Adele Berlin, "If it is, indeed, a Diaspora story from the Persian period, it could have been written in any Jewish community, more likely a Diaspora Jewish community, but it is not possible to identify its place of origin."[5]

The History of Jews and Judaism in the Late Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods

The history of the Jews and Judaism in the post-exilic period is controversial and uncertain. According to 2 Kings 24-25, the Babylonians deported to Babylon many of Judah's highest ranking officials, wealthy landowners, skilled craftsmen, and elites, including King Jehoiachin, in 597 BCE. Following a prolonged siege of Jerusalem and its destruction in 586 BCE, another group of Judeans were deported to Babylon. This event marked the destruction of the Davidic monarchy, the temple, the royal palace and the fortifications of Jerusalem. The narrative of 2 Kings reports that only the poorest people of the land were left behind to be plowmen and vinedressers. Although presumably the wealthy aristocrats and ruling elite were exiled to Babylon, it is possible that some type of village social structure was retained with the addition of Babylonian

[4] Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* Second Edition (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 1991), 139.

[5] Adele Berlin, "Esther," in *JPS Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2001), xlii.

appointed administrators.[6] Those who were exiled to Babylon may have been settled in small agricultural communities (Ezekiel 1:3) or placed in bureaucratic positions to serve the imperial administration (2 Kings 25:27-30). Therefore, during the exilic period, it is likely that there were Judeans still living in the land of Judah while many of the elite nobles and officials of Judah were deported to Babylon.

After the Persian defeat of Babylon in 539, Cyrus presented himself as a liberator of the gods and people that had been captured by the Babylonians. Seth Schwartz states:

> In comparison to the Assyrians and Babylonians, who were mainly interested in collecting tribute from their subjects, and punished brutally those who failed to pay, the Persians were mild but interventionist. Cyrus posed as a liberator, a restorer of gods and peoples following the depredations and deportations of the Babylonians, and this pose became a fixture of Persian imperial rhetoric. In practice, the Persians tended to patronize native oligarchies, preferably those with strong connections to temples, and encouraged them to try to regulate the legal and economic activities of their provinces. This last consideration may help explain the imperial patronage of the Torah.[7]

According to Pierre Briant in *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, the imperial propaganda found in texts such as the Cyrus Cylinder and the biblical books of Ezra-Nehemiah that depicts Cyrus as a liberator functions to facilitate cooperation between local authorities and elites and the imperial administration.[8] The book of Ezra-Nehemiah recounts the return of exiled Judahites to Judah and Jerusalem in groups under

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[6] Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1995), 17. There is no lack of controversy over whether Judah was devastated after the Babylonian conquest or it was only minimally affected, with the majority of the population living their lives relatively unchanged.

[7] Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 21.

[8] Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, Trans. Peter T. Daniels (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 43. Briant states that the Persian Empire allowed many towns and cities to retain "considerable autonomy, as long as they fulfilled the obligations placed on them, especially the financial and military obligations" (64). He furthermore remarks about conquered populations relocated to Babylon that rulers such as Cyrus and Cambyses desired "to bring about a total disruption of existing conditions. Many institutions known from their time find their antecedents in the Mesopotamian imperial structures of the previous centuries. In other words, the transformations did not necessarily result from suppression or destruction of the existing institutions, but more often and doubtless more efficaciously came about by gradually adapting these institutions to the new structure outlined by the conquerors" (70).

the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jehoshua and Ezra and Nehemiah with the goals to rebuild the Temple, to teach the laws of God, and to rebuild the fortifications of Jerusalem. Many scholars question the concept of a "mass return" in the early Persian period, asserting that historical evidence supports more of an ongoing process over the span of a century.[9] Jerusalem was ostensibly a small urban center settled by priests, temple servants, landed aristocracy, and appointed imperial officials.[10] The rural settlements in the hill country of Judah and Samaria were likely a source of agricultural goods that were collected by the Persians through taxation.[11] The concept of a mass return is viewed by many as an ideological foundation and social construct that serves the interests of a specific group that claimed to be the "true Israel".[12]

In books such as Ezekiel and Ezra-Nehmiah, the rightful possessors of the land are those who returned from exile or members of the Golah. Any people remaining in the land are depicted as "illegitimate usurpers."[13] As noted by John Kessler, "a closer reading of the biblical text, as well as available archaeological data, reveal a more nuanced picture, one in which the returnees find themselves in a variety of complex relationships with a great diversity of centers of power."[14] Included in this diversity are those who may have been worshippers of Yahweh or those who had some stake in the temple or the city

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[9] Bob Becking, "'We All Returned as One!'," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 12.

[10] Oded Lipschits, "Achaemenid Imperial Policy and the Status of Jerusalem," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 32.

[11] Ibid., 30.

[12] Becking, 12-13. Becking also states that the "Myth of Mass Return" is related to the "Myth of the Empty Land." Another way of expressing the same concept is that "we all returned from Exile" just as "we all went into Exile." (7).

[13] John Kessler, "Persia's Loyal Yahwists," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, ed. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 92.

[14] Ibid., 92. Kessler notes that even if the socio-political structures in the land of Judah after the Babylonian conquest are uncertain, it can be generally accepted that some of the former population remained in the land, and unlike Assyrian strategies, no external populations were settled in place of those exiled.(92).

of Jerusalem." Textual and archaeological evidence supports the supposition that there were Yahwists belonging to groups such as the Golah returnees, the Golah members who remained in Babylonia, Samaritan Yahwists of various origins, Egyptian Yahwists (possibly descendants of those who fled following the Babylonian conquest), and Yahwists who remained in the land after the Babylonian conquest in 586 BCE.[15]

Using the sociological model of a Charter Group derived from the work of Canadian sociologist John Porter, Kessler suggests that the Golah returnees formed a "refounding" Charter Group.[16] A Charter Group is defined as "an ethnic elite that moves into a geographical region, establishes its power base, and creates a sociological and cultural structure distinct from the one already existing in that region. Thus a Charter Group is the first ethnic group to come into a previously unpopulated territory as the effective possessor, noting as well that a Charter Group may have to conquer an indigenous group to establish its claim."[17] The Golah returnees are described as a re-founding Charter Group that uses genealogies, religious traditions, literacy, bilingualism, legal rights, and imperial authorization to make claims on land and authority in the province of Yehud.[18] According to Kessler, the Babylonian remainees' interest in the refounding venture was primarily "an attempt at ethnic, cultural, and religious identification with a geographic site deeply rooted in the community's historical and

[15] Ibid., 93. Admitting that there is no consensus on the ethnic composition of the Samaritan Yahwists, Kessler notes that "it is widely held that it contained both those who were descendants of the inhabitants of the former Northern Kingdom and those who were settled there by the Assyrians" (94). There may also be some epigraphic evidence of Yahwist communities in Galilee, Gaza, Ashdod, and Idumea in the Persian period (95).

[16] Ibid., 103.

[17] Ibid., 99.

[18] Ibid., 105. Kessler notes that the Persian "'dynastic model' employed by the Persians, whereby members of the former ruling elite, deposed by the Babylonians, were reinstated and served to further imperial interests" (105).

religious heritage."[19] The Golah returnees presumably had a dual allegiance to both the Persian administration and the Golah remainees in Babylonia.[20] Kessler summarizes in this way: "Thus the returnees were "Persia's Loyal Yahwists"—an ethnically defined group whose mission was to found (or in this case to reestablish) a community and central shrine around a shared version of the worship of Yahweh, in subjection to and with the support of the Persian Crown and their co-religionists in the east."[21]

Under Persian rule, the Golah returnees regained a position of power and dominance in Jerusalem and the Judean province. When the Jerusalem temple was rebuilt, the Persians allowed the Judean elite to direct the temple-state according to their own indigenous cultural traditions and laws, as long as the Persian Empire received their required taxes and military service.[22]

Whether or not the Torah was authorized or initiated by the Persian authorities and how much involvement they had in the process of its composition are highly debated issues. Many biblical scholars of the Persian period would agree that the Persian imperial context had some influence on the composition of Torah and the codification of its legal material, even if there was no official Persian authorization or initiation. Alexander Fantalkin and Oren Tal argue that archaeological evidence points to a political reorganization of Judea after the revolt of Egypt (404-400 BCE). Reorganization of this frontier and buffer region likely resulted in increased Persian control and involvement in

[19] Ibid., 104.
[20] Ibid., 103.
[21] Ibid., 106. This description is not intended by Kessler to minimize the hardships experienced by the Golah community in Babylonia as described in works such as those of D.L. Smith-Christopher (106).
[22] Richard Horsley, *Scribes Visionaries and the Politics of Second Temple Judaism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 16-17.

Judean affairs.[23] According to Fantalkin and Tal, this geopolitical change was the initial impetus for the compilation, redaction, and canonization of literary works that would over time become known as Torah.[24]

Although the impetus for the production and adaptation of Israel's official literary traditions is uncertain, there is little doubt that the legal codes functioned to construct group identity and re-establish a post-exilic community in the Persian province of Yehud. Anselm C. Hagedorn discusses the importance of legal codes and practice in colonial and imperial contexts. He states:

> Law represents a central aspect of the way (emerging) nations tell their stories—who they are and how their ethnic identities have been forged. This aspect is the reason why, in the perspective of others (especially the Greeks and the Jews), the Persians must have had a set of laws; if law represents identity and a certain degree of equality, any group that claims to be an ethnic community must have a set of laws that help to maintain its ethnic status.[25]

Hagedorn concludes that "even if one does not postulate that the Pentateuch served as the constitution for a Jewish community or state during the Persian period, it can hardly be denied that extensive writing and reworking of older material took place during the Persian period" in a form that permitted the corpus to function within the imperial context.[26] The ruling elite presumably responded to the changing socio-political reality of being under the authority of the Persian Empire. [27] The redaction and canonization of

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[23] Alexander Fantalkin and Tal Oren, "The Canonization of the Pentateuch. (part I): When and Why?," *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 124, no. 1* (January 1, 2012): 1-18.

[24] Alexander Fantalkin and Tal Oren, "The canonization of the Pentateuch. (part II): When and why?," *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 124, no. 1* (January 1, 2012): 201. The authors acknowledge that the process of canonization occurs over a lengthy period of time, but they theorize that the geopolitical changes in the Persian Empire following the revolt of Egypt was an event that triggered the process.

[25] Anselm C. Hagedorn, "Local Law in an Imperial Context: The role of Torah in the (imagined) Persian Period," in *The Pentateuch as Torah: New Models for Understanding its Promulgation and Acceptance*, ed. Gary Knoppers and Bernard Levinson (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 68.

[26] Ibid., 67.

[27] Alexander Fantalkin and Tal Oren, "The canonization of the Pentateuch. (part II), 203.

Israelite traditions allowed for renegotiation of a new collective identity (Jewish/Judean) "*vis-á-vis* both the Persian authorities and local non-Judahite populations," an identity that legitimates the rights of the group to possess and rule over a certain territory.[28] The temple in Jerusalem functioned as the center from which the elite ruled the land of Judea.

The temple of Jerusalem, like temples in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, functioned as the religious, economic, and political center of the city and its surrounding villages. The peasant farmers and shepherds served the ancestral gods by bringing tithes and offerings to the temple. These gifts, in turn, supported the managerial priesthood, who ensured that the required imperial taxes and tribute were collected.[29] A governor appointed by the imperial regime also imposed order on the province and watched out for imperial interests. The surplus demand put on the peasants by the local and imperial rulers resulted in economic hardship and struggle for many. It was not uncommon for the peasantry to become deeply indebted to the wealthy elite, sometimes forcing them to sell themselves or their children into debt-slavery and to sell their ancestral land (Neh. 5:1-5).[30]

It is reasonable to assume that the indigenous "people of the land" (those who remained in Judea after the Babylonian conquest) would be in conflict with the restored elite who had Persian support of their claim to local authority and possession of the land.[31] Many cultural and religious traditions either produced or reworked by this group legitimated their claims to authority and land by depicting the land as desolate and empty

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[28] Ibid. Fantalkin and Oren note that the anti-Egyptian polemic and the defeat of the Egyptian gods by Israel's god would be viewed favorably by the Persians after the revolt of Egypt (203).

[29] Ibid., 17.

[30] Ibid., 24. Nehemiah 5 depicts the Priesthood, nobles, and officials as complicit in exploitation of the peasantry.

[31] Ibid., 23.

and the returnees as the only true "Yehudim."[32] However, in addition to conflict between the indigenous peoples and the ruling elite, there was also conflict between groups within those in leadership positions. Diverse Judean traditions suggest that there were conflicts between various groups of priests. Horsley identifies three conflicts between priestly groups, including conflict between indigenous priests and those who returned from Babylon, between Aaronite and Zadokite priests and Levites, and between various priestly lineages. Since priestly groups were the primary cultivators of literary and legal traditions, it would be expected that there would be a variety of Judean traditions which were in competition with one another, including the dominant ones. This competition could explain the variety of legal traditions found in the Torah/Pentateuch.[33] The rivalry and maneuvering for power of the various elite groups suggests that the priests of the Jerusalem temple were instruments for Persian control over the province of Yehud in the Persian period.[34]

The Social Role of Scribes and Authorship of Literature

Karel Van Der Toorn argues that the texts which eventually became the Hebrew Bible were produced by the literate scribal elite who taught and studied in the Jerusalem temple workshop in the period between 500 and 200 B.C.E.[35] Van Der Toorn claims that

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[32] Ibid. As noted by Horsley, the emphasis on genealogy and prohibition of exogamy in texts such as Ezra-Nehemiah are examples of cultural traditions likely propagated by the Golah returnees. This emphasis would "keep the landed property in the control of the [returned] exiles" (23-23).

[33] Ibid., 28. The power of the priestly aristocracy can be seen in traditions which describe other officials from the satrapy Beyond the River (Sanballat the Horonite the Persian governor of Samaria and Tobiah the Ammonite) who intermarry with the family of the high priest as a means of gaining power and wealth in the province of Yehud. The prohibition against intermarriage with those not from the Golah community may be in part to prevent a loss of hegemony over other "outside" groups and to prevent the dilution of the languages and culture that strengthened group identity (29-30).

[34] Ibid., 32.

[35] Karel Van Der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1-2.

the scribes of this period were scholars and teachers who produced, edited, publically read, copied, and interpreted texts and traditions in a predominantly oral culture.[36] It was by way of oral performance that traditions reached a larger audience. The texts which now comprise the Hebrew Bible are repositories "of tradition, accumulated over time that were preserved and studied by a small body of specialists."[37] Since texts are presumably accumulations of written and oral traditions over time and are produced, edited, and copied by anonymous scribes, the modern concept of authorship does not apply. When pseudonymous authors are named as the producers of a text, it is primarily a way to confer greater authority.[38] The concept of authorship in antiquity relates to the social role of the individual. Van Der Toorn states: "In Mesopotamia and Israel, the author, being a subcategory of the individual, is a particular character or role. The social group the author belongs to and identifies with is that of the scribes. His work expresses the common values, ideological and artistic, of the scribal community."[39] Because texts were commissioned by wealthy patrons and institutions (including the priesthood), written texts also reflect their values and viewpoints.[40]

The scribes of the Second Temple period were part of the elite class of society.[41] Their scribal education could prepare them for careers as lawyers, doctors, court functionaries, linguists, guardians of cultural traditions, teachers, and advisors to imperial

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[36] Ibid., 2. Van Der Toorn concludes that the scholars of Israel were "scribes who had specialized in the classic texts, which in their case made them scholars of Torah" (81).

[37] Ibid., 5.

[38] Ibid., 34. The scribal curriculum of the Second Temple period is described by Van Der Toorn in this way: "In the first phase, students acquired the basic skills of writing, composition, and eloquence. The second stage of the curriculum was devoted to memorization and study of classic texts of their trade and their culture" (98). The students became "enculturated" through memorization of oral and written traditions (103). Training in foreign languages would also be an important part of scribal training (100). These conclusions by Van Der Toorn are supported by comparative evidence from Egypt and Mesopotamia.

[39] Ibid., 46.

[40] Ibid., 48.

[41] Ibid., 104.

and local rulers and aristocrats. According to Horsley, scribes and sages were "retainers with scribal-legal-cultural-religious functions, some of which may have overlapped with those of the priests."[42] Teaching the law or torah of God and guarding Judean cultural repertoire were the responsibilities of the scribes. They served the priesthood, rulers, and wealthy nobles and thus were dependent on them economically, but they did have an authority of their own due to their expertise in Mosaic Law.[43] The exhortations in the Torah to defend the interests of the poor and oppressed put the scribes in occasional conflict with their wealthy priestly and aristocratic patrons.[44] Although scribes worked for the elite, they still felt an ethical responsibility toward those marginalized and oppressed by the rulers of the empire and temple-state, especially since social justice is foundational to the concept of wisdom.

In his book *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature*, David M. Carr suggests that the education and enculturation of scribes through an oral-written process that set apart a priestly and scribal elite probably occurred during a period of Israelite urbanization and the development of a city-state hierarchical system.[45] Although the exact time when an early Israelite state was formed is uncertain, a text supported educational system was likely in place by the late pre-exilic period.[46] In the post-exilic Persian Period, the Mosaic Torah gained a "supreme authority" in Judah,

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[42] Horsley, *Scribes and Visionaries*, 67.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid., 69. Horsley notes that in the Persian period some Levites were scribes but not all scribes were Levites. He further states: "that scribes were closely associated with priests and Levites enables us to understand many references in later texts to the scribes exercising functions that had been assigned to the priests in earlier literature" (80).

[45] David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 131.

[46] Ibid.

even though the scribes would have knowledge of traditional priestly and non-priestly literature (the entire Judean Cultural Repertoire).[47] Carr states:

> This relatively fixed Mosaic Torah instruction now stands at the center of a temple-centered community headed by priests. The monarchy is gone. Where a king, Josiah, is envisioned as leading the people in the Torah-reading and covenant-making in Kings (2 Kings 23:1-3), the book of Nehemiah depicts a priest, Ezra, leading the people in a similar Torah-reading (Nehemiah 8). In addition, the "Torah" taught to such Israelites—whether in Ezra's period or afterward—is an increasingly priestly Torah. Through the inclusion in the Torah of priestly traditions, lay Israelites receive some of the education enculturation once reserved for priests. As a result, Israel is no longer just a "wise" people (as in Deuteronomy) but a people made "holy" by their reception of a (partly) priestly education-enculturation, "a nation of priests." In literary depictions like Nehemiah 8 they receive this education- enculturation from true priests, but it marks them—at least in comparison to non-Israelites—as a holy people.[48]

This education and enculturation process thus functions to legitimate hierarchical identity constructions within the Judean/Jewish community and also in the community's relation to other "foreign" groups who are ostensibly less educated and impure (depicted as the Canaanites and Amalekites).

Jan Assman in *The Mind of Egypt* argues that ancient societies such as Israel and Mesopotamia responded to disruptions or discontinuities in traditional order by writing retrospective historical narratives and myths that connect the present to the past. For ancient Israel, the Babylonian exile is an example of such a discontinuity and disruption.[49] Assman relates the principle of canonization to continuity and the attempt to ban variation due to the passage of time. In literary traditions, canonization means that a certain set of central inherited traditions should not be changed. This "institutionalization

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[47] Ibid., 171.Carr admits that "there is much debate about how this somewhat unprecedented conflation of traditions came about. To some extent, it may have been the product of compromise between remnants of royal groups in early postexilic Judah and the newly dominant priests. Yet it is also possible, even probable, that the Persians played some role in endorsing and even commissioning the combined Torah of Priestly and non-Priestly traditions" (170).

[48] Ibid. 172.

[49] Jan Assman, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, translated by Andrew Jenkins (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 22-23.

of permanence" or strategy for foiling time is a means to "perpetuate a time-resistant cultural identity."[50] In ancient Egypt, this type of literature emerged when the Egyptian state was reorganizing during the period of the Twelfth Dynasty, a period of unification and restorative recentralization following the "chaotic" First Intermediate Period.[51] By the time of the New Kingdom, following the breach of tradition that occurred during the Armana period, certain texts from the Twelfth Dynasty were written in their original language (in contrast to the changing spoken language) and "elevated to the canonic status of classics."[52] In the case of Israel, following the breach of traditional order that occurred as a result of the Babylonian exile, historical narratives and normative traditions from the past would likely be re-worked in a manner that could support re-centralization and restoration of a post-exilic community. The codification of social norms depicted as a father teaching his son "the totality of social existence—a codification of social competence" can be seen in the Book of Deuteronomy.[53] The recapitulation of Israel's history and the nucleus of the community's normative cultural repertoire can be found in the Deuteronomy and Exodus traditions. Deuteronomy links the late monarchy to the

[50] Ibid., 65.

[51] Ibid., 126. The wisdom literature of this period in its codification of social norms was central to reorganizing the state as a monocracy and theocracy (127).

[52] Ibid., 273.

[53] Ibid. 125. Assman notes that these instructions are both initiatory and testamentary in character. In the case of Deuteronomy, "Moses, the teacher and lawgiver, stands at the threshold of death, just as the people of Israel—the tutelary collective—is on the point of crossing the Jordan and entering into the Promised Land. At this point there is a recapitulation of the totality of commandments, regulations, and statutes designed to form the foundation of life in the Holy Land and make Israel 'a wise and understanding people' (Deuteronomy 4:6). The fundamental difference between Israel and Egypt is that for the Israelites the commandments did not codify the norms prevailing in the world around them. The commandments came from Sinai; they were part of an extraterritorial, revealed order. Very different norms were operative in the land of Canaan. The Israelites were not only prohibited from adapting to these norms, but were instructed to set themselves apart in the strictest possible way, thus to live in accordance with extraterritorial norms" (125).

Persian period, a period of restorative recentralization following the exile. [54] Van Der Toorn states:

> Owing to its long history, the Book of Deuteronomy bridges the time of the late monarchy to the Persian period. Starting out with a revision of the written law inherited from the mid-monarchic era (i.e., the Covenant Code), Deuteronomy takes its readers to the time of Ezra, who held out the Torah as the ultimate form of wisdom (Ezra 7:14, 25). In response to two centuries of national history, the scribes reconceptualized the Torah, and by the same token, their own role as legal scholars. Deuteronomy takes us from Hilkiah to Ezra; both are priests and both are associated with the Book of the Torah. Ezra, however, is also a scribe, whose ideal prototype and ancestor the editors of Deuteronomy had portrayed as the figure of Moses.[55]

Although the authoritative nature of these normative traditions is often referred to as a canonical status, the concept of canonization as a list of authoritative books does not occur until the late fourth century CE based on decisions made by the church synod.[56] Carr prefers to use the term "scriptures" because the term implies that the texts were understood by ancient Near Eastern cultures as divinely inspired sources of sacred norms. Just by virtue of their being written, the normative texts would assume a numinous and semi-divine quality that supports their authoritative status.[57] Susan Niditch asserts that the iconic and monumental functions of writing relate to the perception of writing as sacred, extraordinary, and representing permanence. Written words were in some cases thought to have magical and transformative power.[58]

Whatever model is used to understand the formation of the biblical canon, whether a scribal curriculum, a library catalogue, or a canonical list, the phenomenon is

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[54] Ibid. 379.
[55] Van Der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 172.
[56] Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*, 276.
[57] Ibid, 290.
[58] Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, ed. Douglas Knight (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 84, 107.

both discriminatory and authoritative.[59] Although many scholars would agree that a number of Israel's traditional texts gained an authoritative status by the end of the Persian period, this elevation of status did not preclude the production of new literature. As observed by Assman in relation to Egypt, when the literature of the Middle Kingdom was elevated to classical status in the Ramesside period, new texts were being produced that emerged from oral traditions and a "culture of folk humor."[60] Citing the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Assman asserts that many of the artistic works from this period are carnivalesque in nature. Carnivalesque features including caricature, satire, grotesque exaggeration, physicality, and a world turned upside down are evident in literature and images of this era. Assman further states:

> But inversion in itself is not merely comic; it also presses home the point that the established order might look very different. The culture of folk humor draws heavilyon the tensions and hopes inevitably generated by the pressures of a strongly segregated and canonized official culture. In this period, then, a new dimension of aesthetic expression emerged, free of the constraints of official written culture, free of the normative claims of lite literature. . . In the Ramesside age, the oblivion-generating culture of folk humor, hitherto relegated to the subset of unwritten folklore, was admitted into the written realm of culture for the space of two centuries, where it constituted a "free space" of aesthetic communication.[61]

It is the thesis of this dissertation that the book of Esther is a carnivalesque (unofficial) text responding in opposition to the official and authoritative traditions produced during the reestablishment of a post-exilic community in the Persian province of Yehud.

As noted earlier, many biblical scholars have identified in the Hebrew text of Esther intertextual allusions to Israel's traditional literature, particularly texts and

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[59] Van Der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 247.
[60] Assman, *The Mind of Egypt*, 277.
[61] Ibid., 279.

traditions in Genesis (the Joseph tradition), Exodus, Deuteronomy, the books of Samuel (Saul and David traditions), Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles, Psalms, and some prophetic books. This thesis contends that these intertextual allusions in Esther are parodically ridiculing and critiquing the serious word of Israel's official traditions that were produced or revised in the post-exilic period. As noted by Van Der Toorn, the viewpoints of Israel's official cultural literature express the values, ideological viewpoints, and identity constructions of the elite, including the priests, wealthy aristocrats and scribes.[62] The heteroglossia or multiplicity of viewpoints orchestrated throughout the carnivalesque text of Esther is a means to challenge, question, and subvert ideologies and identity constructions in Israel's official literature. The works of scholars such as Horsley, Kessler, and Hagedorn contend that the identities of social groups in the Persian province of Yehud were diverse and heterogeneous and influenced by a multitude of power dynamics. Using Bakhtin's theory of the organization of heteroglossia in novelistic literature, this thesis will draw attention to the multiple viewpoints relating to identity as constructed in Israel's official texts. As unofficial literature arising out of folk culture, the viewpoints in Esther ridicule and critique official identity constructions that legitimate the power and authority of the elite and that leave indigenous and "other" social groups vulnerable to oppression, exploitation, and hardship. Since monarchy is one of the major socio-political structures targeted in the book of Esther (the root *mlk* occurs over 100 times in Esther), it is worthwhile to describe the social role of the king in the ancient Near East.

[62] Van Der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 46.

The Social Role of the King

In ancient Mesopotamian thought, the order of the city reflected the order of the state and of the cosmos. It was believed that cities were created by the gods prior to the creation of humans. Prominent cities had temples for the patron deity who was credited with founding, building, and sustaining the city.[63] Kingship descended from heaven into a city and the king mediated the god's power to the city and state. The king "was responsible for maintaining justice, for leading in battle, for initiating and accomplishing public building projects from canals to walls to temples, and had ultimate responsibility for the ongoing responsibility of the cult. Beyond that, every aspect of order and balance in the cosmos was associated with the king's execution of his role."[64] Wisdom was bestowed upon the king by the gods as a means to maintain justice and order in the kingdom.[65] One of the main responsibilities of the king was to establish a just society.[66] Several hendiadyses re used to express the concept of social justice in ancient Israel including "justice and righteousness" (*mishpat utsedaqah*), "righteousness and equity" (*mishpat umeysharim*), and "righteousness and truth" (*yishpot-tevel betsedeq v'ammim be'emunato*).[67] In Mesopotamia the hendiadys that expresses the idea of social justice is

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[63] John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2006), 276-277.

[64] Ibid., 278.

[65] Ibid., 283. Walton notes that in Egypt this concept is expressed as establishing *maat*. Order or *maat* is opposed to chaos or *isfet*. In Mesopotamia, the king was responsible for justice (*mišaru*) and truth (*kittu*); concepts which referred to welfare for the people and "administering a judicial system that protected the rights of the vulnerable" (283).

[66] 2 Samuel 8:15. Also see discussion of Moshe Weinfeld: Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 45. See also 2 Samuel 8: 15. When David became king, he began to administer justice and righteousness/equity for all his people. In 1 Kings 10:9, the Queen of Sheba exclaims that Solomon was set on the throne of Israel and established him as king to administer justice and righteousness/equity.

[67] Isaiah 11:4. In Akkadian the hendiadys *kittum u mīšarum* or "truth and equity" are similar to the terms in ancient Israel. In Psalm 99:4 "justice and righteousness" is used in parallel with "equity" and in Psalm 89:15, the kings throne is established with "justice and righteousness" and "steadfast love and faithfulness/truth" are before him.

kittum u mīšarum or "truth and equity." The Akkadian term *andurārum* or *durārum* (of the same root as *dror*, the liberty proclaimed during the Jubilee in Leviticus 25:10 and Isaiah 61:1) is another term associated with social justice. According to Weinfeld, the establishment of social justice reflected in these hendiadyses entails "improving the status of the poor and the weak in society through a series of regulations which prevent oppression. . . . Doing *mishpat utsdaqah* is likewise bound up with actions on behalf of the poor and oppressed."[68] Justice and righteousness include the judicial process, but it primarily refers to improving the plight of the poor through laws and regulations issued by the king and his closest advisors.[69] The *mīšarum* proclaimed by Mesopotamian kings is intended to liberate the poor and weak from their oppressors. The prologue of Hammurabi's law code states that the law code's purpose is to protect the weak from being oppressed by the strong.[70] The Mesopotamian terms *mīšarum* and *andurārum* can refer to socio-economic enactments that are intended for restoration of economic balance, manumission of people, and return of property.[71] The similar Hebrew terms *dror* in Leviticus 25 and *shemittah* in Deuteronomy 15 include the notions of liberation from slavery (for Israelites) and return of family and estate.[72]

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[68] Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 33.

[69] Ibid., 35. Weinfeld concludes "justice and righteousness" is not a concept that belongs to jurisdiction alone, but is much more relevant for the social-political leaders who create the laws and are responsible for their execution" (44).

[70] Ibid., 48. Furthermore, in the Hammurabi law code, the king is supposed to abolish evil and restrain the oppressor (49).

[71] Ibid., 75. These proclamations were often made at the king's coronation. The freedom proclaimed could be from slavery, from taxes and levies, from military service. "The common denominator was the will of the king to show favor to his people by protecting them and lightening their burden, or to reward his subjects who benefited him" (77).

[72] Ibid., 79. According to Weinfeld, the *mīšarum* of Mesopotamia and the *šümi††â* of Deuteronomy 15 have many similarities. In both "the legislator prohibits the lender from claiming his debt after the remission has been proclaimed. The expressions used are congruent from a semantic point of view and the style of address is also identical" to the proclamation of Ammi-saduqa (163).

A Persian period inscription discovered at Susa attributed to Xerxes (the *daviā* inscription) suggests that the primary role of the king is to bring order from disorder by means of the king's law and Ahura-Mazda's law.[73] Pierre Briant asserts that the term for law, *datā*, refers to a political-ideological concept, not a judicial-administrative one.[74] The decisions rendered by local judges, provincial judges, and royal judges were in accordance with local laws. The term *datā* or the phrase *datu ša šarru* (according to the king's law) could refer to rules, regulations, customs, or the king's edict.[75] Briant contends that in Esther 3:8, the contrast of the king's law with the law of the Jews emphasizes the "political rather than the judicial aspect: there was no question of imposing the Persian laws everywhere: instead, the royal edict explicitly recognizes the laws of the various peoples, in the same way the royal edicts were published in all the languages of the Empire."[76] Royal law refers primarily to the obligation to be loyal to the king and to pay the required imperial taxes and tribute.[77] The bas-relief sculptures on the walls of the staircases leading to the Apadana or audience hall in Persepolis illustrate Achaemenid monarchic ideology. On one side is the army of the Immortals or the king's private guard and the other side is the *Procession of the Tributaries* which depicts numerous delegates from subjugated peoples in an ordered procession bearing gifts for the king. These reliefs ideologically represent the king's unbounded authority over peoples and lands, yet the depictions of people as throne-bearers and gift-bearers emphasize their political subjugation and obligation to pay imperial tribute. The formulas

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[73] Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, Translated by Peter T. Daniels (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 552.
[74] Ibid., 552.
[75] Ibid., 510.
[76] Ibid., 511.
[77] Ibid.

used by Darius in the Behistun inscription and another inscription by Xerxes are strikingly similar. The first by Darius states: "'These are the countries which came unto me; by the favor of Ahuramazda they were my subjects; they bore tribute to me; what was said unto them by me either night or by day that was done.' The formula used by Xerxes is nearly identical: 'By the favor of Ahuramazda these are the countries of which I was king outside Persia; I ruled over them; they bore tribute to me; what was said to them by me, that they did; my law (*dāta*)—that held them firm.'"[78]

The ideology that legitimated the king's authority included the assertions that the king was chosen by the creator god (Ahura-Mazda), is from the appropriate familial lineage, and is of a conquering stature.[79] Inscriptions by both Darius and Xerxes list the duties and virtues of the king. Some of the virtues and duties of the king listed on the tomb of Darius at Naqši-i Rustam include the following: 1) Ahurmazda bestows wisdom and efficiency upon the king; 2) The king is a master in dispensing justice due to his ability to remain composed and in complete control even when angry; 3) The king is a restorer of peace; 4) The king rules firmly over his impulses; 5) The king rewards those who cooperate and punishes those who do harm; 6) A man who accuses another does not convince the king until he satisfies the *Ordinance of Good Regulations*; 7) The king rewards those who perform for him so that he is satisfied and has abundant pleasure; 8) The king has understanding and wise thinking, but above this, he is one who leads by action and example.[80]

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[78] Ibid., 178. Products came centripetally from the peripheral territories to the central Persian capitals (including Susa). The Persian table and paradise (royal garden) represent royal splendor (202).

[79] Ibid., 210.

[80] Ibid., 212. Briant also notes that in Herodotus' writing, the Persian king is forbidden by custom to put a man to death for one offense and that a man's faults are weighed against the services and assistance provided to the king (213).

Two statues of Darius holding a staff in his right hand and a lotus flower in his left were discovered in the gate of Susa in 1972. These statues adorned the immense gate that led to the king's palace and the Apadana.[81] Although there is no color in the robe worn by the king in these statues, in Greek writings, the king is described as wearing a tunic, trousers, mantle, and head-dress in the colors of purple, scarlet, white, and blue.[82] In the bas-reliefs of Persepolis, the king is depicted as seated on his throne with his feet on a footstool and a long scepter in his right hand.[83] According to Briant, the king held supreme power and "he never delegated his sovereign power to anyone. . . . When the king had to make a decision, he either acted alone or he appealed to a few men chosen according to their recognized abilities."[84]

Those who sought audience with the king first had to pass through the Darius Gate of Susa. Briant says of this gate:

> This term must not be allowed to confuse the reader. The Gate was actually an imposing building, distinct in Elamite and Persian vocabulary from the gate of a building. The word became a synonym for the palace and the court, as shown by the expression "Those of the Gate," which became a sort of court title (cf. Esther 2:21, 3:2-2 [JB Chancllery]), even in Babylonian tablets (e.g., Amherst 258). The best-known example currently is the Darius Gate at Susa, on whose columns Xerxes had the trilingual inscription carved "Xerxes the king says: 'By the grace of Ahur-Mazda, this Gate, Darius the king made it, he who was my father'" (XSd). At the base it measured 40 m by 28 m, and it rose to a height of some 15 m. It comprised three halls. The square central hall measured 21.20 m on a side; it was flanked on the north and south by two oblong halls open to the central hall (fig. 38). At Persepolis, the Gates were decorated with apotropaic reliefs (Royal Hero combating composite animals). At Susa, the passage to the central court was flanked by statues of King Darius. Within the great hall, stone benches were arranged against the walls, where, we suppose, the petitioners

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[81] Ibid., 216.

[82] Ibid., 217. The colors white, red, and blue corresponds to the social categories of priest, soldier, and farmer, respectively (217).

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid., 258. Briant concludes that it is unlikely that the king had a prime minister who had a disproportionate authority over others in the court. Among those who served in the court were the janitors (*pylōroi*) and listeners (*ōtakoustai)* who functioned as the "eyes and ears" of the all-knowing king (258-259).

> waited. In the Gate itself were cut openings, doors giving access to the interior of the palaces. But before getting access, the visitor had to pass numerous obstacles and go through quite a few check-points.[85]

The eunuchs were one group within the royal court with the responsibility to serve and protect the king and his harem. Greek writers often employed in their writings the stereotype of a powerful eunuch allied with a perverse woman conspiring against the king.[86] Quintus Curtius writes about the eunuchs who attended the king's 360 concubines and other writers discuss scandalous stories about homosexual relations between the king and his favorite eunuch or eunuchs conspiring to kill him.[87] Although eunuchs could hold powerful positions within the royal court and sometimes functioned to escort guests to the royal apartments and bedchamber, most were really in a position close to slavery. Young castrated boys and young girl were brought to the imperial palace as tribute and gifts from subject territories (Babylon purportedly sent 500 castrated boys every year to the royal court, and some countries also sent young girls).[88]

Conclusion

Understanding the hierarchical social structures and ideologies constructed and legitimated in Israel's official literary traditions is fundamental to the analysis of Esther if read as a parodic counter-part that provides a corrective laughter. Carnivalesque laughter in Esther would be expected to critique and expose the limitations and insufficiencies of Israel's official genres, languages, and voices. According to Bakhtin's theories of dialogism and social heteroglossia, the meaning of an utterance is inextricably related to

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[85] Ibid., 260..
[86] Ibid., 268.
[87] Ibid., 269.
[88] Ibid., 273. Briant notes that the king's most vulnerable moments were the table, bath, and bed, times that eunuchs were entrusted to protect him.

its social and historical context. Since the historical and social contexts of discourse are deemed essential to its analysis, a (speculative) historical and social context of the book of Esther has been presented prior to analysis of the text. The social role of the king in the ancient Near East has been detailed because in Israel's official literary traditions, the king is one ruler among the ruling elite who had the potential to either uphold justice and righteousness or to exploit and oppress the weak. This analysis provides a background from which to identify the various social voices or view-points that would be likely to contest, challenge, and question the ideologies and identity constructions in Israel's official literary traditions during the late Persian or early Hellenistic post-exilic period.

CHAPTER 5

DIALOGISM AND HETEROGLOSSIA: A BAKHTINIAN READING OF ESTHER 1-2

Review of Methodology

Mikhail Bakhtin theorized that carnivalesque literature values fearlessness, freedom, and radically inclusive and democratic relations among *all* people and offers an alternative to the official worldview imposed by political and ecclesiastical hierarchies and those privileged in terms of authority and truth.[1] Carnival laughter is understood as universal in scope. It belongs to *all* the people and is directed toward *everyone*, including the participants. Carnivalesque literature ostensibly functions to liberate from the prevailing worldview and established truth and to provide a new perspective of the world based on the relative nature of all things so that a new order of things may emerge.[2] This universal spirit of carnival laughter and the values associated with carnival will be identified in this reading of Esther.

In addition and related to the concept of carnival, Bakhtin's two other pertinent concepts relating to speech genres, "dialogism" and "heteroglossia," will be used when analyzing the text of Esther. According to Bakhtin, social heteroglossia (voices and languages representing various socio-linguistic points of view) is organized within novelistic literature against the background of the social context. These diverse voices

[1] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, Translated by H. Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11,12.

[2] Ibid., 34.

emerge in *comic word play*, *hybrid constructions*, *character speech*, *character zones*, and *framing* or *inserted genres*.[3] *Comic playing with language* can take many forms such as exaggerating the elements of a common language in order to show its inadequacy in relation to its object or as a parodic stylization of other socio-ideological languages and genres.[4]A *hybrid construction* is defined as the utterance of a single speaker according to its syntactic and compositional markers, but that contains two speech styles, languages, and belief systems. A hybrid construction can be found in a word that belongs to two systems, with the word having contradictory meanings.[5] Legal edicts are an example of *inserted genres* that frame the book of Esther and *character speech* is the direct or reported speech of each character throughout the story. *Character zones* are the author's speech that surrounds the speech of characters. This authorial speech may be used to depict a character in ironic ways or to expose hypocrisy. The author may use hidden sayings from the speech of others or the character's own words in the form of inner speech. Character zones may take the form of ellipsis, questions, or exclamations. Bakhtin's theory of *social heteroglossia* in novelistic literature enables the identification of voices that constitute an intra-community dialogue surrounding Jewish identity as constructed in Israel's "official" (hierarchizing) literature. This dialogue is understood against the socio-historical context of the late Persian or early Hellenistic periods. The universality of Bakhtin's theory of carnival invites readers to see within Esther critique of *all* political and religious structures and traditions. Readers are free to engage in an ongoing social dialogue and critique of official structures that is *unfinalizable*.

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[3] Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 323.

[4] Ibid., 301.

[5] Ibid., 304.

Esther 1

The book of Esther opens with a hyperbolic description of the Persian king Ahasuerus and the vast empire over which *he ruled*, from India to Ethiopia, over 127 provinces. This description is consistent with the rhetoric of Persian kings (such as Darius and Xerxes) in their art and inscriptions which represent the power and authority of the monarch over the entire world. In an inscription at Persepolis Darius states that he is "king over this vast land, in which there are many countries: Persia, Media, and the other countries with other languages, mountains, and plains, from this side of the Bitter River and from the other side of the Bitter River, from this side of the parched land and from the other side of the parched land."[6] As Briant remarks, "These titulatures stress the immensity of the imperial space and also the ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the peoples to the 'king of the countries."[7]

In Esth 1:2, King Ahasuerus is depicted as sitting on the throne of his kingdom in Susa *habirah.* The term *habirah* is sometimes translated "citadel," "fortress," "acropolis," "capital," and "temple." Of its 18 occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, 10 of them are found in the book of Esther, each time in relation to the proper name Susa. In 1 Chr 29:1 and 19 the term refers to the temple built by Solomon and in Neh 2:8 it is used in relation to the temple built in the post-exilic period. In the other two occurrences of 2 Chr 17:12 and 27:4 the term lacks the definite article, is used in the plural form, and is usually translated "fortresses" (*TNK, RSV, NRS*). Thus, in the singular form with the definite article the term *habirah* in the MT of the Hebrew Bible refers either to the temple in Jerusalem or

[6] Quoted in Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, Trans. Peter T. Daniels (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 179.

[7] Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 179.

the Persian royal citadel of Susa. The association of the temple and its administration with that of the Persian court can be understood as *carnivalistic mésalliances*. Things which are normally separated in the ordered world are brought together, including the sacred and the profane. Through intertextual allusion to Israel's authoritative texts, King Ahasuerus becomes a suggested signifier of Israel's valorized epic heroes. The ridiculous image of the Persian king permits free and familiar investigation of characters such as YHWH, the kings of the Davidic dynasty, and the scribes and priests of the Jerusalem temple. As described by Bakhtin, carnivalistic literature mixes high and low, serious and comic, and parodically reinterpreted citations as a means to parody official genres and to expose the limitations and insufficiency of the serious word.

The Persian king Ahasuerus is associated with the monarchs of the Davidic dynasty through intertextual allusion beginning in Esth 1:2. The exact phrase "throne of his kingdom" (*kisse' malkhuto*) is found in only one other verse of the Hebrew Bible. In 1 Chr 22, David is described as collecting materials in preparation for construction of the temple after his death. According to David, the word of YHWH came to him saying that he would not be the one to build the temple because he has shed too much blood on the land. Rather, his son Solomon would be the one to build the temple, and YHWH will establish "the throne of his kingdom" (*kisse' malkhuto*) over Israel forever.[8] The phrase that describes the king "sitting on the throne of his kingdom" is first found in Deut 17:18 within the section describing the responsibilities of the king when the monarchy is established. The primary responsibility of the king "when he is sitting on the throne of his kingdom" (*keshivto 'al kisse' mamlakhto*) is to write a copy of the torah in the presence of the priests and Levites. The king should read the torah every day so that he will

[8] 1 Chronicles 22:10.

observe the words of the torah and obey its laws (Deut 17:19). Although the noun for kingdom or kingship *mamlakhah* is associated with both the house of Saul and the house of David, it is primarily associated with the house of Saul when the kingship is being transferred from Saul to David (1 Sam 13:13,14; 24:21; 28:17; 2 Sam 3:10). It is noteworthy that in 2 Sam 3:10, Abner states that he will do what YHWH swore to David, "to transfer the kingship from the house of Saul and to establish *the throne* of David over Israel and Judah from Dan to Beer-Sheva" (emphasis mine). The term for throne (*kisse'*) is associated with the house of David (not Saul) and sitting on the throne is predominantly associated with Solomon (1 Kgs 1:13, 17, 30, 35, 46, 48, 2:12, 19, 24, 3:6, 8:20, 25). The Queen of Sheba remarks in 1 Kgs 10:9 that YHWH set Solomon on the throne and made him king for the purpose of doing "justice and righteousness." The description of Solomon's kingdom spanning *from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt* (1 Kings 5:2; 2 Chronicles 9:26) is akin to the description of Ahasuerus as ruling the territory *from India to Cush* in Esth 1:1. David, Solomon, and the Persian king are brought together for close scrutiny through carnival laughter. The monarchs can be examined inside out and any disparity between the surface and center exposed.[9] Furthermore, the association of the Persian king with Israel's most discerning and wise monarch problematizes and subverts the identity constructions found in Israel's traditional literature (1 Kgs 3:12; 4:29; 5:9).

The first action of King Ahasuerus in the book of Esther as he is sitting on the throne of his kingdom is to host a royal feast. As noted by Bakhtin, official banquets function to sanction hierarchical order and emphasize all that is stable, unchanging, complete, and perennial. Hierarchy and rank are apparent as each participant is expected

[9] Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 35.

to dress in the regalia of his station in society.[10] According to Susan Pollock, "one of the significant political problems facing nascent states, empires, and other large-scale political organizations is how to create bonds of allegiance to the emerging large-scale political unit."[11] An emerging empire or state entity must create unity among people groups with dissimilar and sometimes conflicting interests and allegiances while simultaneously creating and upholding the hierarchical social order that distinguishes groups according to their access to privilege and power.[12] Official feasts are an important means of influencing social identity. Tamara Bray says of the relationship between feasting and identity:

> Recognizing that identity is not an essential property of individuals and groups but rather multi-faceted, dynamic, and situational leads to a consideration of how, where, when and with what identity is negotiated. Given its contingent nature, identity is understood to be rooted in ongoing daily practice and historical experience but also seen as subject to transformation and discontinuity. As numerous scholars have suggested in recent years, consumption and material goods are intimately involved in the creation, maintenance, and manipulation of identity.[13]

Through feasting and banquets, nascent states and empires can effect social change or uphold hierarchical social structures because social identity and status can be constructed and maintained through food and consumption practices.[14] The distinctions of who eats what with whom and where can symbolize and communicate a social structure that distinguishes between categories such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, kinship, and age.[15]

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[10] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 10.

[11] Susan Pollick, "Feasts, Funerals, and Fast Food in Early Mesopotamian States," *in The Archaeology and Politics of Food and Feasting in Early States and Empires*, ed. T.L. Bray (New York: Kluwer, 2003), 18.

[12] Ibid., 18.

[13] Tamara L. Bray, "The Commensal Politics of Early States and Empires," *in The Archaeology and Politics of Food and Feasting in Early States and Empires*, ed. T.L. Bray (New York: Kluwer, 2003), 3.

[14] Ibid., 9. The construction and maintenance of social structures can range from strictly hierarchical to egalitarian and intimate (Pollick, 19).

[15] Pollick, *Feasts, Funerals, and Fast Food*, 19.

Official feasts, such as the royal feast held by the Persian king, can serve the political functions of forging bonds of unity among the different people groups of the empire in addition to upholding the hierarchical structures that maintain the prestige and power of the elite. This strategy was used by Solomon during the consolidation of his reign. In 1 Kgs 2:13-46, Solomon has Adonijah, Joab, and Shimei, killed. He subsequently obtains divine legitimation of his rule via a dream at the high place in Gibeon. His first act after the dream is to hold a feast for his servants (1 Kgs 3:15). After demonstrating his divine gift of wisdom *to judge and rule as king*, the officials of Solomon's royal administration are named, including 12 officials to provide food for the king's table from the northern territories and an official over the forced labor (*hammas*).[16] Following the list of officials in 1 Kgs 4:1-19, verse 20 states: "Judah and Israel were as many as the sands of the sea and were eating, drinking, and rejoicing." The new identity and hierarchical social structure is constructed and upheld in this second event of communal food and drink consumption that includes all the people.

The officials attending Ahasuerus' royal feast in Susa in the third year of his reign are listed in Esth 1:3 (*lekhol-sarav hel paras umaday happartemim vsare hammedinot lefanayv lkhol-sarayv va'avadayv*). Although translations of the Hebrew terms vary, they all appear to represent the official ranks of the imperial hierarchy. In the king's presence were all his officials and servants, the army of Persian and Media, and the nobles and officials of the provinces.[17] These were the elite of the empire who had access to privilege and power as indicated by their official titles and their feasting in the presence of the king. The list of officials attending the banquet has a center to periphery orientation

[16] 1 Kings 4:6.

[17] Bush, *Esther*, 347. As noted by Bush, the term *Hêl* could be translated army, officer corps, nobility, aristocracy or upper classes.

as described by Briant.[18] The king sitting on his throne in the citadel of Susa is listed first and represents the center. The king's officials and servants are listed next, followed by the army or aristocrats of Persia and Media and finally the nobles and princes of the provinces. Briant asserts that in the country lists and inscriptions of Darius and Xerxes, Persia is considered superior even to Media and that neighboring countries were honored more than those on the periphery of the empire. The most remote nations were ostensibly the most despised.[19] After the guest list, the narrator describes how the king acts to honor himself by displaying the riches and glory of his kingdom and the honor and splendor of his greatness for an absurd period of time, 180 days. Most scholars recognize the hyperbole in the description of a banquet that lasts for 6 months. This exaggeration is likely meant to mock the king who ascends the throne and drinks wine with the imperial officials for 6 months. If the king and all the officials are drinking and feasting for 6 months, who is keeping law and order in the empire?

Timothy Laniak recognizes the theme of honor and shame that permeates the book of Esther.[20] The terms in Esther 1:4 indicate that the Persian king is displaying his unsurpassable royal wealth (*'et-'osher kebod malkhuto*) and his superior rank (*ve'et-yeqar tif'eret gedullato*). These terms of honor have intertextual allusions to kings in the Davidic dynasty including David, Solomon, Jehoshaphat, and Hezekiah (1 Kgs 3:13; 1Chr 29:12; 2 Chr 1:11; 17:5; 32:27). The closest intertextual allusion relates to Solomon at the beginning of his reign when he asks YHWH for wisdom and understanding to judge his people. Because he did not ask for long life (*yamim rabbim*), riches and honor

[18] Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 181.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Timothy S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, SBL Dissertation Series, ed. Michael V. Fox (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1998).

(*'osher gam-kavod*) or the life of his enemies, Solomon was given by God a wise and discerning mind. These terms in 1 Kgs 3:11-13 and 2 Chr 1:11 are also found in Esth 1:4 in relation to King Ahasuerus and his kingdom. The terms for *greatness* and *beauty* (*haggedullah vehaggevurah vehattif'eret*) in 1 Chr 29:11 are used by David as he praises YHWH during preparations for building the temple. The setting of the first banquet scene in Esther thus has allusions to the Davidic dynasty, especially Solomon, and the temple of YHWH in Jerusalem.[21] The social structure upheld in the first banquet of Solomon and Ahasuerus relate the two monarchs in terms of their extensive and hierarchical administrative organization. Both kings sit on the throne at the pinnacle of power, wealth, and honor.[22] Although Solomon was given unsurpassed wisdom and understanding to judge his people, his reign is characterized by defiance of every statute in the Deuteronomic law relating to the responsibilities of the king (Deut 17:14-20). After his initial display of wisdom in the case of the two prostitutes, there is no indication that Solomon ruled his kingdom with justice and equity. Conversely, 1 Kgs 5:27-28 emphasizes that Solomon imposed forced labor (*hammas*) over all Israel, an oppressive policy that caused the northern tribes to revolt against the Davidic dynasty and establish their own kingdom. Because the monarch is the guarantor of justice and righteousness, the display of absurd wealth and opulence obtained through the resources and slave labor of the lower classes critiques and exposes the gross injustice of the royal administration, the priests and scribes of the temple allied with the royal court, and even YHWH who

[21] LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 43. LaCocque recognizes an association between the description of the royal palace and the Jerusalem temple and also states "the king's hubris almost amounts to a claim to divinity" (43).

[22] Although Solomon's rule is often described as a monarchy, there is also an imperial structure. In 1 Kings chapter one, it says that Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines, to the border of Egypt and that they brought tribute to him and served him all the days of his life.

resides in a grandiose citadel akin to that of Ahasuerus. In Bakhtinian terms, the laughing word in Esther derides the serious word in Israel's official literature that legitimates these hierarchical socio-political structures and identity constructions and exposes their limitations and insufficiencies. Those who are entrusted to provide justice and equity instead exploit and oppress the lower classes.

The second feast hosted by Ahasuerus is held in the court of the garden of the king's palace. The guests are all those, small to great, who are in the citadel of Susa, those located at the center of the empire. The seven day length of the banquet and mention of it being held in the court once again alludes to the construction and dedication of Solomon's temple. In 1 Kgs 8:64-65 and 2 Chr 7:7-8, Solomon consecrates the court of the temple and subsequently holds a seven day festival. He holds another seven day festival after the altar is dedicated. The ornate and extravagant setting for the second banquet hosted by Ahasuerus also has intertextual allusions to the construction and dedication of the temple and Solomon's palace. In 2 Chr 3:14 it says about Solomon: "He made the curtain of blue, purple, and crimson fabrics and fine linen" (*vayya'as 'et-happarkhet tekhelet ve'argaman vekharmil uvuts*). The terms for blue, purple, and white linen are also found in the description of the Persian royal court (Esth 1:6). In the court of the king's garden there were also "alabaster columns and couches of gold and silver on a pavement of marble, alabaster, mother-of-pears and mosaics" (Esth 1:6). Some of the precious materials described in the king's court are also found in the Jerusalaem temple or Solomon's palace including the pillars and alabaster (*ve'ammude shesh*), the pavement (*ritsfat*), rounded objects such as folding doors or rings for the curtains (*gelile khesef*), and gold and silver (*zahav vakhesef*). The drinking vessels of silver and gold in Esth 1:7

are reminiscent of the vessels of gold and silver obtained by the Israelites from the Egyptians (Exod 11:2; 12:35) which were later used for construction of the tabernacle. Reference to vessels of gold and vessels of silver are also found in the description of tribute brought to Solomon every year from the whole world (1 Kgs 10:25; 2 Chr 9:24), but the drinking vessels of King Solomon were made only of gold (2 Chr 9:20). [23] The vessels in the temple were also made of gold (1 Kgs 7:48). The elaborate and detailed description of the Persian royal court evokes the exhaustive descriptions of the tabernacle in Exodus and the temple and royal palace in 1 Kgs 6-7 and 2 Chr 3-4. The extravagant houses built for YHWH and Solomon were accomplished through the forced labor of 30,000 men who cut and delivered timber from Lebanon, 70,000 who transported loads of material for construction, and 80,000 stone masons (1 Kgs 5:27-29). The laughing word in Esther further derides YHWH and the king for residing in luxuriant houses built and provisioned through the resources and slave labor of the people they are supposed to protect from injustice and exploitation.

The provision of abundant royal wine for King Ahasurus' banquet is another expression of the monarch's honor. As noted by Laniak, "generosity is frequently viewed as an expression of a person's honor, especially in the context of hospitality."[24] In return, the client who honors the host by accepting the provisions simultaneously accepts a dependent status.[25] The celebrative drinking that occurs in the context of a banquet strengthens the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that shape group identity.[26] The

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[23] R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1214a.

[24] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 43.

[25] Ibid., 45.

[26] Carey Ellen Walsh, "Under the Influence: Trust and Risk in Biblical Family Drinking," *JSOT* 90 (2000): 17.

term frequently used for banquets in the Hebrew Bible is *mishteh*, containing the root *shatah* with the basic meaning "to drink." Celebrative drinking was ostensibly a constitutive element of these communal feasts and having a merry heart (*tov lev*) has the implication of some degree of intoxication or reduced inhibition with enhanced intimacy.[27] In this context of heightened trust is a concomitant increased risk of deception and betrayal.[28]

"The drinking (*hashtiyah*, of the same root as *shatah*) was according to the law with no restrictions, for the king had ordered the officials of his palace to do according to the desire of each man" (Esth 1:8). The first mention of law in the book of Esther relates to unrestricted drinking and ensuring that each man can do according to his own pleasure. The verb used to describe the king's actions when the law is established is *yasad* (Piel stem). This verb relates to something that is firmly fixed and cannot be moved. For this reason it is used in reference to the founding of the earth, a city, or a temple. In Prov 3:19 it is used in parallelism (in the Qal stem) with the verb *kun*: "The Lord by wisdom established the earth; he established the heavens by his understanding." These two roots are also found in Esther 1:8 in relation to Ahasuerus establishing a law that protects the freedom of every man to drink without restriction and according to his pleasure. Since in Mesopotamian and Israelite thought the king and his law were responsible for maintaining peaceable order, justice, and equity in the city and cosmos, mention of a law that establishes unrestricted drinking for every man is the laughing word that exposes the insufficiency of both unalterable official laws and the royal authorities who are entrusted

[27] Ibid., 14.

[28] Ibid., 17. Examples of deception and betrayal in the context of drinking include the stories of Noah, Lot, Jacob, and Amnon. Uriah is an exception, as he was not duped by David when he was drunk. David did, however, succeed to kill him in a dubious manner.

to uphold their core values of justice and equity. Legal statutes become the represented images that are mocked and critiqued for their potential to bring about injustice and disorder when used by the ruling elite to uphold their own values of pleasure, honor, and wealth. In Ancient Near Eastern law codes, either in the prologue-epilogue or in the laws themselves, there is a concern for the plight of the poor and justice for all people.[29] The gods mediated laws through the king, and the responsibility of the king was to bring order and justice to the land and improve the circumstances of the poor and needy.[30] The first law mentioned in the book of Esther has no concern for justice or care for those oppressed and weak. Rather, the law is concerned with the value of *pleasure* for the *men* by protecting their freedom to drink without restraint. This freedom, however, leaves the men at risk for betrayal and deception.

When the king's heart is described as merry with wine, his vulnerability is likely insinuated. The phrase *ketov lev-hammelekh bayyayin* (when the heart of the king is merry with wine) is almost exactly the same one used when Absalom is planning the murder of his brother Amnon (*ketob lev-Amnon bayyayin*).[31] The connection of these two texts suggests that King Ahasuerus is open to betrayal or deception by someone close to him.

Most scholars recognize Vashti's subjectivity as she emulates the king by hosting a banquet for women in the king's palace. What is often not mentioned is the central location of her affair in the *house of the kingdom* (*bet hammalkhut*) relative to the more

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[29] Norbert Lohfink, "Poverty in the Laws of the Ancient Near East and of the Bible," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 35.

[30] Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel*, 33.

[31] The concept of a merry heart leaving a character vulnerable to betrayal can be seen in other narratives in the Hebrew Bible. In the narratives of David's flight in the wilderness from Saul, Nabal suspiciously dies after a night of feasting and drinking in the presence of his wife.

peripheral location of the king's banquet in the court of the garden of the king's pavilion. The women's central location in the house of the kingdom *that belongs to the king* is likely another insinuation that the male elite are vulnerable and not in control of the empire. The elaborate feast held by the Persian king culminates on the seventh day when the heart of the king was merry with wine. The "seventh day" is likely another intertextual allusion. Of the 25 occurrences of the phrase "on the seventh day" (*bayyom hashshevi'i*) in the Hebrew Bible, 18 of them relate to legislation obligating the Israelites to observe the Sabbath, the feast of unleavened bread, or a priestly ritual to purify a person or object from an unclean state. Each of these observances functions to distinguish the Israelites from other people groups.[32] In Esth 1:10, the seventh day is associated with an intoxicated king and his queen's refusal to come at his behest.

The first *speech* of the king is *reported speech* addressed to the seven eunuchs that attend him. They are told to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing the royal crown so that he could show her beauty to the princes and peoples. The display of the queen would seemingly represent the pinnacle of the king's unsurpassable honor and distinction. The description of the queen as beautiful and good in appearance (*'et-yafyah ki-tovat mar'eh hi'*) is the first intertextual allusion to the sister-wife stories in Genesis where the matriarchs are described as beautiful in appearance. In the Genesis stories, Abraham and Isaac both fear that they will be killed so that their beautiful wives can be taken into the house of a foreign king. They both lie about the identity of their wives and ultimately benefit greatly from the deception. In Gen 12, Abram instructs Sarah to tell the

[32] The law in Exodus 20:10-11 charges the people to rest and to do no work on the seventh day. The feast of unleavened bread is a feast to YHWH in recognition of the deliverance of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt and as a reminder that the torah of YHWH should be in their mouths (Exodus 13:9). The purification rituals relate to the separation of people who are clean from those who are unclean.

Egyptians that she is his sister so that things may go well for him. In Gen 26:7, Isaac tells the Philistines that Rebekah is his sister and he subsequently gets very wealthy and powerful. Allusion to the sister-wife tales will come up again in the introduction to Esther and Mordecai in Esth 2. In this chapter, Mordecai tells Esther to conceal her identity when she is brought into the house of the Persian king. When Esther is crowned queen, Mordecai is suddenly sitting in the king's gate. As the story progresses and the deception continues, Mordecai, like Abraham and Isaac, becomes very wealthy and powerful.

These intertextual allusions along with the allusion to Absalom's murder of his intoxicated brother Amnon hint that the king is vulnerable to deception or betrayal. In Esth 1, the reader is given no hint as to the ethnicity or kin group of the beautiful Queen Vashti; she is only identified as beautiful and good-looking. The obscurity of her identity and association with the sister-wife tales ridicules the male elite whose priorities are the pursuit of their own pleasure, wealth, and honor. The character of Vashti derides and exposes the values of Israel's patriarchs, including Abraham and Isaac, and the elite associated with the royal court.

When Vashti refuses to come by the king's command delivered via the eunuchs, the king becomes very angry. The terms used for the king's anger (*hemah and qatsaf*) are most often used to describe YHWH's anger when the people disobey his word or laws (Deut 9, 29; 2 Kgs 22; 2 Chr 34). As recognized by many scholars, King Ahasuerus is associated with YHWH when he becomes angry over someone's refusal to obey his word.[33] Laniak further observes that "disobedience is an affront to one's honor."[34] When

[33] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 58. Laniak states: "Secondly, there may be a subtle association here between Ahasuerus and Israel's God. Descriptions of the king's glory earlier in chapter 1 reflected hymnic sentiments from the Bible."

[34] Ibid., 57.

the queen disobeys the king's command, the king consults the wise-men or sages who know law and judgment. The idea of the king consulting his sages about law and judgment, especially in relation to his own wife's disobedience, is likely satirical. If the king does not know his own law and judgment, how can he uphold order and justice in the city and empire, especially if he cannot maintain control of his own household? Furthermore, if the king does not know his own law and judgment and he is associated with YHWH and Israel's official laws, is the parodic laughing word implying that YHWH does not know his own law and consequently does not act according to it, or that the priests and scribes know more about the law than YHWH? In other words, is the priest-scribe rather than YHWH really "the man behind the curtain?"

The term for judgment used in Esther 1:13 is *din*. As recognized by Weinfeld, this term often relates to the king's role of defending the poor and weak from oppression and creating social equity (Jer 22:15-16; Prov 31:9).[35] Using Bakhtin' theory of heteroglossia, the *character zone* of Ahasuerus in dialogue with texts in Deuteronomy, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah may be ridiculing imperial and monarchic elites who are concerned more with pursuit of pleasure, wealth, and honor for themselves than with justice and equity for the poor and oppressed people of the kingdom. It is significant that the term *din* (judgment) and *evyonim* (poor) form an inclusio framing the entire book of Esther (1:13 and 9:22) and the term for law (*dat*) pervades the book and is one of the major themes in the dialogue of social heteroglossia. This *character zone* appears to represent the social voice of *the lower classes* who are oppressed and exploited by the male elite associated with the Persian administration in the post-exilic province of Yehud

[35] Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel*, 42. The cognate of *din* in Akkadian and Ugaritic also relates to justice for the weak such as the orphan and widow (42-43).

and in the diaspora. This voice opposes and ridicules the official laws that legitimate their positions of authority, privilege, and power and have no concern with improving the situation of those oppressed and needy.

The first *direct character speech* in the book of Esther comes from King Ahasuerus and is in the form of a question. Of the 16 occurrences of Ahasuerus' direct speech, 10 of them are in the form of questions and the 6 others are the king's response to the machinations of other characters. The prevalence of questions in the king's direct speech in addition to directives which originate from the design of other characters function to make the king appear like a fool who cannot make any decisions on his own and is not in control of his house, the city, or the empire. The king's response to the tactics of Haman, Esther, and Mordecai exaggerate the king's eagerness to give them whatever they want or to do whatever they desire. Control of the empire is acquired by whoever has access to the king's presence and can influence him by heightening his pleasure or by affecting his honor in some way (see charts below).

Questions posed by King Ahasuerus

1:15	To sages at 7 day banquet	"According to the law, what *shall be done* with Queen Vashti because she *did not do* the command of the king conveyed by the eunuchs?"
5:3	To Esther in court of palace	"What is it Queen Esther? What is your *request*? *It shall be given to you*, even up to half the kingdom."
5:6	To Esther at 1st banquet of wine	"What is your *petition*? *It shall be given to you*. And what is your *request*? Even to the half of the kingdom, it *shall be done*."
6:3	To his young male servants	"What *honor or greatness was done* for Mordecai on account of this?"
6:4	To his young male servants	"Who is in the court?"
6:6	To Haman	"What *shall be done* with the man whom the king *delights to honor*?"
7:2	To Esther at 2nd banquet of wine	"What is your *petition* Queen Esther? *It shall be given to you*. What is your *request*? Even up to half the kingdom, it *shall be done*."

7:5	To Queen Esther at 2nd banquet of wine	"Who is he and where is he who filled his heart *to do* this?"
7:8	At house of banquet of wine	"Will he even assault the Queen with me in the house?"
9:12	To Queen Esther	"In the citadel of Susa, the Jews had killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of Haman. In the rest of the provinces of the king, what have *they done*? What is your *petition*? *It shall be given to you*. What is your further *request*? It *shall be done*.

Directives given by King Ahasuerus

3:11	To Haman	"The *money* is *given to you and the people to do* with it *as is good in your eyes*."
5:5	To Esther	"Hasten Haman *to do the word of Esther*."
6:5	To young male servants	(regarding Haman) "Let him come in."
6:10	To Haman	"Quickly, take the robe and the horse just as *you spoke* and *do this* to Mordecai the Jew, the one sitting in the gate of the King. Do not let a word fall from *all that you spoke*."
7:9	To the eunuchs	(regarding Haman) "Hang him on it."
8:7	To Queen Esther and Mordecai the Jew	"See, I have *given the house of Haman to Esther* and they have hanged him on the tree, because he sent his hand against the Jews."
8:8	To Queen Esther and Mordecai the Jew	"You write concerning the Jews *as is good in your eyes* in the name of the king and seal it with the king's signet; for a writing which is written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked" (emphasis mine).

The *character zone* which opens the book of Esther depicts a king who sits at the pinnacle of power over a vast empire and delights in displaying his preeminent wealth and status to the world and indulging in pleasure for ridiculous periods of time. The direct speech of the king compounds this depiction by characterizing the king as a fool who is manipulated by others by his unquenchable desire for pleasure, wealth, and honor. Like Solomon and the kings of the Davidic dynasty, the Persian king has little interest in the

responsibility to provide justice and equity for the people under his rule.[36] The laws of the king are formulated as a means for those in power to accrue more wealth, prestige, and power. The king appears to be a puppet whose strings are controlled by those who have access to his presence. Is the king's association with YHWH implying that YHWH is a puppet controlled by those who have access to his presence, and that Israel's official laws are formulated as a means to protect the power and privilege of the elite associated with the temple-state? An affirmative answer is likely, considering that carnivalesque literature is free to explore and ridicule even the lofty and sacred. No one is exempt from carnival laughter.

The *character zone* of Ahasuerus also contains the *character zone* for Memucan, one of the seven wise-men or sages who sits first in the kingdom. Since they have access to the king's presence, these sages are in a position to influence him and exert some control over the administration of law and justice in the empire. As mentioned above, the term for judgment in Esth 1:13 is *din*, a term associated with the responsibility of the king to defend the poor and weak from oppression and to establish social equity.[37] In Israel, as in Mesopotamia, the scribes and sages served the priesthood, wealthy nobles, and rulers, but they had their own authority due to their wisdom and expertise in law. They had an ethical responsibility concerning the poor and oppressed because social justice is essential to the notion of wisdom.[38] Using Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia, the ideology of a character zone can be compared with a character's discourse and actions. The

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[36] Absalom's platform for the usurpation of his father's throne was that the king (David) was not listening to the people seeking justice when there were disputes and injustices. Absalom claimed that if he was made judge in the land he would provide the justice and righteousness that was lacking (2 Sam 15:1-4).

[37] According to Harris, Archer, and Waltke in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, dîn* is nearly identical in meaning to *mêsh¹rîm*, a term related to "uprightness" and "equity" (426a). Psalm 96:10 declares that YHWH is king and he judges (*dîn*) the people with equity (*mêsh¹rîm*).

[38] Richard A. Horsley, *Scribes, Visionaries, and the Politics of Second Temple Judea* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 69.

> character zone for Memucan depicts him as an elite sage in the Persian imperial regime who has expertise in law and judgment. Comparison of this depiction to his direct speech can function to expose hypocrisy and to ridicule the sages associated with Persia's royal court. The term for sage or wiseman in Esth 1:13, *hakham*, is also used to describe the judges and officers who sit in the gates of Israel's cities and villages to dispense justice for the people (Deut 1:13-17; 16:18-20). The association of Memucan with Israel's male elite, including the priests, the judges, and the king (1 Sam 2:13; 8:3,11), can function to ridicule their lack of concern for justice and equity.

Memucan is the second character who speaks in the book of Esther. His speech is in response to the king's question in Esth 1:15: "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the eunuchs?" As stated by Bush, the expression "according to the law" is "intended to be farcical and humorous—not knowing how to handle his recalcitrant wife, the king turns the affair into a matter of state."[39] Rhetorical analysis of Memucan's exaggerated response reveals the underlying insecurity of the male elite in relation to the power and influence of women, especially that of Queen Vashti (see below). The contrast between *the queen's word* and *the command of the king* and the insertion of *her kingdom* versus *his kingdom* is Memucan's oblique criticism of Vashti's usurpation of the king's status and the king's lack of control over his house. The term *malkhut*, usually understood as meaning "royal position," can also be translated as "kingdom." This *hybrid construction* plays with the notion that Vashti is really the one ruling the kingdom. The fear that Vashti's insubordination will lead to mass rebellion of women against their husbands is evident when Memucan's proposed law deals with inscribing male dominance in marriage rather than the stated sanctions against

[39] Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 351.

Vashti.[40] The pressing concern of the male elite is that all the women *will speak* the word (or deed) of the queen and rebel against male dominance.

[16]And **Memucan said** before the king and the princes 1
'Not against the king alone Vashti the Queen wronged
For against the princes and against all the people who are in all the provinces
of king Ahasuerus

[17]For **the word of the Queen** will go out to all the women **A: Word of Queen**
and cause them to look with contempt upon their husbands when they **say** **Spoken byWomen**
King Ahasuerus said to bring Vashti the Queen before him **Contempt toward Husband**
and she didn't come
[18]And this day the princesses of Persia and Media will **say** what they **heard**
the word of the Queen
to all the princes of the King and there will be no end of contempt and wrath

[19]If it is good for the king **A[1]: Royal Word**
Let a **royal word** go out from before him **Written as Law**
And **let it be written** in **the laws** of Persia and Media and it can't be repealed **Honor toward Husband**
That Vashti may not come before King Ahasuerus
Let the king give ***her kingdom*** *to her neighbor the one better than her*
[20]And when the **command of the king**
Which he made in all ***his kingdom*** is **heard,**
For it is great
All the women will give honor to their husbands, great and small

And the thing was good in the eyes of the king and the princes
And the king did according to **the word of Memucan**

Memucan's fear that the women will usurp the men's superior position in the paternal household is insinuated through use of the term *ba'al* for "husband" and use of the term *qetsef* for "wrath." The term *ba'al* can be translated as "lord" or "owner" and the term *qetsef* is often used in reference to YHWH's anger when his word is defied.[41] In Memucan's discourse, when the women speak the deed or word of the queen, the men will no longer be perceived as superior. The use of another *hybrid construction* adds ridicule to Memucan's speech. The term *davar* can be translated as "word" or "deed," and within the context of Memucan's speech it is used both ways. The term *davar* is

[40] Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 54.
[41] Harris, Archer, and Waltke in *Theological Wordbook*, 262a.

related to the women speaking whether it is about the deed of the Queen or the word of the Queen. It is obvious that Memucan finds the speech of women dangerous to the superior position of the men in the family household. It is humorous that Vashti never speaks a word in the text of Esther, but her action of refusing to come at the king's bidding is referred to by Memucan as the word and deed of the Queen which can be heard and spoken by all the women in the empire (Esth 1:17-18).

Memucan's counter maneuver to have a law written which bans Vashti from coming into the king's presence and to give her royal position or kingdom (*malkhutah*) to another who is better than she is recognized by many scholars as an intertextual allusion to 1 Sam 15:28, where almost the exact same phrase is spoken to Saul by Samuel. When Saul is alleged to have disobeyed the word of YHWH by sparing Agag king of the Amalekites, Samuel tells him that YHWH has torn the kingdom (*mamlekhut*) of Israel from him and given it to someone better than him. This intertextual allusion and *hybrid construction* suggests that just as David rules as king in place of Saul, someone better will rule instead of Vashti. The intertextual allusions and hybrid constructions in Memucan's speech undermine the idea that the men are superior to the women and with all their pomp are in control of the empire.[42]

In opposition to the word of the Queen, Memucan proposes that a royal word be sent out from the king's presence and that it be written in the laws of Persia and Media and not revoked. Memucan further states that when the edict of the king (*pitgam hammelekh*) which he made is heard throughout his kingdom (*malkhuto*), all the women will give honor to their husbands. Ridicule of the king and the sages can be detected in

[42] As noted by Danna Nolan Fewell in an earlier draft of this paper, the intertextual allusion between David and Esther as replacing Saul and Vashti undermines David's masculinity and gender constructions as they relate to the monarchy in Israel's official literature.

the way Memucan makes his proposal to the king. Rather than call the king's edict the *davar* (word) of the king in opposition to the *davar* (word) of the queen, Memucan refers to it as the *pitgam hammelekh* or edict of the king *which he made* (Esth 1:20). The qualification of the king's edict as that which he made is humorous, because it is Memucan who formulated the edict. Other than his question, the king has been silent thus far. In opposition to the word of the queen which would result in women looking down upon their husbands, the edict of the king would result in women honoring their husbands. In other words, the king's edict formulated by Memucan would keep women inferior, silent, and obedient to the men. The narrator's insertion at the end of Memucan's speech that "the king did according to *the word of Memucan*" adds further ridicule to both the king and the sage (Esth 1:21; emphasis mine). It becomes obvious that Memucan is really the one in a power struggle with the Queen.[43] The ultimate opposition is between the *davar* of the Queen and the *davar* of Memucan.

In Bakhtin's theory of novelistic development, ancient serio-comical literature makes wide use of *inserted genres*.[44] In the book of Esther, *inserted genres* function as a structuring device in the book and an important means of ridiculing imperial hierarchies and law, and covertly Israel's hierarchical structures and traditional law codes. The imperial laws in Esther represent the words of the privileged few who gain access to the king's presence. Analysis of the king's direct speech reveals that most of his discourse is in the form of questions to those who advise him. Unable to make any decisions himself,

[43] The phrase in Esther 1:21 and 2:4 "the *davar* was good in the eyes of the king and his nobles" is likely an intertextual allusion to the phrase in Genesis 41:37 where Joseph's proposal to Pharaoh "is good in the eyes of Pharaoh and in the eyes of all his servants" and consequently, Joseph is placed over the king's house (and his mouth) and only in regard to the throne is the pharaoh greater than Joseph. This intertextual allusion hints at the competition (initially between the sages and the king's *na'arim*) to be the near-equal and mouthpiece of the king. Later the competition for royal preeminence will be between Haman, Mordecai, and Esther.

[44] Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 107-108.

the ones surrounding the king make suggestions that *please* him and then draw up written decrees that promote their own agenda.

Insertion of a law devised by the king's sage Memucan as the solution to the king's royal dilemma with Vashti augments ridicule of the king and his sages. The stark contrast between the king's relative silence and Memucan's loquacious discourse is comical. By the end of Memucan's speech, the king is carrying out the word of the sage and a law is written that makes patriarchy compulsory for every household in the empire. The law is written in the language of every people as it is sent to every imperial province. This statement insinuates that the law was written in Hebrew and sent to the Jews of the provinces, including the land of Judah. Many scholars have identified the intertextual similarities between Neh 13:24 (*kilshon 'am va'am*) "according to the language of each people") and Esth 1:22 (*kilshon 'ammo*) "according to the language of his people"). Nehemiah 13 is concerned with the separation of foreign women from the *golah* Jews, especially the priests and Levites. The Jews had married Ashdodite (and Ammonite, and Moabite) women and half of their children spoke Ashdodite. The sons did not speak the Judean language; rather, they were "speaking the language of each people" (Neh 13:24). Intermarriage with foreign women is fervently condemned in Ezra-Nehemiah. Jewish group identity is determined through genealogy, observance of Sabbath and Mosaic Law, and temple worship. Only those returning from exile (*the golah*) as listed in the genealogies of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra: 2, 8, 9; Neh: 7) are considered Jews according to these texts. It is the *golah* Jews who use Mosaic Law to assert their right to possess the land and dissociate from the *peoples of the land* (Ezra 9:11,12; 10:2,11; Neh 10:31). Ostensibly marriage to indigenous women threatens the inheritance rights of the *golah*

community, thus the "foreign" women must be expelled. The link between Memucan's speech and Ezra's speeches is that both are dealing with the need to control or expel women as a means to protect the status and power of the male elite. The insertion of the legal edicts in the book of Esther imposing absurd decrees are likely functioning to expose and ridicule, not only the insufficient and tyrannical nature of imperial law, but also laws and traditions from Israel's official literature which construct group identity in a way that exploits and oppresses "others" according to ethnicity, gender, class, or sexuality. The actions of Vashti in the opening scene reveal the threat women can pose to male supremacy in hierarchical social structures. When Vashti is introduced by the narrator, she is located at the center of power hosting a women's banquet and refusing the king's command to be objectified before his male guests. Memucan recognizes that her subjectivity threatens the stability of male dominance and thus he acts to create a *written law* that commands "every man to be ruler in his own house" (Esth 1:22). As seen in the list below, the laws throughout the book of Esther are concerned with preserving the status, power, wealth, and pleasure of those in positions of authority or with gaining power, status, and wealth by annihilating another group and plundering their possessions.

Law in Esther:

Text	Character	Law
1:19	Memucan	Vashti is to come no more before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give *her royal position* to another who is better than she.
1:22	Memucan	***Every man*** should be lord over his own house and speak according to the language of his people
2:2-4 2:8	The king's young male servants	Let *beautiful young virgins* be sought for the king. [3]And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather ***all the beautiful young virgins*** to the harem in Susa the capital, under custody of Hegai the king's eunuch who is in charge of *the women*; let their ointments be given them. [4]And let the maiden who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.
2:12	The Law	The regular period of *their* beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh

	of Women	and six months with spices and ointments for *women*
3:13	Haman	*To destroy, to slay, and to annihilate* ***all Jews, young and old, women and children***, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and *to plunder their goods*.
4:11	King's Law	If ***any man or woman*** goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but ***one law***; all alike are to be *put to death*, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter that he *may live*.
8:11	Mordecai	The king allowed ***the Jews who were in every city*** to gather and defend their lives, *to destroy, to slay, 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*,
9:13	Esther	Let ***the Jews*** who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict. And let the ***ten sons of Haman*** *be hanged* on the gallows."
9:21-22	Mordecai	They should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, as the days on which ***the Jews*** *got relief* from ***their enemies***, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them *days of feasting and gladness*, *days for sending choice portions* ***to one another*** and gifts to ***the poor***.
9:30-31	Esther and Mordecai; 2nd Letter of Purim; Words of peace and truth	That these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther enjoined upon ***the Jews***, and as they had laid down ***for themselves and for their descendants*** the obligation of their *fasts and their lamenting.*

There is no concern for justice and equity for the weak and oppressed. Conversely, the official laws that benefit those in power are oppressive, exploitative, and even horrific to "others."

Esther 2

The character zone of Ahasuerus resumes in the second chapter of Esther when the king's anger abates and he "remembers Vashti and what she did and what was decreed against her" (Esth 2:1). If, according to the inscriptions of Darius and Xerxes, the king has complete control when angry and rules resolutely over his impulses, then the

first verse of chapter two is likely ridiculing the king for lacking control in his anger and not realizing the implications of Memucan's counsel to ban Vashti from his presence.[45] Ridicule of the king and sage continues with word play in the first verse. The narrator says that the king remembers what she (Vashti) did (*'asher-'asatah*), and yet she was punished for what she did not do (*'asher lo'-'astah*) (Esth 1:15). The king not only remembers what she did (she did not come), he also remembers *'asher-nigzar 'aleyah*. This phrase is another *hybrid construction* that ridicules the construction of hierarchical structures based on gender or sexuality. The Qal stem of the root *gazar* means "to cut off," "to cut down," "to cut in two," or "to decree."[46] This phrase in Esther 2:1 is usually translated "what was decreed against her." An alternative translation could be "what was cut off because of her." The reader is not informed what might have been cut off. Is this *hybrid construction* alluding to the king being emasculated by the queen's disobedience? Was Vashti beheaded or metaphorically "cut off" from a sexual relationship with the king? Was she metaphorically emasculated when she lost her position as ruler of the kingdom? Was the king cut off from Vashti's provision of sexual pleasure? This ambiguity of meaning undermines the law and the gender identity construction promulgated by Memucan.

Ridicule of the official administration continues when the king's male servants (*na'are-hammelekh*) propose a resolution to the king's quandary following the banishment of Vashti. They suggest that young virgins good in appearance (*ne'arot betulot tovot mar'eh*) be sought out for the king. The juxtaposition of *ne'arim* and *na'arot* hints at the reason the king's young male servants would like to see *all* the

[45] Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 212.
[46] Harris, Archer, and Waltke in *Theological Wordbook*, 340.

young beautiful virgins throughout the empire stockpiled within the citadel of Susa (Esther 2:2). According to the plan, *every* beautiful young virgin in the empire would be gathered to the "house of the women" and put under the authority of Hegai, the king's eunuch who guards the women. The virgins would then receive their rubbing treatments.

Many scholars have recognized intertextual allusions between the stories of Joseph and Esther. There is a clear intertextual allusion in the proposals of Memucan and the *ne'arim* in chapters 1 and 2 of Esther to the story of Joseph when he interprets Pharaoh's dream. In Gen 41:33-35 Joseph suggests that Pharaoh find a discerning and wise man and set him over the land of Egypt. Pharaoh should then *appoint overseers* to take a fifth of the land during the years of plenty and *let them gather* all the food from the good years and stockpile them under *the hand* of Pharaoh in the cities and *guard* the grain. The intertextual allusion in Esther to the Joseph tradition includes many of the same phrases including appoint overseers (*veyafqed peqidim*), let them gather (*veyiqbetsu*) (beautiful young virgins), to the hand of (*'el-yad*) (Hegai), and mention of guarding (*shomer*) (all the young virgins). Rather than stockpile and control food for a time of famine, the *ne'arim* propose that the king stockpile young virgins within the citadel of Susa under the hand of Hegai the eunuch who will guard them. The hyperbole of every beautiful virgin in the empire being brought to the citadel in a house just for the king's women is exaggerating and ridiculing the exploitative and oppressive practices by those in positions of authority. The *ne'arim* in the ridiculing word of Esther are associated with the self-serving and domineering Joseph (*hashshallit*) who controls the stockpile of food during a prolonged famine in Egypt (Gen 42:6). In order to obtain food, the lower classes of the population are forced to sell themselves into slavery and to give

their land and resources to the royal administration (Gen 47:19).[47] In Esther, all the beautiful young virgins of the empire stockpiled in the citadel of Susa become virtual sex slaves closely guarded by the eunuchs in the house of women where they undergo 12 months of preparation for a night of sex with the king.

Terms such as *peqidim*, *el-yad hegai*, *bet hannashim,* and *shomer hannashim* in Esth 2 emphasize the need to closely monitor the women in attempt to thwart any attempts at insubordination and to keep them rigidly controlled. Although the king's eunuchs who attend to the harem are likely castrated, they are still not exempt from ridicule and critique for exploiting the women and seeking sexual gratification. The terms used to describe the relation of Hegai to the virgins, *el-yad* and *shomer hannashim,* are *hybrid constructions* that can be translated as "under the authority" of Hegai "the one he guarding the women" or as "under the hand" of Hegai "the one watching the women." The inclusion of the rubbing treatments given to the virgins is likely building on the euphemism of Hegai's hand as a symbol of sexual pleasure and power. In Esth 2:8, the narrator states that many girls were gathered to the citadel of Susa to the hand of Hegai, but Esther *was taken* to the house of the king *to the hand* of Hegai the *one watching* the women (emphasis mine). The narrator then states in Esth 2:9 that the *na'arah* (Esther) was good in his (Hegai's) eyes and she gained favor in his presence. He hastened to give her rubbing treatments, portions, and seven chosen maids and then transferred her to the good house for women. The wordplay in Esth 2 undermines identity constructions of gender and sexuality. If Hegai is indeed castrated as a eunuch, this does not preclude him from having sexual relations with women or men. The construction of gender identity and

[47] Harris, Archer, and Waltke in *Theological Wordbook*, 2396.

sexuality in Israel's official traditions is contested and ridiculed in Esther's laughing word.

As noted by Fox, Esth 2:2 has a literary parallel in 1 Kgs 1:2 when virgins are sought for the aging King David.[48] The intertextual allusion to Abishag may hint that just as the aging King David was impotent and easily deceived (by Bathsheba and Nathan), so is King Ahasuerus easily manipulated. Furthermore, Abishag becomes a pawn in the struggle for succession between Solomon and Adonijah.[49] The *hybrid construction* in Esth 2:4 intimates that Esther is the one who will win the struggle for the Persian king's power and authority. The *ne'arim* (young men) suggest that the *na'arah* (young girl) who is good in the eyes of the king *timlokh* in place of Vashti. The term *timlokh* can be translated "she will be queen" or "she will rule as monarch." This wordplay ridicules the royal administration by implying that a good looking woman who pleases the king will rule the empire in place of Vashti. The king again appears like a political puppet when in the end he is the one doing the word of his servants and the word of his servants becomes "the word of the king and his law" (Esther 2:4,8).

Further ridicule of official laws and traditions can be detected in the description of the "law of the women" in Esth 2:12 where the young girls must undergo 12 months of rubbing treatments (six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes). After her rubbing treatments, when her turn came, each girl would be given whatever she requested and she would "go into" (*ba'ah*) the king in his house for the evening. In the morning she would return to the second house of the women to the king's eunuch Shaashgaz, the one guarding the concubines. The girl would not return to the king again

[48] Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 29.

[49] Tamar, also described in 2 Sam. 13:1 as beautiful, also becomes a pawn in the power struggle between Absalom and Amnon.

unless he delighted in her and he called her by name. Many scholars recognize that the verb *bo'* is sometimes used as an idiom for sexual relations.[50] Stated plainly, the "law of the women" involves a 12 month rubbing preparation for a night of sex with the king. The king apparently has sex with a different beautiful virgin every night as a means of choosing someone to rule the kingdom in place of Vashti. The one who brings him the greatest pleasure will win the crown. Once again, official legal traditions and authorities are mocked when in the laughing word they promote gross injustice and oppression rather than justice and equity.

Immediately following the plan to implement a beauty contest designed to find a new queen for the king, the characters of Mordecai and Esther are introduced. Since the direct speech of Mordecai is used only once in the book of Esther, his identity is constructed primarily by the words of the narrator. Ambiguity and ridicule seem to pervade the narrator's introduction of Mordecai and Esth 2, including the names Mordecai and Esther, which are likely alluding to the Mesopotamian gods Marduk (patron god of Babylon) and Ishtar (Babylonian goddess of love and war). As recognized by Beal, Mordecai is described as an *ish yehudi* (man of Judah) who is an *ish yemini* (man of Benjamin), and in Esth 2:5 the rivalry between Israel's two royal dynasties is alluded to in the names of Kish, the father of Saul, and Shimei, a Benjaminite Saulide who curses David. Beal states: "Mordecai's Jewish character is here associated with (1) a disenfranchised genealogy, including an ousted dynasty and a raving anti-Davidean executed as a political criminal, and (2) exile, the experience of being carried off and dispersed."[51] Mordecai's character thus ridicules and undermines the traditions

[50] R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce Waltke, *Theological Wordbook*, 212.
[51] Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 33.

surrounding dispute over the legitimate dynasty of Israel's monarchy, one Judahite and the other Benjaminite, and exposes the bloodshed, violence, and injustice associated with their competition for preeminence. The mention of Shimei who accuses David of being a "man of blood," alludes to David's covert bloody eradication of Saul's progeny (2 Sam. 15:20). Reference to Shimei also harkens back to David's instruction to Solomon "to bring down his gray head with blood to Sheol" (1 Kgs 2:9), an ironic contrast to his preceding exhortation to obey the Law of Moses. The ultimate failure of both dynasties is seen in mention of the Davidic King Jeconiah (Jehoiachin), who like the Saulide Mephibosheth, ends up as a dependent at the table of his subjugator.[52] Mordecai's introduction also locates him at the center of imperial power, this location being placed within the chiastic structure that humorously and ambiguously constructs his national and ethnic identity: ***ish yehudi*** *hayah beshushan habbirah ushemo mordochai ben ya'ir bn-shim'i ben-qish* ***ish yemini*** (a Judahite/Jewish man was in the citadel of Susa and his name was Mordcai the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite man) (Esth 2:5-6).

The construction of Mordecai's identity as a member of the exilic community (*haglah*) associated with the royal court links the story of Esther with the books of Ezra-Nehemiah and the construction of "Jewish" identity vis-à-vis "the people of the land" in the post-exilic period.[53] Significantly, the name Mordecai has only two other occurrences outside the book of Esther. One is in Ezra and the other in Nehemiah, and both list a

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[52] Cephas. T. A. Tushima, *The Fate of Saul's Progeny in the Reign of David* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 288, 290, .

[53] There are 13 occurrences of this term in the books of Ezra-Nehemiah. The term also links the book of Esther with Jeremiah and Ezekiel which both have 10 occurrences of the term *golah*, and the book of 2 Kings which has two occurrences. It is significant that 2 Kings 24 is the pericope which recounts the exile of Jehoichin, his mother, his wives, his eunuchs, and his nobles from Jerusalem to Babylon. Also exiled to Babylon were the men of valor, the craftsmen, and the smiths.

"Mordecai" among the leaders who return to Jerusalem and Judah with the *golah* community.

> **Nehemiah 7:6** These were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of *those exiles* whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried into exile; they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his town.
> **Nehemiah 7:7** They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Azariah, Raamiah, Nahamani, *Mordecai*, Bilshan, Mispereth, Bigvai, Nehum, Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel:
> **Ezra 2:1** Now these were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of *those exiles* whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried captive to Babylonia; they returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his own town.
> **Ezra 2:2** They came with Zerubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, *Mordecai*, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah. The number of the men of the people of Israel (emphasis mine)

As seen above, both occurrences of the name Mordecai are associated with the identity construction of the "people of Israel" (the geneaological list of *golah* returnees) and the temple-centered leadership headed by priests in the post-exilic period. According to Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, the ambiguity and ridicule of Mordecai's and Esther's identities may be a response to the identity constructions in Israel's official literature, including traditions from the books of Ezra-Nehemiah, Samuel, Kings, and Torah (Pentateuch). Identity construction of the post-exilic community, including leadership and land rights, is a central theme of Ezra-Nehemiah. Furthermore, the torah is used by Ezra to legitimate these entitlements.[54]

In Ezra-Nehmiah, the *golah* community is distinguished from the "peoples of the land," a group anachronistically identified as the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites (Ezra 9:1). Assuming the book of Esther is a

[54] D.J. A. Clines, "Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther," *New Century Bible Commentary*, ed. Ronald E. Clements (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1 984), 124. Clines lists several traditions from Deuteronomy, Leviticus, Ezekiel, 2 Kings, and Genesis used by Ezra during his prayer in Ezra 9:10-12. In Ezra-Nehemiah the torah is referred to as the torah of Moses (Ezra 3:2), the torah of God (Nehemiah 10:30), the torah of their god YHWH (Nehemiah 9:3) and simply the torah (Nehemiah 10:35).

carnivalesque literary response to the identity constructions in Israel's official literature, the ambiguity and ridicule surrounding the identities of Mordecai and Esther may be the unofficial response to undermine and destabilize these official identity constructions. This theory is strengthened by the occurrence of the denominative verb form of the noun *yehudi* in Esth 8:17. The meaning of this unique Hithpael participle (*mityahadim*) from the noun associated with Mordecai's identity is debated among scholars. The context of its use in Esther relates to the events subsequent to Mordecai's royal edict that permits the Jews to assemble and fight for their lives. The narrator states:

> [15]Mordcai left the king's presence in royal robes of blue and white, with a magnificent crown of gold and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool. And the city of Susa rang with joyous cries. [16] The Jews enjoyed light and gladness, happiness and honor. [17]And in every province and in every city, wherever the king's command and his edict came, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many from the peoples of the land *declared themselves Jews*, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them (Esther 8:15-17; emphasis mine).

The meaning of *mityahadim* is ambiguous, with several potential meanings. It may be understood as meaning that the peoples of the land "professed to be Jews,"[55] "identified themselves with the Jews,"[56] "pretended to be Jews," or "adopted Jewish beliefs, customs, and practices."[57] Considering that the Jews are identified as opposed to the "peoples of the land" in Israel's official literature (Ezra 9:2; the "holy seed" vs. the "peoples of the lands"), the idea that the "peoples of the land" could become or pretend to be Jews undermines and ridicules this opposition. The term *hannilvim* in Esth 9:27 "the ones joining" the Jews in their obligation to celebrate the days of Purim year by year, is also ambiguous and undermines the identity constructions in Ezra, Nehemiah, and

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[55] Berlin, *Esther*, 80.
[56] Jon D. Levenson, *Esther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 117.
[57] Bush, *Esther*, 448.

Deuteronomy 7.[58] Furthermore, mention of "the fear of the Jews falling" on "the peoples of the land" in Esth 8:17 has allusions to Deut 2:25 and 11:25 which affirm that YHWH will put the "fear" of Israel over the whole land during conquest of the Transjordan and Cisjordan. In Deuteronomy, when the people of Israel enter the land of Canaan to possess it, they are instructed to utterly destroy the indigenous people (the Hittites, Canaanites, Girgashites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites) and not to intermarry with them (Deut 7:1-3; 20:16-17). The idea that the "peoples of the land" would join the Jewish community or convert to Judaism is especially contrary to identity constructions in Israel's official traditions as described in Deuteronomy, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

Even more uncertain and ambiguous than the identity of Mordecai is the identity of Esther. Several terms used in Esth 2:7-8 connect her identity to the wife-sister tale of Genesis 12.[59] In this tale, Pharaoh is duped into believing that *the beautiful* Sarai is Abram's sister. Pharaoh thus *takes her to himself as wife*. Abram becomes very rich by hiding his marital relationship to Sarai. Similar to Gen 12, Esther is described as *beautiful* in form and good in appearance (Esth 2:7). The narrator states, however, that Mordecai *took her to himself as daughter*.[60] The verb *laqah* is often used as an idiom to express marriage, but there is no example of its use for legal adoption.[61] In addition, just

[58] Levenson suggests that *hannilwîm* may refer to converts to Judaism or those who joined the Jewish community (*Esther*, 129).

[59] Susan Niditch, *A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000) 149. In this tale, Abram, ostensibly fearing he will be killed, directs his wife Sarai to tell the Egyptians that she is his sister. When the Egyptian officials see Sarai (*who is beautiful* in *appearance*), she is *taken to the house of Pharaoh*. The Egyptians thus treat Abram very well. He becomes very rich. After Yahweh afflicts Pharaoh, he confronts Abram for not disclosing that Sarai was his wife.

[60] As noted by Danna Nolan Fewell in an earlier draft of this dissertation, the Hebrew term for daughter, *bat*, is likely a word play on the term for house, *bēt*. Mordecai may be taking Esther into his house as wife.

[61] Bush, *Esther*, 365. The connection to deception in Genesis 12 is reinforced when Esther 2:8 describes Esther as *taken to the house of the king*, just as Sarai was *taken to the house of Pharaoh.* The identification of Esther as the daughter of Mordecai's uncle, her sexually charged description, and the

as Sarah *was taken into the house of Pharaoh* (Gen 12:15), Esther *is taken in the royal house to King Ahasuerus* (Esth 2:16). The ambiguous relationship between Mordecai and Esther is strengthened by the potential reference to Esther in 2:15 as the *dod* of Mordecai. Because the term *dod* can be translated "uncle" or "beloved," it is a *hybrid construction* that uses wordplay to hint at the deception behind Esther's relationship to Mordecai. Is Esther Mordecai's beloved or his daughter? Unlike the sister-wife story of Sarah and Abraham, there is no overt answer to this question in the book of Esther. Mordecai, like Abraham, however does order Esther to hide her identity from the royal authorities and he does ultimately benefit from the deception. Almost immediately after Esther becomes queen, Mordecai is described as "sitting in the gate of the king," likely insinuating that he was given a position in the royal court (Esth 2:19).[62] When Esther finally does reveal to the king her relationship to Mordecai, the reader is not told what that relationship is. The narrator states that Esther revealed to the king what Mordecai "was to her" (Esth 8:1). After this revelation, Mordecai is given royal authority via the king's signet ring in addition to Haman's estate. This ambiguity and the allusion to the sister-wife tale is likely ridiculing the male elite who exploit women to gain wealth and positions of power.[63] This theme is seen repeatedly in Israel's official traditions such as the stories of Rebekah, Asenath daughter of Potiphera, Rahab, Tamar, Michal, Abigail, and Solomon's multitude of "foreign" wives. Esther's character ridicules and exposes the insufficiency and hypocrisy regarding the identity construction of the "foreign" women in Ezra-Nehemiah.

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unfulfilled expectation that Mordecai would take her to himself as wife strongly insinuates that there is deception in Esther's identity

[62] As already noted, the gate of the king at Susa was a magnificent structure and the "those of the gate" was a court title (Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 260).

[63] *In The Book of Hiding*, Timothy Beal notes that Mordecai had an investment in Esther that was for his own self-interest. "She is an object that has been exchanged between and circulated among the men and, as such, she is Mordecai's link with the central Persian politics" (36).

When it is the turn of Esther to "go into" the king, the narrator states that she did not seek anything *except* what Hegai advises (Esth 2:15). This verse contains oblique reference to Esther's active participation in preparation for a night of sex with the king. Esther does seek something that Hegai knows would please the king sexually; the thing, however, is unstated. The statement prompts the question: How does Hegai know what pleases the king sexually? Does he have first-hand knowledge? Whatever it was, Esther is successful in gaining (*nasa'*) the favor of all who saw her, including the king. The verb used to describe Esther's activity, *nasa'*, means "to lift" or "to take." This verb relates to the rise in status associated with gaining favor in the royal court.[64] Esther's ability to please the king is evidently unsurpassed. The narrator states that he loves her more than all the other virgins, so he puts the royal crown on her head and makes her queen instead of Vashti. The ability to please the king more than every beautiful virgin in the empire and to find favor with everyone who sees her is likely playing on the allusion of Esther's name to the goddess Ishtar. Rivkah Harris characterizes the goddess Inanna-Ishtar as a paradox: "That is, she embodied within herself polarities and contraries, and thereby she transcended them. She was, to put it somewhat differently, a deity who incorporated fundamental and irreducible paradoxes."[65] Like the character of Esther, her identity cannot be fixed into any one category. Inanna-Ishtar embodies "binary oppositions that undermine normative categories and disrupt the boundaries that distinguish between male and female, divine and human, order and disorder, structure and anti-structure, and good

[64] Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 64. This verb contrasts with the typical idiom of "finding" favor which "emphasizes passivity and respect" (64).

[65] Rivkah Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia* (University of Oklahoma Press:Norman, 2000), 159.

and evil.[66] The goddess Ishtar combines the characteristics of erotic female hyper-sexuality with abundant and even violent male aggressiveness. "She encompasses the two forms of potential disorder and violence—sex and war."[67] Considering the allusion of the name Esther to the goddess Ishtar, it becomes understandable that Esther is characterized as having the ability to please the king sexually more than every beautiful virgin in the empire and to gain the favor of everyone who saw her. Other characteristics attributed to the goddess Ishtar can be discerned as the story progresses.

After Esther is crowned queen, the king once again hosts a great banquet for his nobles and servants. A new social structure is once again being established with Esther now "acting as queen," or "ruling the kingdom." The king also grants a remission of taxes (*hanahah*) to the provinces and liberally distributes gifts (*mas'et*) (Esth 2:18). As noted by Weinfeld, in the LXX the term *hanahah* is translated in Greek as *aphesin*, a term that refers to a proclamation of liberty (release of slaves, cancellation of debts and liens on property) that was given by Egyptian and Persian kings when they ascended the throne. In the book of Esther, the proclamation of liberty occurs when Esther is crowned queen.[68] Is this another insinuation that Esther is the new ruler of the kingdom?

Although Esther attains regal status, she is still obedient and submissive to Mordecai. She still obeys his command not to reveal her people and kin. Although

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[66] Ibid., 159.

[67] Ibid., 165. Harris notes that Inanna-Ishtar is "both male and female. Over and over again the texts juxtapose the masculine and feminine traits and behavior of the goddess. She can be at one and the same time compassionate, supportive, nurturing as well as assertive, aggressive, and strong-willed. In short, she breaks the boundaries between the sexes by embodying both femaleness and maleness" (163). Inanna-Ishtar is not depicted as involved in typical female pursuits such as child-rearing, rather, she is more involved in the extra-domestic world of men "and in the public arena of men who quest for power and fame" (164).

[68] Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, 145. Weinfeld points out that in the LXX, the Hebrew terms *yobel* (Jubilee), *dror* (proclamation of liberty), and *shemitta* (remission of debt) are translated in Greek as *aphesin*.

nothing is said about Mordecai's status, he is suddenly sitting at the gate of the king after Esther receives the royal crown. Robert Gordis proposes that Esther appointed Mordecai as a magistrate immediately after attaining royal status.[69] Although no action by Esther is stated in the narrative, this conclusion is quite likely. At the end of chapter two, Esther is explicitly described as informing the king in Mordecai's name about the two eunuchs' conspiracy to assassinate him. Mordecai's exploitation of Esther's royal position in order to gain status is obliquely inserted into the narrative. Esther 2:22 says that Mordecai told Esther *the queen* about the matter. This is the first time Esther is referred to as queen since receiving the royal crown. The literary structure of the narrative also supports the conclusion that Mordecai expected to be promoted after informing the king about the conspiracy. The king sitting on the throne of his kingdom (1:2) and Mordecai sitting at the gate of the king (2:21) are linked through major narrative structuring of the book of Esther. Both statements follow the formulaic phrase "in those days," *bayyamim hahem*, setting the scene of action. In both scenes, someone rebels against the king; and the subsequent scene begins with the formulaic statement "after these things" (*ahar haddevarim ha'elleh*). *After* Vashti rebels, Esther is promoted to royal status in her place; but *after* the eunuchs rebel, the king promotes Haman, not the one who informed the king through Esther. Mordecai is shamed as his deed goes unacknowledged by Ahasuerus, even after Esther informed the king of the conspiracy in Mordecai's name. Conversely,

[69] Robert Gordis, "Studies in the Esther Narrative," *Journal of Biblical Literature, 95 no 1* (Mr. 1976) 48. Reference to Mordecai sitting in the gate of the king and the presence of the two eunuchs who conspire against the king triggers the question: "Is the narrator hinting that Mordecai is also a eunuch and is castrated?" This intimation is not so implausible when one considers that Mordecai has no house (until given the house of Haman), no children, and, on the surface, no wife.

Haman is honored for no apparent reason. This shocking turn of events sets up the conflict between Mordecai and Haman which we will explore in the next chapter.[70]

[70] This conflict is exacerbated by intertextual allusion to 1 Sam. 15, a narrative that recounts a history of feuding between their tribal ancestors Saul and Agag.

CHAPTER 6

DIALOGISM AND HETEROGLOSSIA: A BAKHTINIAN READING OF ESTHER 3-8

Esther 3

Rhetorical analysis of Esther 3:2-6 emphasizes the conflict between Haman and Mordecai, especially Mordecai's disobedience to the king's command for all to honor Haman. Once again, like Vashti, Mordecai's refusal to heed the king's behest is referred to as the word or deed of Mordecai when Mordecai has not yet spoken a word in the narrative.

[1] After these things,
King Ahasuerus promoted **Haman the *Agagite***, the son of Hammdatha, **A**
and advanced him and set his throne above all the princes who were with him

[2]And all the servants of the king
Who were in the gate of the king were ones bowing low and paying homage to **Haman**
For thus the king commanded concerning him **B**
But **Mordecai didn't** bow low or pay homage

[3]And the servants of the king
Who were in the gate of the king said to **Mordecai**
Why are you transgressing the command of the king? **B[1]**
[4]And they spoke to him day after day
But he **wouldn't** listen to them

And they told **Haman** to see whether the **word of Mordecai** would stand
For he had told them that he was a ***Jew*** **A[1]**

[5]And **Haman** *saw*
That **Mordecai was not** one <u>bowing down</u> and <u>one paying homage</u> to him
And **Haman** *was filled with anger*
[6]But he *disdained to lay hands on* **Mordecai** alone
For they made known to him the **<u>people of Mordecai</u>**
And **Haman** *sought to destroy* **<u>all the Jews</u>**
Which are in all the kingdom of Ahasuerus
The **<u>people of Mordecai</u>**

Just as the character of Mordecai the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish is introduced with gentilic adjectives as a Judahite (Jewish) man and a Benjaminite man, so is the character of Haman, the son of Hammedatha, identified as an Agagite. As recognized by most scholars, reference to Haman as an Agagite and to Mordecai as a son of Kish and a Benjaminite alludes to 1 Sam 15 when Saul, the son of Kish, is accused of disobeying the word of YHWH when he spares Agag, king of the Amalekites. Saul is rejected as king when he spares the life of Agag and the people take the best of the booty which was devoted to destruction (1 Sam 15:20-21). Adele Berlin identifies the conflict between Haman and Mordecai as the common folktale motif of a conflict between two courtiers. This conflict in Esther escalates to the two people groups with a prolonged history of enmity, Israel and the Amalekites.[1] The similarities between Haman and Mordecai in their competition for status, prestige, and power undermine and ridicule the binary opposition between the two groups.

More unsettling similarities can be identified between the characters Mordecai and Vashti and between the characters Haman and Memucan. Just as Memucan proposes and formulates a law to deal with the crisis of Vashti's disobedience to the king's order, now Haman proposes a law to address Mordecai's disobedience to the king's command.

[1] Adele Berlin, "Esther," in *JPS Commentary* (Philadelphia: JPS, 2001), 32.

When Haman distinguishes the one people (Jews) by their laws, it brings to light his identification of them with Israel's official laws and traditions. Since in those laws are commands for the complete destruction of the Amalekites, (Deut 25; 1 Sam 15), Haman's proposal may be understood in part as a critique and mockery of them. Randall C Bailey observes the way most scholars discuss the longstanding enmity between the Amalekites and Israelites in their understanding of Haman's decree to kill the Jews (especially 1 Sam 15), but in their discussions they ignore the genocidal practices of Israel against Agag and his people.[2] Bailey recognizes that language used by Haman in his plot to destroy the Jews alludes to texts in Deuteronomy (Deut 20:16-17, 7:1-3, 25:19) where YHWH commands Israel to practice genocide against non-Israelites (including the Amalekites) during the conquest of the land and to destroy Israelites who assimilate into foreign cultures.[3] YHWH also declares many times that he will scatter the Israelites among the nations and peoples or utterly destroy them for disobedience to his commands (Lev 26:33; Deut 4:26, 27; 8:19, 20; 11:17; 28:64, Neh 1:8). Because Israel's god is the one who ostensibly commands such practices, there is likely a critique on YHWH as the author of such laws (Deut. 5:22). The rhetorical analysis below highlights how Haman's request echoes Israel's official legal traditions. When Israel's law in Deut 25:19 and YHWH's command of 1 Sam 15 are juxtaposed to Haman's initial direct speech, the critical dialogue between his discourse and these official legal texts becomes apparent. Haman's voice represents the response of *the indigenous peoples* who are the targets of genocide as commanded by YHWH in the torah and historical narratives.

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[2] Randall C. Bailey, "'That's Why They Didn't Call the Book Hadassah!' The interse(ct)/(x)ionality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender and Sexuality in the Book of Esther," in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, Edited by Randall C. Bailey, Tat-siong Benny Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 227, 231.

[3] Ibid., 231. Bailey cites Deuteronomy 4:26, 7:20, and 12:2 and Numbers 24:20.

Esth 3:8-11
[8] Then **Haman said to King Ahasuerus**
There is <u>one people</u> scattered and dispersed among <u>the peoples</u>
in all the provinces of your kingdom
And **their laws** are different from <u>all the people</u>
And **the laws of the king** *they are not doing*
And for the king there is no profit <u>to give them rest</u> (*hanniah*)
[9] If it is <u>good for the king</u>
Let it be written <u>to destroy them</u>
And <u>ten thousand talents</u> of <u>silver</u> I will pay into the hands
of the ones doing to work to bring to <u>the treasury of the king</u>

[10]*So the king took off his signet ring from his hand*
and gave it to Haman, the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews

[11]And **the King said to Haman**
The <u>silver</u> is given to you
and <u>the people</u> *to do* with them as is <u>good in your eyes</u>

Deut 25:19
[19] Therefore when the **LORD your God** has <u>given you rest</u> (<u>*hanniah*</u>) from all your enemies round about, in the land which the **LORD your Go**d gives you for an inheritance to possess,
You shall <u>blot out the remembrance of **Amalek**</u> from under heaven; you shall not forget

1 Saml 15:3,4,20
[3] Now go and smite **Amalek**, and <u>utterly destroy</u> all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.'"
[4] So **Saul** summoned <u>the people</u>, and numbered them in Telaim, two hundred thousand men on foot, and <u>ten thousand</u> <u>**men of Judah**</u>.
[20] And **Saul** said to Samuel, "I have obeyed the voice of the **LORD,** I have gone on the mission on which the **LORD** sent me, I have brought **Agag the king of Amalek**, and I have <u>utterly destroyed</u> **the Amalekites.**

The direct speech of the king once again shows how easily he is manipulated by those who promote his wealth and honor. The king's true motivation and concern, the silver, is mentioned first. The fate of an entire people, who are never specified to the king, is left in control of one who is resolutely determined to destroy them. The reckless delegation of the king's authority to create laws that benefit the elite is expressed in the king's terse discourse. The king's direct speech is again ridiculing legal traditions whose

formulation is designed to benefit the elite with no concern for promoting justice and equity in the land. Haman is free to do whatever brings him pleasure, as long as the king benefits too. More pleasure ensues as Haman and the king sit down to drink. Another royal law is written and disseminated throughout the entire kingdom in the language of each people. Rather than promoting order and justice, the law brings confusion to the city of Susa (Esth 3:15).

The contents of the royal law formulated by Haman are provided by the narrator. The people group targeted by the law is now specific. The law in Esther 3:13 commands the leaders of the provinces "to destroy, to slay, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods." Using Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and heteroglossia, Haman's law can be understood as a response to the laws commanded by YHWH in Deut 7:1-3; 20:14,16; 25:17-19 and 1 Sam 15:3. In these laws YHWH commands the Israelites to utterly destroy the indigenous inhabitants of the land. First Samuel 15:3 is most closely associated with the language in Haman's law. In this verse, YHWH commands Saul to "smite Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and donkey." In this narrative, YHWH is commanding the genocide of the Amalekites and destruction of all their livestock. Haman, using his new found authority, is creating a law that commands genocide of the Jews that is expressed in terms derived from Israel's own official laws and literary traditions. Haman's law seen through a Bakhtinian perspective is likely deriding the genocidal laws in Israel's official literature and traditions as a means to expose their dreadful nature. Haman is thus associated with YHWH and Moses who

ostensibly formulated and promulgated similarly heinous laws as a means to legitimate the rights of the Israelites to the resources and land of the indigenous peoples. Using an *inserted genre* strengthens the connection between the laws in Israel's official traditions and the ridiculing laws in Esther. The "exposing" nature of Haman's law is implicit in Esther 3:14, which states that "a copy of the document was to be issued as a law in every province by *proclamation* to *all the peoples* to be ready for that day" (emphasis mine). The Hebrew term often translated as *proclamation* is *galuy*, a Qal passive participle of the root *galah*. This term is a *hybrid construction* that alludes to Israel's official traditions. One meaning relates to the returned exiles, the *golah*, in Ezra 2:1 and Neh 7:6. The other meaning relates to something hidden *being uncovered* or *revealed*. The use of this term thus refers both to the exposing nature of Haman's law and the returned exiles who teach Israel's official laws to all the people. The imposition of both imperial law and the law of the *golah* community can be seen in Ezra 7:25-26. The potential for oppression and exploitation may be discerned in these verses (below).

> Ezra 7 [25]"And you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God; and those who do not know them, you shall teach. [26]Whoever will not obey the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be strictly executed upon him, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of his goods or for imprisonment."

The opposition in Haman's law between the Jews and "all the peoples" is likely alluding to the identity construction of the people of Israel in the laws of Deuteronomy. The term "all the peoples" in opposition to the people of Israel (a people holy to YHWH) is found many times throughout the book of Deuteronomy. In Deut 7, the exact phrase "all the peoples" in opposition to Israel is found six times. For example:

> Deut 7 [6]"For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of *all the peoples* that are on the face of the earth.
> [7] It was not because you were more in number than *all the peoples* that the LORD set his love upon you and chose you, for you were the fewest of *all the peoples*" (emphasis mine).

This is the same chapter where YHWH commands the destruction of the indigenous peoples of the land. In Haman's law, "all the peoples" are to be prepared for the day established for the destruction of the Jews and the plundering of their possessions.[4]

Esther 4

The narrator states that Mordecai learns what has been done, and he responds to Haman's decree by going out into the midst of the city and crying out with a great and bitter outcry (*vayyiz'aq ze'aqah gedolah umarah*). The meaning of the root *za'aq* refers to a cry for help in a time of anguish, usually directed to YHWH.[5] The name YHWH, however, is conspicuously absent in Mordecai's plea. The Jews of the provinces also respond to "the word of the king and his law" by "fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes" (Esth 4:3). Again, there is no mention of YHWH. From the midst of the city donned in sackcloth, Mordecai goes before the gate of the king, the symbolic site of justice, in his distress. It is ironic that Mordecai has been the one sitting at the gate of the king, likely serving as an official of the royal court, and now he is outside the gate seeking justice for himself and his people. Since the narrator states that no one is permitted to enter the king's gate wearing sackcloth, Mordecai's behavior is dangerous and borders on rebellion. When Esther is informed about the situation by her eunuchs and her maids, she becomes very distressed and *sends* garments

[4] Compare also Deut. 7: 14, 16, 19.
[5] R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce Waltke, *Theological Wordbook*, 570.

to clothe Mordecai and *to take away* his sackcloth. The narrator does not say how the eunuchs or Esther's maids know that Mordecai's actions would be a concern to her. It seems possible that she has revealed to them her relationship to Mordecai, whatever it was (daughter or wife). It is also possible that Mordecai's outcry is directed to Queen Esther, an allusion to supplications of distress sent to the Queen of Heaven, Ishtar. Thorkild Jacobson cites one such example of a supplication to Ishtar:

> I have cried to thee, (I) thy suffering, wearied, distressed servant
> See me, O my lady, accept my prayers!
> Faithfully look upon me and hear my supplication!
> Say "A pity!" about me, and let thy mood be eased,
> "A pity!" about my wretched body that is full of disorders and troubles
> "A pity!" about my sore heart that is full of tears and sobbing,
> "A pity!" about my wretched, disordered, and troubled portents,
> "A pity!" about my house kept sleepless, which mourns bitterly
> "A pity!" about my moods which are steadily of tears and sobbings[6]

Esther's response to the news of Mordecai's action is described with the phrase *tithalhal hammalkah me'od*, or "the queen was greatly agitated or distressed." As noted by Bush, "the hitpalpal stem of *hul* or *hil* occurs only here" in the Hebrew Bible.[7] The meaning of the verb relates to the two ideas of "whirling around in circular movements" (as in dancing) and "writhing" (as in labor pains or anguish).[8] The narrator's use of this term is likely an intentional allusion to Ishtar as the goddess of war. Jacobsen notes that in the ancient Near East the "dance of Inanna" was an idiom that referred to the battle of war.[9] In Mesopotamian thought, the battle lines of war are likened to two women in the

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[6] Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 148-149. It is also possible that Esther's response to Mordecai's donning sackcloth (a symbolic representation of death) is alluding to the realm of the underworld as belonging to her sister Ereshkigal, queen of the netherworld. Inanna-Ishtar is known as the queen of heaven and of the universe.

[7] Bush, *Esther*, 390.

[8] R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce Waltke, *Theological Wordbook*, 623.

[9] Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 137.

travails of child-birth with the gushing of blood and agonizing pain.[10] A Hurro-Hittite hymn to Ishtar illustrates the violent association between Ishtar and the violence of war:

> Star of the battle-cry, who can make brothers who have
> lived together in harmony fight each other.
> When you put clean festive garments on them
> You soil one,
> And another you neglect even though his is clean (!) . . .
> "You, Ishtar, thus always finish men off."[11]

Another hymn to Inanna-Ishtar is *The Poem of Erra, 52*:

> Battle is a feast for her.
> She washes the tools in the blood of battle. She opens the "door of battle."
> Inanna, you pile up heads like dust, you sow heads like seeds.[12]

There is a noticeable change in Esther's character even before she learns about Haman's decree.[13] Her initial characterization emphasizes her passivity and objectification; she is *taken* by Mordecai as his daughter and subsequently *taken* to the house of the king.[14] When Mordecai approaches the gate donned in sackcloth, Esther becomes much more assertive in her interaction with him. The Hiphil form of the two infinitives (to clothe him, to take away his sackcloth) indicates the increasing subjectivity of Esther and her attempt to exert royal power over Mordecai. Previously, Esther obeyed the commands of Mordecai (Esther 2:10, 20). When Mordecai refuses the garments, Esther commands the king's eunuch to interrogate Mordecai to learn what is going on. Mordecai tells him about Haman, the royal decree, and the bribe paid to destroy the Jews. He gives the eunuch a copy of the edict to show Esther and *to command* her *to go to the*

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[10] Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia*, 161.

[11] H. G. Güterbock, "A Hurro-Hittite Hymn to Ishtar," in *Studies in Literature of the Ancient Near East Dedicated to Samuel Noah Kramer,* ed. J.M. Sasson (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1984), 157-158.

[12] Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia*, 165-166.

[13] Bush, *Esther*, 390.

[14]Joshua Berman, "Hadassah bat Abihail: The Evolution from Object to Subject in the Character of Esther," *Journal of Biblical Literature, 120 no 4* (Winter 2001) 647.

king, to implore his favor, and *to seek* his presence on behalf of her people. The veiled sexual connotation of the verbs *bô'* and *hnn* used in Mordecai's command is a likely intended as a *hybrid construction*. Mordecai, instead of crying out and seeking YHWH, is commanding Esther to use her powers of seduction (an allusion to Ishtar as the goddess of love and prostitution) to gain the king's favor as a means to save the Jews from destruction. Mordecai's command to Esther is extremely ironic in another way. He is commanding her to do the very thing that he has commanded her not to do: to speak up and reveal her people.[15] When the eunuch Hathach tells Esther *the words of Mordecai* (*divre mordokhay)* the struggle for dominance between Esther and Mordecai intensifies.

The first direct speech of Esther is her response to Mordecai's command that she go to the king and make supplication for her people. This response is referred to in Esth 4:12 as *the words of Esther*. In her message to Mordecai, Esther reminds him of the imperial law which states that "any man or woman who goes to the king inside the inner court without being summoned" will be killed unless the king extends his golden scepter (Esth 4:11). Esther's response emphasizes her fear of being killed for approaching the king unsummoned:[16]

[11]Every man or woman who comes to the king to the inner court who is not summoned A
There is one law of his: to be put to death
Except the one to whom the king extends the golden scepter and he may live B
And I have not been summoned to come to the king for the last thirty days A^1

[15] It is significant that Mordecai commands Esther to plead for her people (±*am*), presumably the Jews, but does not mention her relatives (môledet). She is not expected to reveal her relationship to Mordecai.

[16] Under imperial law, approaching the king without being summoned is risking your life. For Esther, this command is a matter of life and death. Since *coming to the king* has sexual connotations, statement **A** of the rhetorical analysis may be a cryptic way of expressing that only the king may initiate sex with a person by summoning him or her. This conclusion is supported by the report in Esther 2:4 which states that a young girl did not again *go to the king* unless she was *summoned* to him by name. Criticism of the king's sexual exploitation of subordinates may be implied in a veiled manner in Esther's speech.

To *come to the king* uninvited is to risk death. The exception of the one to whom the king extends the golden scepter is likely a euphemistic way of saying that the one who sexually arouses the king when they *come* without being summoned may live. Esther's concern for her life is explicit in **A**^{1}. She has not been summoned to the king for the last thirty days. This statement likely implies that the king has had no sexual interest in Esther. She is not confident that his golden scepter will extend for her. The *hybrid construction* that the king may extend his golden scepter or become sexually aroused by a man or woman who "comes" to him is likely ridiculing the monarch again for his insatiable desire for sexual pleasure. He not only sleeps every night with a different beautiful young virgin, he is also finding time to have sex with men who are either summoned or risk their lives by "coming" uninvited. The reference to the inner court as the location of the king when he extends his golden scepter may be an allusion to the inner court of the temple built by Solomon. The term for inner court (*'el-hehatser happenimit*), is found in 1 Kings 6:36 and 7:12 in reference to the court in Solomon's temple. Allusion to the Jerusalem temple is likely ridiculing the temple priests and possibly even YHWH who resides in the inner court. Once again, law is not related to justice or equity, but rather for the pleasure, status, and privilege of imperial officials and those associated with the royal court in Jerusalem.

Following the first direct speech of Esther is the only direct speech of Mordecai in the entire book of Esther. This detail draws special emphasis to *his words* which are responding to *the words of Esther*. Mention of *the words of Esther* and *the words of Mordecai* harkens back to the initial power struggle between Memucan and Vashti. In Esther 4:13 Mordecai says to Esther: "Don't imagine that you can escape in the king's house more than all the Jews" (*'al-tedammi venafshekh lehimmalet bet-hammelekh mikkol-hayyehudim*). LaCocque

suggests that Mordecai here has a "surplus of vision" and persuades his timid cousin to transform into a hero who risks her life to save her people.[17] The innocuous meaning is that she will die with her people if she does not intervene. However, looking at the *hybrid construction* within this verse suggests another potential meaning in Mordecai's direct speech. An alternative translation is: "Do not imagine that you can escape in the king's house from all the Jews." This translation would imply that Mordecai is threatening to have the Jews kill Esther if she does not speak up on their behalf.

Esther's reluctance to identify with the Jews makes her identity more questionable and unclear. The subsequent verse, which seems to continue Mordecai's covert threat, makes her ethnic and kinship identity more ambiguous. Mordecai continues in Esth 4:14: "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish." This statement is another *hybrid construction*. One meaning implies that lest Esther remain silent, possibly hoping that all the Jews who might kill her will be annihilated, Mordecai assures her that deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place. The message implies that even if she does not help, the Jews will survive and kill her, destroying her father's (Abihail's) house. The innocuous meaning is that Mordecai is concerned with survival of them both; she is a daughter in *his* house. The veiled threat seems more apparent in the grammar and syntax of the phrase *ve'att uvet-'avikh to'vedu*.[18] The second person plural form *to'vedu*, "you will be destroyed," hints that Mordecai is not included in the potential destruction. Reference to Esther as "the daughter of Abihail" in 2:15 and 9:29 contributes to the obscurity of Esther's identity and her relation to

[17] LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, 51.

[18] The story thus far never indicates that Mordecai even has a house of his own. The mention of him being in exile, allusions that he could be a eunuch (he is in the gate with other eunuchs), and no mention of sons or "seed" also support the conclusion that he has no land or progeny (sons) at this point.

another people group. A law subsequently written by Mordecai in 8:11 protects his legal right to carry out his threat against Esther and her father's house. The law gives the Jews the right to destroy and annihilate "every power of a people." The term *kol-hel 'am* may be a covert reference to Esther and her father's house, since Abihail can be translated "my father is power." Thus Mordecai is protecting his right to threaten Esther and her father's house with annihilation using irrevocable and monoglossic imperial law.

It is hard to miss the irony in Mordecai's only direct speech in the book of Esther. He is commanding Esther to speak up and plead to the king on behalf of her people. Previously, he had commanded her not to reveal her kindred and people. It is also extremely ironic that Mordecai is commanding Esther to speak on behalf of her people in light of the royal law composed by Memucan that obligates the man to be ruler in his house and the one speaking the language of his people. Women speaking were seen as a threat to patriarchal structures. Now Mordecai says that if she remains silent she and her father's house will be destroyed. The use of the infinitive absolute *haharesh taharishi* emphasizes the importance of *her* speech for the survival of her father's house.

Esther seems to understand Mordecai's pressure or veiled threat. She responds with an authoritative triple command for him to go, gather all the Jews in Susa, and fast for three days. It is striking that no mention is made of supplication to YHWH. This omission could be a critique on the Jews associated with the royal city who do not identify themselves with Israel's god. The abrupt change in Esther's speech and disposition is likely alluding to the capricious personality of the goddess Ishtar who can change from a compassionate deity who cries out like a woman in travail to the goddess of war who is the source of carnage and

destruction.[19] Esther agrees to risk her life and go to the king to intercede for the Jews. The insertion of the phrase, "though it is contrary to the law," harkens back to Haman's remark in 3:8 about the one people (the Jews) who did not obey the king's law and to Mordecai's transgression of the king's command in 3:3. Mordecai is now commanding Esther to transgress imperial law. Although Mordecai seems to have won the challenge for dominance, his ultimate subordination to Esther is indicated by the narrator who states in 4:17 that "Mordecai went away and did all which Esther commanded him" (Esther 4:17). The term often translated as "he went away" (*vayya'avor*) is a *hybrid construction* that can be translated as "passed over" or "transgressed." The narrator's statement thus can mean that Mordecai transgressed (the king's law to rule over and speak for his house) or he passed over (gender role boundaries). The statement may also foreshadow Mordecai's return to the gate when he was supposed to be gathering the Jews in Susa to fast for three days.[20] Either way Esther is in the dominant status and the one speaking on behalf of her father's house and her people.

Esther 5

Esther's strategy plays out like a typical trickster tale. Esther is aware of the king's concern for honor and his greed for the pleasures of sex and wine. Her strategy to bring Haman down involves acting the part of queen in order to identify with the king and his house. Esther is *outside* the house of royalty where the king now sits like a god upon his pedestal. The perilous moment lingers as Esther stands before the door in sight of the king dressed in her royal garb. She has not lost the skill to arouse favor in his eyes; he extends to

[19] In the Epic of Gilgamesh, when humankind is threatened by the flood, Ishtar cries out and wails over their demise.

[20] This observation was made by Fewell in an earlier draft of this paper.

her the golden scepter. Esther knows the king's weakness; she draws near and touches the scepter's head. The king is ready to give her up to half his kingdom. Esther's extraordinary seductive ability is likely alluding again to Ishtar as the goddess of love and prostitution.

Esther maintains an exaggerated display of subordination in order to assure the king that she will not rebel and shame him. She explicitly tells the king that she will do according to the word of the King, something that Vashti had refused to do. Her strategy is to ally herself with the king and to create rivalry between the king and Haman by inviting them to two banquets, one *for him* and one *for them*. When the king senses that Haman's honor is beginning to rival his own, he becomes restless and seeks to promote someone at Haman's expense.[21] Mordecai is thus finally honored for exposing the eunuchs' conspiracy.

The king's direct speech is again in the form of a question followed by a directive to do as the one manipulating him suggests. He asks in Esth 5:3: "'What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom." Esther answers in a subservient manner that shows concern for the king's pleasure and honor. She invites the king and Haman to a drinking banquet she prepared *for him*. The object of the prepositional phrase *for him* (*lo*) is not specified, but the reader likely assumes that the king is the "guest of honor." The king gives the imperative: "Hasten Haman to do the word of Esther" (Esth 5:5). The narrator subsequently states (*character zone*) that the king and Haman came to the drinking banquet that Esther made. Without direct articulation, it is obvious that the king also did according to the word of Esther.

[21] In Jon D. Levenson, *Esther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 90, Levenson recognizes that Jewish commentators since early rabbinic times have suggested that Esther was attempting to make Ahasuerus jealous of Haman by inviting them to her two banquets. In Timothy Beal, *Esther*, Berit Olam, Edited by David W. Cotter (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Order of St. Benedict, Inc., 1999), 72, Beal also suggests that may be trying to make the king jealous by raising suspicions that there is Esther and Haman are having an amorous relationship.

The king's next direct speech at "the banquet of wine" is essentially a repetition of the last one posed to Esther. He asks her again in Esth 5:6: "What is your petition? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." Esther answers the king in a subservient manner and states her request in 5:8: "If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet which I will prepare *for them*, and tomorrow I will do the word of the king." In a deferential manner that does not shame the king, and in the presence of the king and Haman, she invites them both to a banquet in honor of them both. Esther reassures the king that she will not dishonor him by stating that she will do the word of the king.

The narrator states that Haman went out from the banquet of wine joyful and feeling good hearted. His ambitions to attain the status of the king are insinuated by the narrator multiple times throughout the story. When Haman is introduced in chapter 3:1, the narrator states that the king "made Haman great" and "he set his throne above all the nobles." Apparently, only the king had a higher status than Haman and the only ones in Esther said to have a *throne* are Ahasuerus and Haman. Since the majority of occurrences of the term *throne* in Israel's official traditions are used in reference to the accession of a new king, especially Solomon, the author is using parodic stylization of the accession narratives to expose Haman's ambitions to succeed Ahasuerus as king. Since the royal throne is associated with the administration of justice, righteousness, equity, truthfulness, and loving-kindness in Israel's literary traditions (Ps 9:5, 8; 45:7; 89:14; 97:2; 122:5; Prov 16:12; 20:8, 28; 25:5; 29:14; Isa 9:7; 16:5), the term can function to expose the

hypocrisy of those associated with the royal court and the official traditions that legitimate their positions of authority and power.

After the banquet of wine, Haman is feeling joyful and good until he sees Mordecai not bowing down to him. The description of Haman as filled with anger harkens back to the king's anger when he was dishonored by Vashti. The competition for preeminence between Mordecai and Haman is highlighted by rhetorical analysis of the narrator's description of two incidents whereby Mordecai challenges Haman's honor:

3[5] And Haman *saw*
That Mordecai *was not bowing down or paying homage to him*
And Haman *was filled with anger*

[6]And he despised *to send his hand against* Mordecai alone
For they revealed to him the people of Mordecai
And Haman sought *to destroy all the Jews who were in the kingdom of Ahasuerus*
The people of Mordecai

5:[9]And Haman went out that day joyful and good of heart
And when Haman *saw*
Mordecai in the king's gate and *he didn't rise up and didn't tremble because of him*
Haman *was filled with anger* on account of Mordecai
[10]But Haman restrained himself and he came to his house and he sent for his friends and his wife Zeresh

When Haman is surrounded by his wife and friends, he proceeds to honor himself by boasting about "the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how the king had promoted him above the princes and the servants of the king" (5:11). The terms used to describe Haman's wealth and honor are the same ones used to describe the king in chapter one (*'et-kevod 'oshro*). Haman also tells them how Queen Esther *brought* only him along with the king to the

banquet which she made. Use of the hiphil stem for the verb "to come" (*hevi'ah*) with Esther as the subject is likely ridiculing the king and Haman for their role as passive objects. In chapter one, Vashti had refused to be brought before the king at his banquet. Now, Queen Esther is bringing Haman and the king to the banquet which she hosts.

In a switch to *direct speech*, Haman states in 5:12: "What is more, Queen Esther gave a feast, and besides the king she did not have anyone but me. And tomorrow too I am summoned by her along with the king." In this statement Haman boasts that he is *summoned* with the king to another banquet the next day. The passive participle with its preposition and feminine singular object (*qaru'-lah*) emphasizes once more the passivity of Haman and the king. The irony of the narrator's statement is that Esther feared approaching the king because she had not been summoned to him in 30 days and now she is summoning Haman and the king to herself. After boasting of all his glory and honor, Haman concludes in 5:13 that "all this means nothing to me every time I see that Jew Mordecai sitting in the palace gate." Mordecai's refusal to venerate Haman voids everything else that brings him honor.

Haman is further ridiculed when his wife Zeresh and his friends say to him in Esth 5:14: "Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it; then go joyfully with the king to the dinner." As noted by Bush, a fifty cubit high tree would probably stand to approximately 75-85 ft high in modern terms.[22] Characteristic of carnivalesque literature, this number is probably an exaggeration. The idea of hanging Mordecai on a tree 75 ft high is ridiculous and is likely a critique on the opposition and rivalry between the two courtiers for status, wealth, and

[22] Bush, *Esther*, 414. It is also possible that the number "fifty" is alluding to the fifty names of Marduk after he is granted permanent kingship over Babylon and the assembly of gods.

privilege and perhaps also the hostility the between their two ethnic groups. Reference to hanging someone on a tree may also be an allusion to the law in Deut 21:22-23 which states: "And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, you must not let his corpse remain on the stake overnight; you must bury him the same day. For an impaled body is cursed by God."[23] It seems that according to Haman, Mordecai's refusal to honor him is a crime worthy of death. This decision is another critique of the justice and equity provided by officials in positions of authority and power. The narrator states that *the word* was good to Haman and he made the tree. Now Haman is behaving like the king, leaving it to others to decide what to do. Furthermore, the use of *direct speech* by Zeresh emphasizes that a woman is again speaking on behalf of the household. Zeresh advises the patriarch and he heeds her word. Zeresh, like the characters of Vashti and Esther undermine the patriarchal social structure legitimated in Memucan's law and Israel's official traditions.

Esther 6

Chapter six opens with the narrator reminding the reader that it is the evening of the first banquet. The banquet to come on the next day was to be in honor *of them*, the king and Haman. The seeds of Esther's words are likely keeping the king awake as sleep eludes him. Haman's honor is beginning to rival that of the king. Laniak asserts that in

[23] It is likely that reference to hanging someone on a tree is also alluding to the occurrences of this form of shaming in Israel's official traditions. When Saul's and his sons' corpses are hung on the wall of Beth Shan by the Philistines, it is the men of Jabesh Gilead who ride all night to remove their bodies from the wall and bring them back to burn them. There is no effort made by David to remove their bodies. David also has the hands and feet of the men who cut off (Saul's son) Ishbosheth's head hung at the pool in Hebron. David also leaves the bodies of Saul's descendents who were hung by the Gibeonites from the beginning of the barley harvest until the rains came. It does not seem that David wanted to prevent the house of Saul from further shame as he covertly had them exterminated.

honor and shame societies, honor is a limited commodity.[24] Whenever someone is honored, it must come at another's expense. Haman is exalted above the princes *who sat first* in the kingdom. The servants in the king's gate are commanded by the king to pay homage to Haman. When Mordecai refuses to pay, Haman is dishonored and thus retaliates by devising a plan to exact revenge. The king seems to sense Haman's desire for preeminence and takes a preemptive strike in order to honor someone at Haman's expense.

The king finally has an idea of his own. In direct speech he gives orders to have the scroll of remembrance read to him. In the book is the record of Mordecai exposing the assassination plot of the two eunuchs. The king returns to his *modus operandi* by asking questions and giving directives according to the response he receives (see rhetorical analysis below). By the end of the dialogue, Haman is the one doing what he imagined someone else would do for him, procedures conceived in his own mind and spoken in his own words. These procedures have allusions to the struggle for accession of the throne between Adonijah and Solomon. When Bathsheba and Nathan deceive David, he instructs Zadok the priest, Nathan the prophet, and Benaiah the son of Jehoiada to cause Solomon to ride on the king's mule and bring him down to the Gihon spring where he is to be anointed king. They are then instructed to blow the shofar and proclaim: "Long live King Solomon!" (1 Kgs 1:33-46). Solomon subsequently sits on the royal throne and Adonijah's aspirations to rule are quashed. Haman's vision of riding on the king's horse dressed like royalty and escorted by one of the king's nobles while his honor is proclaimed is strikingly similar to this official literary tradition. The unexpected turn of events when Mordecai is chosen to be honored relates the characters of Haman and

[24] Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, 78.

Mordecai to Adonijah and Solomon. This allusion supports the struggle between Haman and Mordecai for preeminence and undermines the binary opposition between the Israelites and the Amalekites. Haman's strategy to boost his honor to that of a king results in his own downfall, dishonor, and eventually death (as did the plan of Adonijah). Furthermore, Haman's conspiracy to destroy and disgrace Mordecai ends with Mordecai honored like a king by Haman himself. The rivalry between the two courtiers is further ridiculed by the exaggeration of the tree Haman makes for Mordecai and the opposite outcome of what Haman *thought* created by his own *words* and his own *actions*. The direct speech of Haman makes his unawareness of Esther's maneuvering and the king's response more of a mockery of his ambitions for honor and power.

[3]And **the King** *said* (Question)
What was done for the ***honor and greatness of Mordecai*** concerning this?
The young lads of the King, the ones ministering to him *said* (Answer)
Not a thing was done for him
[4]And **the King** *said* (Question)
Who is in the court?

Now **Haman** had come into the outer court of the house of the King (Character Zone)*
To say to the King ***to hang Mordecai on the tree*** which he had prepared for him

[5]**The young lads of the King** *said* to him (Answer)
Behold, **Haman** is standing in the court
And **the King** *said* (Directive)
Let him come in
[6]And **Haman** came in (Response)

And **the King** *said* to him (Question)
What shall be done with **the man w*hom the King delights in his honor***

And **Haman** *said* in his heart (Question)* Haman's *thought*
In ***whom does the King delight to honor*** more than me?

[7]And **Haman** *said* to the King (Answer)* Haman's *words*
A man *whom the King delights in his honor*
[8]Let them bring a *royal* ***garment*** that the King has worn
And a ***horse*** on which *the king has ridden* and on whose head is a *royal crown*

[9]Let the garment and the horse be handed over to one of the King's most noble princes
And let them clothe ***the man whom the King delights in his honor***
And cause him to ride upon the horse in the square of the city calling out before him
"Thus shall be done for **the man *whom the King delights in his honor"***

[10]And **the King** *said* to Haman (Directive) .
Hurry, take the ***garment*** and the ***horse***
Just as you spoke
And do thus ***for Mordecai the Jew, the one sitting in the gate of the King***
Don't let a word fall from **all which you spoke**

[11]So Haman took the ***garment*** and the ***horse*** and clothed **Mordecai** (Response) Haman's *actions*
And caused him to ride in the square of the city and called out before him
Thus it shall be done for ***the man whom the King delights in his honor***

After Haman honors Mordecai, the narrator states that Mordecai returned to the gate of the king and Haman hurried home mourning and with his head covered. The term for hurried, *nidhaf*, is the same one used in chapter three to describe the runners who rushed out to disseminate the law conceived by Haman to destroy and plunder the Jews. At that time, the king and Haman sat down to drink and the city of Shushan was in a state of confusion. Now, after Haman honors Mordecai, he is the one hurrying to his house mourning with his head covered. The passive participle *hafuy*, meaning "covered" is used only twice in this exact form in the MT of the Hebrew Bible. The first occurrence is used to describe David weeping with his head covered as he ascends the Mount of Olives during his flight from Absalom. After David passes the summit of the mountain, he meets Saul's kinsman, Shimei, who curses David for being a man of blood responsible for killing off the house of Saul. The other usage of *hafuy* is in Esther 6:12 when Haman hurries home in shame after honoring Mordecai. This intertextual allusion relates Haman with David who are both shamed and cursed for their unjust attempts to annihilate a

people group, David for the house of Saul and Haman for Mordecai and the Jews. The rivalry over status, privilege, and wealth is the motive behind the violence and bloodshed in both cases.

Rather than boasting about his honor and greatness, Haman recounts to his wife and his friends what happened to him. The inclusio that begins with Esther 5:9 as Haman exits Esther's first banquet and ends with Haman going to her second banquet emphasizes the reversal of Haman from a position of great honor to a fall into disgrace and from a disposition of joy to one of mourning:

Chapter 5
[9] Haman went out on that day **joyful** and good of heart A
But when **Haman saw Mordecai in the gate of the King** B
And he didn't arise and didn't tremble before him
Haman was filled with anger against Mordecai
[10]But Haman restrained himself and he went to his house
And he sent for and brought in *the ones loving him and Zeresh, his wife*

[11]***And Haman recounted for them the glory of his riches and the multitude of his sons and how the king made him great and promoted him above the king's princes and servants*** C

[12]And Haman *said*
Even Esther the Queen didn't bring with the king to the banquet which she made
Anyone except me, and also tomorrow I am summoned to her with the king
But all this does not profit me every time
I see Mordecai the Jew sitting in the gate of the king B[1]
[14]And *Zeresh his wife and all the ones loving him said to him*
Let them make trees fifty cubits tall and in the morning speak to the king and let them hang Mordecai on them and go with the king to the banquet
joyful A[1]
And the word was good to Haman and he made the tree

Esther 6
[12]And Mordecai returned to the gate of the King
And Haman hastened to his house
mourning and head covered

[13] ***Haman recounted* to *Zeresh, his wife, and to all the ones loving him***

All which happened to him
And his wise men and Zeresh his wife said to him
If Mordecai is from the descendents of the Jews

Before whom you have begun **to fall**
You will not overcome him
For you will **surely fall** before him
[14]While they were yet speaking with him
The eunichs of the King arrived
And they hurried to bring Haman
to *the banquet which Esther made*

Many scholars have recognized that the *direct speech* of Haman's wise men and Zeresh, his wife, is prophetic in nature. Berlin points to several biblical verses in which a non-Jew predicts the destruction of Israel's enemies.[25] The direct speech of Zeresh and the wise men may be a response to Israel's official traditions which either command or predict the destruction of Amalek and the exaltation of Israel over them. The initial advice of Zeresh and Haman's friends to hang Mordecai and thus curse him has allusions to the official traditions of Balaam who was summoned by the king of Moab to curse Israel. Rather than curse Israel, however, Balaam blesses them. Numbers 24:7 says about Israel: "Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters, his king shall be higher than Agag and his kingdom shall be exalted." The final prophecy of Balaam in Num 24:17-20 foreshadows the destruction of the nations and the triumph of Israel. Of Amalek it says in verse 20: "Amalek was the first of the nations, but in the end he shall come to destruction." The direct speech of the wise men and Zeresh predicting the downfall of Haman (emphasized by the infinitive absolute, *nafol tippol*) is likely deriding official traditions which foreshadow the destruction of people groups, including Amalek. The concept of genocide guaranteed by the divine word of YHWH spoken

[25] Berlin, *Esther*, 63. Berlin cites Numbers 22-24, Dan. 3:28. She also cites those verses which mention the fate of Amalek (Exodus 17:16; Num. 24:20; Deut 25:17-19; 1 Samuel 15).

through a foreign seer or by a courtier's wife and wise men exposes the appalling nature of such official traditions.

Esther 7

Chapter seven of Esther opens with the king and Haman coming to drink with Queen Esther. The Queen knows the king's penchant for drinking wine. The emphasis placed on drinking wine insinuates that Haman and the king will be vulnerable to deception. Carole Fontaine identifies a "deceptive goddess tradition" associated with the goddess Inanna-Ishtar.[26] In this myth, Inanna places a crown on her head and takes on her role as "Queen of the Land."[27] Following this change of status, she rejoices in her sexuality and womanhood. Wanting to "test its powers," she sets out to visit Enki the god of wisdom.[28] Enki prepares a feast for Inanna where the two become competitive while drinking beer. In his drunkenness, Enki gives Inanna the divine ordinances (the *mes*) that ensure order and prosperity for her city. These ordinances represent the wisdom or knowledge required for Inanna to rule her kingdom.[29] Allusion to the deceptive goddess tradition can be detected in Esther 5:1-2 when Esther approaches the king without being summoned: "Esther dressed in royal robes and she stood in the court of the house of the king, the inner one, opposite the house of the king. The king was sitting on the throne of his kingdom in the house of the kingdom, opposite the door of the house. And it happened, when the king saw Esther the Queen standing in the court, she gained favor in his eyes and the king extended to Esther the golden scepter which was in his hand, and

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[26] Carole R. Fontaine, "The Deceptive Goddess in Ancient Near Eastern Myth: Inanna and Inaras," *Semeia*, no 42 1988, p 88.

[27] Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna: Queen of Heaven and Earth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983) 146.

[28] Ibid., 12.

[29] Ibid., 148.

Esther drew near and she touched the head of the scepter." Like Inanna-Ishtar, Esther dresses in her royal robe and "tests the powers" of her womanhood. If she gets the king drunk, she may get what she desires.

The king's direct speech is, as expected, another question. He asks in Esther 7:2: "What is your request Esther the Queen and it will be given to you; what is your entreaty up to half the kingdom and it will be done?" In her response to the king, Esther continues her display of subordination and concern with the king's pleasure as she finally reveals her request and entreaty:

[3]And **Esther the Queen** answered and she said
If I have found favor in your eyes **O King**
And if it is good with the **King**
Let **my life** be given to me as my request
And **my people** as my entreaty
[4]For *we are sold*, **I** and **my people** *to be destroyed to be killed and to be exterminated*
But if as slaves and maidservants *we were sold*,
I would have remained silent
For the distress is nothing compared with damage to the **King**

Esther pleads her case by choosing words that include the king as a victim of the perpetrator's action. The queen, as a member of the king's household is a symbol of his honor. Any threat to her is a direct threat to the king's honor. It is significant that she does not explicitly mention her kin group or ethnicity. Mordecai had commanded her not to reveal them. Like Pharaoh and Abimelech in the sister-wife tales, the King is becoming aware of Esther's identity. By using the exact words *lehashmid laharog ule'abbed* (to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be exterminated), Esther is connecting the threat to herself and her people with the law created by Haman. She, however, replaces the genocidal victims *all the Jews* with *I and my people*. Use of the term *heherashti*, "to

remain silent," also harkens back to Mordecai's veiled threat that she will not escape with her life in the king's house if she remained silent; rather, she and her father's house will be destroyed. This connection reinforces the ambiguity of Esther's identity since her father is two times referred to as Abihail (Esth 2:15; 9:29) and Mordecai is never described as having a house of his own until he is set over Haman's house by Esther.

The king responds to Esther's appeal with another question in 7:5: "Who is he and where is he who dared to do this?" Although the answer could potentially be Mordecai or Haman, Esther, using direct speech, identifies the adversary and enemy as the evil Haman.

Haman responds in terror before the king and queen. The king goes out into the garden and Haman seeks for his life from Queen Esther. The king's act of leaving the queen alone with another man and vulnerable to assault exposes his incompetence as a ruler. When the king returns, Haman is falling on the couch where Esther is reclining. The downfall of Haman is progressing. The king in his anger responds with a question in Esth 7:9: "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" The king's question further exposes his own incompetency since he went out into the garden leaving the two alone. The response to the king's question comes from the eunuch Harbonah who in direct speech informs the king of the towering stake standing at Haman's house intended for Mordecai, the man whose word saved the king. The king commands: "Hang him on it" (Esth 7:9). After Haman was hung on the tree intended for Mordecai, the king's anger abates. Haman's downfall is almost complete.

Esther 8

In Esth 8:1, the narrator states that King Ahasuerus gives Esther the Queen the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. Mordecai comes into the king's presence because Esther "revealed what he was to her." The ambiguity of Esther's identity is not clarified by the narrator. The reader still does not know "what he was to her." Is Esther Mordecai's wife or daughter? Is she Jewish or from another people group? In the sister-wife tales, when Pharaoh and Abimelech discover the identity of Sarah, they return her to Abraham. Although Mordecai, like Abraham, does benefit from the deception, Esther is still linked more to the king by the frequent reference to her as Queen Esther. Mordecai is given the signet ring of the king that was taken from Haman and Esther sets Mordecai over the house of Haman. Mordecai gains the wealth, power, and privilege that previously belonged to Haman and becomes the patriarch of his household. When Mordecai replaces Haman, the opposing identity construction of the Amalekites and Israelites is ridiculed and undermined. Many scholars assert that when Mordecai is promoted, he is elevated above Esther in honor and authority.[30] Esther, however, is exercising *her* superior authority as *she* sets (an objectified) Mordecai over Haman's house.

The narrator states that Esther again speaks (*davar*) in the king's presence. She falls at his feet, weeps, and pleads for his favor. As recognized by many scholars, the term for feet, *raglayim*, can be a euphemism for the male genitals.[31] Since the king again extends his golden scepter, the sexual connotation is likely an allusion to Ishtar as the goddess of love. Esther knows how to pleasure the king and get what she wants. She

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[30] Lillian R. Klein, "Honor and Shame in Esther," *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna,* Ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, Eng.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 171.

[31] Linafelt, *Shame and Honor,* 49.

weeps, pleading for him to avert the evil of Haman the Agagite and his plans to destroy the Jews.

Esther begins her request in 8:5 with hyper-polite honorifics:

> If it is good to the king
> And if I found favor before him,
> And the thing/word is proper before the king
> And I am good in his eyes

The initial phrase "If it is good to the king" (*'im-'al-hammelekh tov*) is the same one used by Memucan and Haman as they manipulated the king to pass laws that served their own interests. Now, Esther requests in 8:5-6:

> Let it be written to return the scrolls,
> The thoughts of Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, which
> he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king.
> For how can I bear to see the disaster which will befall my people (*'ammi*)?
> And how can I bear to see *the destruction* of my kindred (*moladti*)?

Esther's *direct speech* still does not explicitly identify her people and kindred as the Jews or the kin group of Mordecai. Use of the term *'avad* for the destruction of her kindred alludes to the threat Mordecai made to Esther if she remained silent in regard to the destruction facing the Jews. This *hybrid construction* could mean that Esther cannot bear to see her people and kindred the Jews destroyed or that she cannot bear to see her people and kindred killed by the Jews if she remains silent.

In a short *character zone*, the narrator states that the addressees of the king's direct speech are Queen Esther and Mordecai the Jew. Identification of Esther as the queen and Mordecai as the Jew associates Esther with the king, not Mordecai. The ethnic and kinship relations of Esther remain ambiguous. The king responds to Esther's plea stating that he has given Haman's house to Esther and they have hung him on a tree for

threatening the Jews. The king is distanced from any responsibility for the decree to annihilate the Jews and from Haman's threat to the king's supremacy.

The king responds to Esther's plea in Esth 8:8 with an imperative to Esther and Mordecai: "You write concerning the Jews as is good in your eyes in the king's name and seal it with the king's signet, for an edict that has been written in the king's name and sealed with the king's signet may not be revoked." The term for "you" is in the second masculine plural, thus the imperative is to both Esther and Mordecai to write another decree.

In response to the king's imperative, Esther 8:9 states: "The king's secretaries were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day; and an edict was written according to all that Mordecai commanded to the Jews to the satraps and the governors and the princes of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language." Although the king's imperative was given to Queen Esther and Mordecai the Jew (and Queen Esther was named first in the imperative), the narrator states that it is Mordecai who formulates the law to counter Haman's decree. Furthermore, Mordecai is exercising his new authority by "commanding" the addressees to obey. Mordecai wastes no time in exercising his royal authority and attempting once again to dominate Esther. Mention of his edict being sent to the Jews and officials from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, associates Mordecai with King Ahasuerus who is described in Esth 1:1 as ruling from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces. Mordecai is realizing his aspirations to rule like a king over the Jews and the rest of the empire. Mordecai's association with King

Ahasuerus and Haman continues to undermine official identity constructions based on geographical origins or ethnic distinctions.

Mordecai's decree (*an inserted genre*) contains much of the exact language used by Haman in his decree, but there are some changes. One significant change is that reference to "the Jews" forms an inclusio around the counter-decree in Esth 8:9:

> The king's scribes were summoned at that time on the twenty-third day of the third month, that is the month of Sivan
> And an edict was written according to all which Mordecai commanded
> **To the Jews**
> And **to** the satraps, the governors and the princes of the provinces which are from India to Ethiopia, one hundred twenty seven provinces, every province in its own script and to every people in its own language
> And **to the Jews** in *their* script and *their* language

There is an emphasis upon the Jews as the addressees of the law. Like Haman's decree, the edict is written in the king's name and sealed with the king's signet. Esth 8:11 reports the contents of Mordecai's decree: "The king permits the Jews of every city to assemble, to defend their lives, to exterminate, to kill, and to destroy every army/powerful (*hel*) of a people or province with women and children and to plunder their possessions." As is commonly recognized, Mordecai's decree has many allusions to the narrative in 1 Sam 15 where Saul is commanded by YHWH to exterminate all the men, women, children, and livestock of Amalek. Saul is rejected as king for sparing Agag, king of the Amalekites, and for plundering the best of the booty. The law of warfare in Deut 20:13-14 only permits plundering possessions in the cities far from Israel's inheritance. In the land possessed by Israel, they are commanded by YHWH to kill every living being. Mordecai's law, contrary to Deuteronomy, commands the Jews *of every city* to kill the men, women, and children and to plunder their possessions. His law is therefore a counter-decree to YHWH's law, in addition to Haman's decree. It is also linked to Saul

in his disregard of YHWH's command "*to ban*" all the living beings and the plunder. Use of the term for plunder, *shalal*, has allusions to David's encounters with the Amalekites in 1 Sam 27 and 30. In the narrative of 1 Sam 27, David raids the indigenous peoples, including the Amalekites, and brings the spoils back to Achish, king of Gath. David kills all the people, but keeps the livestock and garments as spoil. He killed *all the people* (including the Amalekites) so that he could deceive the Philistine king into thinking that he is raiding the people of Judah. In 1 Sam 30, when David and his men go with the Philistines to fight against Israel, the Amalekites raid Ziklag and carry off all their women and children with the plunder. The narrator specifically says that the Amalekites killed no one. When David returns with his men to Ziklag, he is able to find the Amalekites and retrieve all the women, sons, and daughters and the plunder that was taken. Conversely, when David responds, the narrator states that he smote all the Amalekites (except 400 who escaped on camels) and retrieved all the spoil. David also sends some of the "spoils of YHWH's enemies" to the elders of Judah as he curries their support to become king (1 Sam 30:26). In these narratives, there is a contrast between the violent practices of David with those of the Amalekites.

Mordecai's law is also a *hybrid construction* by use of the term *kol-hel 'am* (every army/power of a people). This term can be a covert reference to Esther and her father's house, since Esther's is twice identified as the daughter of Abihail, a name which can be translated "my father is power." This covert meaning gives the Jews the legal right to carry out Mordecai's threat against Esther and her father's house. Mordecai is thus protecting the Jews' right to destroy Esther and her father's house using an irrevocable imperial law.

As in Haman's decree, a copy of Mordecai's document was to be issued as law in every province and to be displayed to every people. The character zone surrounding Haman's law specifies that *the people* are to be prepared for that day. In the character zone of Mordecai (Esth 8:13), the narrator adds "and the Jews should be ready on that day to avenge themselves on their enemies." This statement may be intended to critique the official laws of Israel and Persia. The concept of vengeance is a strategy to provide social justice in tribal societies when there is no centralized government to serve this function.[32] In Israel's official traditions, YHWH is the primary source of vengeance (Deut 32:35, 41, 43), but in Esther, there is no mention of YHWH. Rather, the Jews are commanded by Mordecai to avenge themselves on their enemies. Reference to the concept of vengeance as a means of social justice insinuates that imperial law and Israel's official laws are not sufficient to uphold justice and can be ruthlessly abused. Haman's edict to destroy the Jews is an atrocious injustice and Mordecai's law also has the potential to inflict horrific suffering upon the weak and innocent. The king as the guarantor of justice is also ridiculed as he delegates his authority to others rather than dispensing justice himself. Mordecai, dressed symbolically as priest and king, also issues a law that has no aim to care for the poor or provide equity for the disadvantaged. His law goes beyond defending the lives of the Jews by permitting them to avenge themselves on their enemies and to annihilate *every* "adversarial armed force of a people or province along with their women and children and to plunder their possessions" (Esth 8:11). Mordecai's law and Haman's law both expose the heinous nature of similar laws in Israel's official traditions. The laws of Deut 12:10-12 which command the Israelites to feast and rejoice at the central sanctuary after they annihilate their enemies or force them

[32] Harris, Archer, and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1980, 1413.

into slave labor and then possess their land and resources is ridiculed and critiqued in the celebration of Purim after the slaughter of 75,800 people.

Mordecai's law is issued in the citadel of Susa and he departs from the king's presence "dressed in royal robes of blue and white, with a magnificent crown of gold and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool. And the city of Shushan rang with joyous cries" (Esth 8:15). Several terms used to describe Mordecai's garment allude to the opulent setting of King Ahasuerus' first banquet in addition to the tabernacle, the temple, the priestly garments of Aaron, and the garments of the Levites. The priestly garments are described in Exodus 28 using these same terms.

> **Exodus 28:4-8** These are the garments which they shall make: a breast-piece, an ephod, a robe, a tunic of checker work, a turban, and a sash; they shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons to serve me as priests. They, therefore, shall receive the *gold*, the *blue*, *purple*, and crimson yarns, and the *fine linen*. And they shall make the ephod of *gold*, of *blue* and *purple* and scarlet stuff, and of *fine twined linen*, skillfully worked. It shall have two shoulder-pieces attached to its two edges, that it may be joined together. And the decorated band that is upon it shall be made like it, of one piece with it: of gold, of *blue*, *purple*, and crimson yarns, and of *fine twisted linen*. (emphasis mine).

When Mordecai departs from the king, he is dressed in garments representing both imperial and priestly authority. Mention of "fine linen" (*buts*) also has allusions to the linen garments worn by David and the Levites when bringing the ark to Jerusalem (1 Chr 15:27) and to the veil of the temple constructed by Solomon (2 Chr 3:14; 5:12). The depiction of Mordecai dressed in royal and priestly garments and wearing the king's signet ring alludes to the close alliance between Israel's elite (including the priests, Levites, and scribes) and the imperial administration. Mention of the crown worn by Mordecai and the city rejoicing also has allusions to Israel's monarchy. The term for crown, *'ateret* is used when the Ammonite king's crown is placed on the head of David

after the defeat of Rabbah (2 Sam 12:30; 1 Chr 20:2). In Esth 8:15, the rejoicing (*samehah*) in the city of Susa when Mordecai exits the citadel in his royal attire has allusions to the rejoicing of Israel when Saul was made king (1 Sam 11:15), when Solomon was anointed king (1 Kgs 1:3), when the temple was dedicated (2 Chr 7:10), when Passover was celebrated during the reign of Hezekiah (2 Chr 30:25) and at feasts celebrated in the presence of YHWH (Lev 23:40; Deut. 12:7, 12, 18; 16:11, 14, 15). Rejoicing in Israel's official traditions most frequently occurs during feasts at the central sanctuary (Deut 12:7; 14:26; 16:11; 26:11; 27:7). In Esther, the people of the imperial capital rejoice as Mordecai ascends into a royal-priestly-scribal position closely connected to the imperial court. There is no mention of YHWH, Jerusalem, or the temple. Furthermore, the preeminent representative of the Jews has the name of a Babylonian god and formulates a law that counters Israel's official laws and traditions.

The reversal of the Jews from a low position of mourning to an elevated position of rejoicing is highlighted by repetition in Esth 8:15 of some of the exact phrases that were used in 4:3 after Haman's degree is proclaimed throughout the empire. It is significant to note the similarities that relate the two verses and the variations that differentiate them.

> 4:3: And in every province where the king's word and his law arrived, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping, and wailing and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.
> 8:17: And in every province and *in every city* where the king's word and his law arrived there was *gladness and joy* among the Jews, a *feast and a holiday. And many of the people of the land professed to be Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them.* (emphasis mine)

Mention of the word "city" and "people of the land" is likely alluding to the city of Jerusalem and the land of Israel. As previously discussed, the unique hithpael participle

mityahadim is ambiguous with several potential meanings. Since the identity of the Jews is opposed to the "peoples of the land" in Israel's official traditions such as Ezra-Nehemiah and Deuteronomy, they are critiqued and undermined if the "peoples of the land" can become or pretend to be Jews. The concept of genocide is also critiqued when the narrator states that "the peoples of the land" professed to be Jews because the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them." The term for fear, *pahad*, is associated with the annihilation of the indigenous people groups living in the land during the conquest of Canaan (peoples such as the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzits, Hivites, and the Jebusites). YHWH informed the Israelites through Moses that he would put the fear and dread of the Israelites on all the people from the Euphrates to the Western Sea in Deut 11:24-25: "Every spot on which your foot treads shall be yours; your territory shall extend from the wilderness to the Lebanon and from the river, the river Euphrates, to the western sea. No man shall stand up to you: the LORD your God will put the dread and the fear of you over the whole land in which you set foot, as He promised you." Also apparently alluding to this verse is Esther 9:2: "The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who had sought their hurt. And no one could make a stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen upon all peoples."

In Israel's official traditions, the judges of the land appointed by Jehoshaphat are exhorted to let the fear of YHWH be upon them because there is no injustice, partiality, or taking of bribes with YHWH. In Jerusalem, Jehoshaphat also appoints some of the priests and Levites to render justice, and they also are instructed to fear YHWH. In the book of Esther, there is no mention of the fear of YHWH. It is the fear of Mordecai that

falls upon the nobles, the satraps, and the governors so that they support the Jews. Furthermore, the symbolic representation of Mordecai dressed as priest, scribe, and royal official associates him with two of Israel's great leaders who promulgate official traditions and laws, Moses and Ezra. Unlike Moses and Ezra, however, in the conclusion of Esther, Mordecai commands observance of the only feast not established in the Torah. The institution of Purim occupies the majority of the last two chapters of the book. The carnivalesque conclusion of Esther 9 and 10 will be analyzed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 7

DIALOGISM AND HETEROGLOSSIA: A BAKHTINIAN READING OF ESTHER 9-10

The Institution of Purim and the Conclusion of Esther

As recognized by many scholars, Esth 9:1 states explicitly the theme of peripety that pervades the book of Esther: "And so, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, that is, the month of Adar, when the word of the king and his law were to be executed, on the day when the enemies of the Jews had hoped to gain power over them, that was overturned when the Jews would gain power over their adversaries." The term translated "to gain power over," *shalat* (repeated twice in this verse), is the same one used in Neh 5:15 to describe "the officials serving under the government of Judah before Nehemiah," who "acted in a tyrannical, self-serving domineering way with the people in imposing heavy burdens of taxation on them. The people were powerless to resist."[1] This term is also used to describe the harsh rule of Joseph after Pharaoh gave him his signet, dressed him in linen garments, and put a gold chain around his neck (Gen 41:42). In these two examples, it is the Israelite or Jewish leaders allied with foreign powers oppressing and exploiting the common people. The word of the king and his law formulated by Mordecai legitimates the domination of the "enemies of the Jews" (such as the indigenous peoples of the land) by the *golah* Jews. The opponents of the Jews were in fear and powerless in the face of the Jews who had imperial backing. Rather than provide equity and justice,

[1] Harris, Archer, and Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 1980, 2396.

the official law formulated by the Jewish leaders allowed for the oppression and slaughter of their opponents. A rhetorical analysis of Esther 9:1-5 helps to highlight this conclusion.

[1]Now in the 12th month that is month of Adar on the 13th day
when **the word of the king and his law arrived**
on the day when ***the enemy of the Jews*** hoped to dominate them
that **was overturned**
when ***the Jews*** dominated them

[2]The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus
to send a hand against the ones seeking their calamity
and no man could stand before them
for their dread fell on all the peoples

[3]All the princes of the provinces, the satraps, the governors, and the ones doing the king's work supported the Jews
for the dread of Mordecai fell on them
[4]for Mordecai was *great in the house of the king*
and his report went in all the provinces
for the man Mordecai was getting *greater and greater*

[5]And ***the Jews*** smote ***all their enemies***
with smiting of the sword, slaughtering, and destruction
and did to ***the ones hating them*** as they pleased

The struggle for power exposed in Esther 9:1 is a critique of official leaders and the elite who resort to violence, exploitation, and deception as a means to gain status and power with no concern for providing equity or justice to the weak. The narrator's comment in Esther 9:4 links Mordecai with the great leaders of Israel's official traditions: "For Mordecai was *great* in the *king's house*, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces; for *the man* Mordecai grew *more and more great*" (emphasis mine). Similar terminology occurs at the end of the sister-wife tale of Isaac, Rebekah, and King Abimelech. After Isaac deceives the Philistine king, *the man* (Isaac) *becomes greater and greater*. Like Abraham, Isaac becomes rich and powerful after he deceives the king by

passing off his wife as his sister. David is another leader who gains power, wealth, and privilege after his rivals, Saul and his kinsmen (Jonathan, Abner, Ishbosheth), are killed. In 2 Samuel 5:10, David is described as *growing greater and greater*. Finally, Exodus 11:3 says: "And the LORD gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians. Moreover, *the man* Moses was *very great* in the land of Egypt, in the sight of Pharaoh's servants and in the sight of the people (emphasis mine). Significantly, this description of Moses as being great in a foreign land and in relation to a foreign king immediately precedes the institution of Passover as a means to distinguish the Israelites from the Egyptians (Exodus 11:7). This distinction is accomplished by YHWH killing the firstborn of every Egyptian from Pharaoh to slave and even their livestock. The festival of Passover is instituted as a perpetual festival to YHWH for passing over the Israelites when the firstborn of Egypt are destroyed. Likewise, Mordecai is described as becoming greater and greater in the house of the king. This description immediately precedes the narrator's statement that the Jews "struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying and did to their adversaries as they pleased." The term for "as they pleased," *kirtson*, is the same one used in Esther 1:8 to describe the law that permits each man to drink as he pleases without restraint. At the conclusion of Esther, the Jews are described as slaying, killing, and destroying their enemies as they please. A lack of restraint in drinking ends in unrestrained killing and destroying. Similar to the Exodus narrative's prescription of Passover, the festival of Purim is established after and in celebration of the slaughter of the Jews' enemies. Ridicule and critique of the Passover narrative can be detected in the description of the institution of Purim. Both are feasts that are established following the genocide of a people group based on ethnic identity. The ambiguity of

Jewish identity throughout the book of Esther undermines and destabilizes group identity constructions associated with the Exodus and conquest narratives.

The struggle for power between Mordecai and Esther continues in chapter 9 of Esther. In chapter 8, although the imperative of the king to formulate a counter-edict to Haman's is directed to both Esther and Mordecai, Mordecai usurped Esther's authority and commanded the royal scribes what to write to the Jews and leaders of the empire. When the king's word and law arrive in the provinces, many peoples of the land fear the Jews and thus act like or become Jews. The political objectives of the Jews are upheld by Persia's officials because the fear of Mordecai falls on them.[2] When the number of those slain in Susa comes to the king, he approaches Esther with another question. The question gives Esther the opportunity to formulate her own law to counter Haman's and Mordecai's edicts. The emphasis on Esther's speech and her articulation of another law can be seen in the rhetorical analysis of Esther 9:6-14 below. Her law allows for additional killing of men in Susa and further humiliation of Haman's sons.

[6]And in **the citadel of Susa** *the Jews killed and destroyed* **500 Men** A
[7]And Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, [8]Poratha, Adallia, Aridatha, [9]Parmashta,
Arisai, Aridai, and Vaizatha
[10]**the ten sons of Haman**, the son of Hammedatha, *the enemy of the Jews*
But they did not send their hand on the plunder
[11]On that day the number of those killed in **the citadel of Susa** came before the king
[12]And **the king said** to Esther the Queen, B
In **the citadel of Susa** *the Jews killed and destroyed* **500 Men** and the ten sons of Haman
What have they done in **the rest of the provinces** of the king?
What is your petition? It will be given to you.
What is your further entreaty? It will be done.

[13]And **Esther said**,
If it is good for the king C
Let it be given also tomorrow to ***the Jews*** **in Susa**

[2] Timothy K Beal, "Esther," *Berit Olam* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1999), 110.

to do according to **the law** of today
And let **the ten sons of Haman** be hanged on the tree

[14]And **the king said**, B[1]
Thus it will be done

And **a law** was given **in Susa** and **the ten sons of Haman** were hanged
And ***the Jews*** who were **in Susa** gathered also
on the 14th day of the month of Adar
and they *killed* **300 Men in Susa** A[1]
But they did not send their hand to the plunder

The narrator elucidates the Jews actions by stating that they killed 500 men in the citadel of Susa and the 10 sons of Haman, the enemy of the Jews, but they did not lay a hand on the plunder (Esther 9:10). The Jews' covert rejection of Mordecai's authority can be detected in the report concerning their actions on the fateful day, the 13th of Adar. The narrator repeats three times in Esther 9 that the Jews of the provinces and Susa "didn't send their hand to the plunder" (Esth 9:6, 15, 16). Repetition of this statement that obviously contradicts Mordecai's edict may represent the Jews opposition to Mordecai's growing imperial authority (Esth 8:4; 10:2-3). The statement in Esth 9:5 that the Jews did *as they pleased* (*ratson*) to their enemies is further evidence that the Jews were not submissive to Mordecai's authority and were not under his control.[3]

Esther's law also appears to deal with the gender politics that begin the book. This scene forms an inclusio with the opening scene where Memucan, *one sitting first in the kingdom*, advises the king to issue a law in response to Vashti's rebellion. The law dictated by Memucan deposes Queen Vashti and inscribes male dominance in the household. In this concluding scene, Esther responds to the king's question by suggesting that the law of the 13th of Adar be given in Susa also for the 14th, and that the

[3] The term *ratson* (pleasure or delight) forms an inclusio in the book. It was also used to insinuate the king's lack of control over his house in the book's opening.

ten sons of Haman be hanged. Using this strategy, Esther allies herself with the king and the Jews by severely shaming Haman's descendants. She also allies herself with the women of Susa allowing for the slaughter of 300 more *men* (*hamesh me'ot 'ish*) within the city. On both the 13th and the 14th of Adar, the ones killed by the Jews in Susa are only described by gender; they are men. This gender oriented description contrasts with the ethnic related descriptions of those killed in the provinces. In the rest of the provinces those killed are *the enemies of the Jews* or *the ones hating them*. Although the term *hayyehudim* is masculine plural, Esther's involvement in the affairs of Susa insinuate that she may be leading the women in vengeance against the oppressive male elite of the royal court. This ending is an extreme reversal of the grandiose and oppressive power of the male elite portrayed in the opening of the book. At the conclusion of the story, Esther is formulating a law that calls for an extra day of killing during a time in which there is no explicit threat to the Jews. The apparent bloodthirstiness of Esther is likely an allusion to the official traditions of Ishtar as a goddess of war with a penchant for slaughter. The killing and hanging of Haman's ten sons also harkens back to the destruction and shame brought on Saul's house (especially the seven sons impaled by the Gibeonites) during the rise of King David. Another law devised by a leader associated with the royal court has no aim toward providing justice and equity.

As noted by Bush, a series of infinitive absolutes (in italics below) helps to structure and set apart Esther 9:16-18.[4]

16And **the rest of the Jews who were in the provinces of the king** gathered
and stood up for their lives
and rested from **their enemies**

[4] Bush, *Esther*, 473.

and killed 75,000 of **the ones who hated them**
but they didn't send their hand on the plunder
[17]That was on the 13th day of the month of Adar
and rested on the 14th of it
and made it a day of **feasting and rejoicing**

[18]but **the Jews who were in Susa** gathered on the 13th and 14th of it
and rested on the 15th of it
and made it a day of **feasting and rejoicing**

The Jews in the provinces of the king are distinguished from the Jews of Susa by the day on which they rest, feast, and rejoice. Just as King Ahasuerus made two feasts in the opening of the book, there are two days of feasting at the end, one for the Jews in the imperial capital and one for the rest of the Jews of the provinces. The one people (*'am 'ehad*) of Esther 3:8 are feasting on different days and in different places. Since feasts and banquets function to influence identity construction and hierarchical social structures, the distinction between the two groups is upheld. The Jews associated with the imperial royal court are distinct from the Jews of the provinces and they are the ones creating and promulgating official law. The days of feasting and rejoicing during Purim are likely ridiculing Israel's official feasts as established in the torah whereby YHWH commands the Israelites to feast and rejoice at the central sanctuary after they possess the land and rest from their enemies (Deut 12:10-12). This rest comes after the indigenous peoples in the land are destroyed and dispossessed (Deut 12:29).

The verse which follows Esther 9:16-18 is likely a *hybrid construction* that is also ridiculing the laws and official feasts that celebrate domination and annihilation of people groups as a means to acquire their resources and strengthen group identity. "Thus the Jews living in open areas and open cities make the 14th of the month of Adar a day of rejoicing and feasting and a holiday for sending portions each man to his neighbor" (Esth

9:19). The meaning of the terms translated "living in open areas" and "open cities," *happerozim* and *happerazot*, respectively, are uncertain. Many scholars recognize that the root *prz* can relate to an "open area" or the gentilic "Perizzite." If the second translation is substituted for the first, Esth 9:19 could be read: "The Perizzite Jews living in Perizzite cities." This translation could be an allusion to the people of the land that acted like or became Jews when the fear of the Jews fell on them. The Perizzites are among the indigenous people groups that were to be annihilated during the conquest (Deut 7:1-2). The reversal of "feasting and rejoicing" to "rejoicing and feasting" in Esth 9:19 also insinuates that this group is different. Furthermore, it is the Perizzite Jews who send portions each man to his neighbor, a practice in Israel's official traditions that relates to the choice parts of sacrificial animals given to privileged persons such as the priests and Levites. The practice of sending portions to one another also relates to Neh 8:12. In this narrative section, the *golah* community celebrates after the scribe Ezra reads the torah of Moses to the people: "Then all the people went to eat and drink and send portions and to rejoice greatly, for they understood the things they were told." Esther 9:19 undermines the identity construction of Ezra-Nehemiah that distinguishes the *golah* community as the true Israel and holy seed (Ezra 9:1), a group distinct from the indigenous peoples of the land.

After the events of the 13th and 14th of Adar, the narrator states that Mordecai *wrote* "these things or words" and sent scrolls to all the Jews in the provinces of the king (Esth 9:20). This verse alludes to Ex 34:27 when on Mount Sinai YHWH commands Moses to write *haddevarim haelleh* (these words), the words of the covenant, the ten commandments. It is also the exact same phrasing used in Josh 24:25-26 when Joshua

wrote statutes and ordinances in a scroll, the torah of God, at a covenant renewal ceremony in Shechem after the conquest of Canaan. According to the Exodus narrative, the words came from the mouth of YHWH and Moses wrote them (Ex 34:27). Joshua also reminds the people that the words of the torah were spoken by YHWH (Josh 24:27). In the book of Esther, Mordecai takes it upon himself to write scrolls to all the Jews in the provinces obligating them to observe the 14th and 15th of Adar every year "as the days on which the Jews rested from their enemies, and as the month that was turned from sorrow into rejoicing and from mourning to a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and rejoicing and sending portions each man to his neighbor and gifts to the poor." Mention of the term *'evyonim* (the poor) raises the issue of laws that provide justice and equity. This term is related to concern for the poor within the Covenant Code of Exodus (Ex 23) and the legal code of Deuteronomy (Deut 15 and 24). The first occurrence of *'evyon* is found in Ex 23:6-8 in the Covenant Code: "[6]You shall not pervert justice due to the poor in his disputes. [7]Keep far from a false charge; do not kill the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the guilty. [8]Do not take bribes, for bribes blind the clear-sighted and pervert the words of those in the right." The inclusion of this term in Mordecai's ordinance to the Jews is likely ridiculing the imperial backed Jewish leaders who oppress and exploit the poor (Neh 5) in their quest for increased wealth, privilege, and power. As the Jews of the provinces rest and celebrate, the slaughter legitimated by Haman's, Mordecai's, and Esther's edicts and the annihilation of indigenous peoples during Israel's conquest of the land still lingers. Justice and equity expressed as concern for the weak, poor, and innocent (Ex 23; Deut 15; Jer 5:28; 22:15-17; Prov 31:9; Ps 72:4), and love of one's neighbor (Lev 19:15, 18) arise only in the

aftermath of the violence and injustice legitimated by the official laws written by powerful rulers.

After he writes, Mordecai sends the scrolls to all the Jews (Esth 9:20) charging them to do annually what *they had already begun to do, what Mordecai wrote to them* (Esth 9:23).[5] The next verse, Esther 9:24, begins with the particle *ki*, introducing a causal clause to explain why the Jews adopt what they had begun to do, what Mordecai had written to them. The explanation differs from the reason Mordecai had given, that they had rested from their enemies and the month had turned from one of grief and morning to rejoicing and feasting. The Jews receive what they had begun to do, Mordecai's instruction, because of Haman's plan to destroy the Jews. This phrasing is taken from Esther's plea to the king, not Mordecai's edict. This use of Esther's words to explain why the Jews obligate themselves to observe the 14th and 15th of Adar again undermines and ridicules the authority of Mordecai as scribe, priest, and courtier to compose official laws to govern the Jews. It insinuates that the Jews do not accept Mordecai's reason for recognizing the 14th and 15th of Adar, but rather, they are motivated to celebrate because of Haman's plan to confuse and destroy all the Jews (Esth 9:24).

After this causal clause of 9:24, the narrative is interrupted by an ambiguous report. It says: but when "she came before the King, he commanded with a scroll…"(Esth 9:25). Scholars recognize the ambiguity of the suffix pronoun on the verb "to come."[6] It is likely that this pronoun is a veiled reference to Esther who comes before the king to inform him about Mordecai *writing* without her participation. This conclusion

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[5] Klein, *Honor and Shame in the Book of Esther*, 173. Klein notes that Mordecai does not use a scribe to write the scroll that he sends to the Jews (9:20,23). She sees this as evidence of Mordecai's honorable literacy. The first scroll (8:9), however, that was authorized by the king was written by the scribes.

[6] Bush, *Esther*, 481. The TNK, RSV, and NRS interpret the pronoun as "Esther." The NIV interprets the pronoun as "the plot."

is confirmed by the content of the King's scroll which contains the monarch's account of recent events. This scroll conspicuously contains *Esther's words* from 8:3-5 and the Jews *exact obedience* to *her request* that the ten sons of Haman be hanged. The narrator also states that "these days are called Purim, after the term Pur; and therefore because of all the words of this letter and what they faced and what happened to them, the Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year" (Esth 9:26-27). The inclusive and egalitarian nature of carnival can be discerned in this clarification that the Jews obligate themselves, their descendants, and all who join them to observe the days of Purim. In these verses, the Jews establish for themselves and their descendants the obligation to observe the days of Purim. The ones who join themselves to the Jews (*hannilvim*) are also obligated to perpetually observe Purim. Although the root *lvh* can relate to the Levites who join the sons of Aaron in the service of the tabernacle or temple, the exact form in the book of Esther (niphal participle masculine plural) occurs only in Isa 56:6 in reference to foreigners who join themselves to YHWH. In Isa 56:3, the eunuch and the foreigner who joins himself to YHWH both rejoice in God's house. The idea of foreigners or "others" joining themselves to the Jews is undermining and ridiculing the idea of YHWH separating the Israelites from the other peoples so that they can possess their land (Lev 20: 24, 26). The theme of separating the Israelites from the peoples of the land (Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites) by prohibiting intermarriage and casting out foreign wives and their children (Ezra 9:1,2; 10:11; Neh 9:2; 10:29; 13:3) is also undermined by the inclusive nature of Purim.

Esther 9:29 begins with the qal waw consecutive imperfect 3rd person feminine singular verb *vattichtov* "and she wrote." The verse continues with the subjects Queen Esther the daughter of Abihail and Mordecai the Jew. As throughout the book, the ethnic identity of Esther and her relationship to Mordecai remain obscure. By listing Esther first as the subject who writes and using the 3rd person feminine singular verb form, the narrator emphasizes her authority above Mordecai's for establishing the second letter of Purim. Although the verb is in the 3rd feminine singular, the listing of Mordecai as an additional subject implies that the letter has full authority because they are both ostensibly involved in its formulation.

The structure of Esth 9:30-31emphasizes the potential of official laws and traditions to implement social justice as well as sponsor injustice and oppression. The terms *sefarim* or "scrolls" and *devarim* or "words" are associated in the book of Esther with official laws and traditions that are created and disseminated by royal courtiers seeking to bolster their superior positions of power and privilege. Memucan sends scrolls throughout the empire to support patriarchal structures. Haman seeks the destruction of Mordecai and the Jews and the plundering of their possessions by sending official scrolls as law. Mordecai sends scrolls authorizing the destruction and plundering of the Jews' adversaries. He also sends scrolls obligating the Jews to observe the 14th and 15th of Adar as days in which the Jews rested from their enemies and the month which was overturned from one of mourning to one of joy.[7]

[7]Although Esther's request for an additional day of killing in Susa does not use the terms "words" or "scrolls," it is still issued as law in the city of Susa and consequently 300 more men are killed and Haman's sons are hung.

The hendiadyses "words of peace and truth" (*divre shalom ve'emet*) in Esther 9:30 and "words of fasts and outcries" (*divre hatstsomot veza'aqatam*) in Esther 9:31 are both in apposition to the term "scrolls" (sefarim) that begins this section of the narrative.

[30]And ***scrolls*** were sent to <u>all the Jews,</u>
to one hundred and twenty seven provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus
Words of peace and truth
[31]to establish observance of these days of Purim at their appointed time
Just as <u>Mordecai the Jew</u> along with <u>Queen Esther</u> established on them
And just as they established on <u>themselves and their descendants</u>
Words of the fasts and their outcries

As noted by Weinfeld, these hendiadyses are used to express the concept of social justice.[8] The terms *'emet* and *shalom* used in the first hendiadys above are found in many contexts dealing with social justice and improving conditions for the poor and oppressed (Zech 7:9, 10; 8:16, 19; Mal 2:6). Regulations and laws issued by the king and royal officials should aim to improve circumstances for the disadvantaged.[9] The exhortations of prophets such as Amos and Isaiah (Amos 3:10; 4:1; 5:11; 8:5-6; Isa 5:7-8) oppose the rich landowners and rulers who oppress and exploit the poor for their own gain.[10] When the poor cry out in distress, those in positions of power, such as YHWH (Gen 18:20; Exod 22:22, 26), the king (Esth 4:1,2; Isa 11:4; Jer 22:13; 2 Sam 15:2-3), and other rulers associated with the royal court (Neh 5:6), are expected to respond with laws and regulations that provide equity and justice.

The second hendiadys in Esther 9:31, words of *hatstsomot veza'aqatam* or "fasts and outcries," is an apparent contradiction to the first one, words of *shalom ve'emet* or "peace and truth." Since both of these hendiadyses are in apposition to the term "scrolls," the contradiction is likely ridiculing the monoglossic laws formulated and disseminated

[8] Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel*, 25.
[9] Ibid., 35.
[10] Ibid., 37-37.

by those in authoritative positions of power including the "words of YHWH" conveyed by Moses to the people at Sinai or the torah of Moses read by Ezra the scribe to the people in the post-exilic period (Exod 24:3, 4; 34:28; Num 11:24; Deut 4:13; 17:19; 18:18; Ezra 7:11; Neh 8:9, 13). The same laws disseminated by official figures as a means to uphold "justice and righteousness" (2 Sam 8:15; 1 Kgs 10:9; 1 Chr 18:14; 2 Chr 9:8; Ps 99:4; Isa 33:5) are frequently used to exploit the common populace and indigenous peoples resulting in outcry and anguish (Exod 12:30; Exod 22:22; Deut 15:9; 24:15; 1 Sam 8:18; Neh 9:9, 24-28; 9:34; Ezra 10:3; Neh 5:1,6). As theorized by Bakhtin, Esther, as serio-comical literature and counterpart to the official genres, critiques the serious word by exposing the unified language to the inconsistent and conflicting experience of the present. As laughter draws the heroization of official traditions into the present for comic scrutiny, *the contradictions and inconsistencies* of present reality expose the insufficiency and limitations of the serious word.[11] The festival of Purim on the 14th and 15th of Adar is the recognition that Israel's official traditions have insufficiencies and limitations. The annihilation of 75,000 men, women, and children who are ostensibly *adversaries of the Jews* and 800 *men* in the city of Susa is an occasion for some to rest, feast, and rejoice and for others it is cause for fasting, mourning, and crying out.

The conclusion of Esther in chapter 10 exposes the exploitation by the royal administration of all the peoples throughout the empire. King Ahasuerus imposes forced labor on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. The term for "forced labor," *mas*, is the same one used to describe the oppressive labor imposed upon Israel by Pharaoh (Exod 1:11), upon the Canaanites and Amorites by Israel (Josh 16:10; Judg 1:35), and upon all

[11]Holquist, *Dialogic Imagination*, 56.

Israel and the descendents of the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites by King Solomon (1 Kgs 5:27; 9:21). Furthermore, since the term "the land" frequently refers to "the land of Canaan" possessed by Israel, the statement insinuates that the indigenous people in Yehud are included in the forced servitude. Immediate mention of Mordecai and his acts of power and might and the greatness to which the king advances him, associates Mordecai and his power with the king who imposes forced labor upon all the people. Esther 10:2 ends with a rhetorical question concerning Mordecai's greatness and powerful acts: "Are they not written in the scroll of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?" The phrase "Are they not written in the scroll of the Chronicles of the kings of" (either Israel or Judah) (*'al-sefer divre hayyamim lemalkhe*) is the same one used throughout the book of Kings as a formulaic ending to each king's reign. In the book of Kings, the phrase is also used in a rhetorical question.[12] The ridicule of Mordecai can be detected when his acts are recorded, not in the Chronicles of the kings of Israel and Judah, but in the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia. Furthermore, in Esther 10:3 Mordecai the Jew is said to be second to King Ahasuerus and popular with the multitude of his brethren and "he sought good for his people and spoke peace to all his descendents." This last verse raises the issue of identity that pervades the book of Esther. Who are the brothers of Mordecai the Jew? Are they the *golah* community (Ezra 2:2; 3:8), the peoples of the land who become or act like Jews (Esth 8:17), the Judeans or the Benjaminites (Esth 2:5), the Persians and the Medes (Esth 10:2), those belonging to Haman's household (Esth 8:2); or even foreign kings (1 Kgs 9:13)? In addition, if Mordecai seeks good "for his people," who are his people? In the majority of occurrences

[12] For example, in 2 Kings 23:28 at the end of Josiah's reign, the narrator asks: "Now the rest of the acts of Josiah, and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Judah?"

of the phrase "for his people" (*le'ammo*), the reference is to the people as belonging to YHWH (Exod 34:15; 1 Kgs 8:56; 1 Chr 23:25). Reference to Mordecai seeking good for his people may be playing with the idea that it is not YHWH seeking good for his people; rather, it is Mordecai, an allusion to Marduk, who is seeking their good.

Esther 10:3 concludes the book with the statement that Mordecai the Jew "spoke peace to all his descendants." The term for descendants, *zera'*, refers to "seed," "semen," or "offspring." Since Mordecai is associated with the eunuchs, has no house until he is set over the house of Haman, and is never depicted as having children, this final statement further destabilizes Jewish identity. Who are the descendants of Mordecai the Jew? Are they worshippers of Marduk? Are they descendents of Benjamin or descendants of Judah? Are they descendants of those in Haman's house? Did he have any descendants at all?

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

The lack of resolution or of any attempt to harmonize the contradictions and inconsistencies in the book of Esther makes this Bakhtinian reading of Esther different from most readings that focus on plot development, characterization, and even irony and comedy. Many scholars conclude that the purpose of the book is to construct communal identity in diaspora, and the characters are viewed as models to be emulated regarding how to survive and prosper in a dangerous foreign land by partial assimilation into the foreign culture and participation in its power structures. When scholars identify comedy in the book of Esther, they often perceive the ridicule as a critique directed against the Persian authorities and imperial hierarchical structures. When ridicule of Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews is identified, it is usually understood as a critique on the assimilation practices of diaspora Jews (in works by Stern, Sharp, and Bailey). The thesis of this dissertation is that the book of Esther belongs to Bakhtin's second stylistic line of novelistic literature whereby the creative author incorporates heteroglossia or multiple perspectives into the novel's composition.[1] The book of Esther is read as carnivalized literature that is in critical dialogue with Israel's official texts and traditions that were compiled, composed, and redacted (and possibly canonized) by the *golah* community in the late Persian or early Hellenistic periods. Since carnival laughter is universal in nature, no one is excluded from ridicule and critique, including YHWH and religious officials.

[1] Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 345- 346.

One of the main themes explored through the dialogue of heteroglossia in the book of Esther is identity as constructed in Israel's official literature.

Israel's official texts provided a means for those returning to Judea from the Babylonian exile to construct a new collective identity (Jewish/Judean) *vis-á-vis* both the imperial authorities and the indigenous populations, an identity that gives the returnees the right to rule over and possess the land within the province of Yehud.[2] Following the breach of traditional order that occurred as a result of the Babylonian exile, the historical narratives and normative traditions from the past were likely re-worked in a manner that could support re-centralization and restoration of a post-exilic community. The recapitulation of Israel's history and the core of the community's normative traditions can be found in the books of Deuteronomy and Exodus. In the Book of Deuteronomy, the time of the late monarchy is linked to the Persian period, a period of restorative recentralization following the exile.[3]

The post-exilic community, with the support of the Persian authorities, was able to propagate identity constructions that legitimated the power and authority of the restored elite. The viewpoints of Israel's official literature express the values, ideological viewpoints, and identity constructions of the elite, including the priests, wealthy aristocrats and scribes.[4] The work of scholars such as Horsley, Kessler, and Hagedorn contend that the identities of social groups in the Persian province of Yehud were diverse, heterogeneous, and influenced by a multitude of power dynamics. The indigenous "peoples of the land," including those that remained in Judea after the Babylonian

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[2] Alexander Fantalkin and Tal Oren, "The canonization of the Pentateuch. (part II): When and why?," *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 124, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 203.

[3] Jan Assman, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, translated by Andrew Jenkins (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), 379.

[4] Karel Van Der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 46.

invasion, would be in conflict with the restored elite and the identity constructions and socio-political structures legitimated in their official laws and traditions.[5] The tensions and hopes of those living under the pressure of a strongly segregated and hierarchical official culture can be expressed through oral traditions and a culture of folk humor that can be written in the form of carnivalized literature.[6] As unofficial literature arising out of folk culture, the multiple viewpoints (social heteroglossia) in Esther ridicule and critique official identity constructions that legitimate the power and authority of the elite and leave indigenous and "other" social groups vulnerable to oppression, exploitation, and hardship. The ideologies of ethnic, gender, class, and sexual identity as constructed in Israel's official literature are themes that preoccupy the characters in the book of Esther. Carnival laughter is oriented toward those superior in the hierarchical order and privileged in terms of authority and truth. As Bakhtin theorized, parodic-travestying literature provides the permanent corrective of laughter that functions to critique the serious direct word by exposing a reality that is too heteroglot and contradictory to fit its monotonic representation. The laughing word exposes the insufficiency and limitations of the serious official word.[7] The contradictory reality in its totality as exposed by corrective laughter and described by Bakhtin seems to fit this Bakhtinian reading of Esther when viewed as a whole. The laughing words identified throughout the book seem like fragments of some unified whole with a multi-generic, multi-styled, intensely critical, and soberly mocking nature and reflecting the heteroglossia and multiple voices of the people

[5] Richard Horsley, *Scribes Visionaries and the Politics of Second Temple Judaism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 23.

[6] Assman, *The mind of Egypt*, 277.

[7] Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Tx.: University of Texas Press,1981), 55-56.

groups living in the province of Yehud and in the diaspora during the late Persian and early Hellenistic periods.

Carnivalesque literature derides and opposes the serious and authoritative word of official traditions. The centralizing and centripetal force of Israel's normative traditions are opposed by the de-centralizing and centrifugal force of the laughing word in Esther. The monoglossic truth and unitary meaning of the official tradition is challenged by a dialogic form of truth with a multiplicity of meanings. The values associated with carnival include freedom, equality, unfinalizability, abundance, and possibility; the symbols of carnival represent change, renewal, and relativity of truths and authorities. In this Bakhtinian reading, the social heteroglossia orchestrated throughout the book represents opposing points of view toward the identity constructions and socio-political hierarchies legitimated in Israel's official traditions. Bakhtin's concept of dialogical truth emphasizes the open and unfinalized nature of these identity claims and the laughing word in Esther opposes any dogmatic and final truth.[8]

Law is another theme prevalent throughout the book of Esther. Insertion of legal edits frames the book emphasizing the laughing words of Israel's contradictory legal traditions. The same laws that are supposed to uphold justice and equity call for the genocide of indigenous people groups and the plundering of their possessions, the oppression and exploitation of women in the patriarchal household, and the subjugation and affliction of the lower classes by the elite who are concerned with their own status, wealth, and power. The socio-ideological viewpoints in Israel's laws are unmasked and

[8] Carol Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible and Dialogic Truth," *Journal of Religion* 76, no. 2 (1996): 304.

exposed as "something false, hypocritical, greedy, limited, narrowly nationalistic, and inadequate to reality."[9]

Bakhtin theorized that the centrifugal forces of heteroglossia are more powerful and ubiquitous than the centripetal and unifying forces of monoglossic national myths and epics.[10] Carnivalesque literature functions to liberate from the universally accepted worldview and from established truths and clichés. It provides the opportunity to adopt a "new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things."[11] Carnivalized literature, according to Bakhtin, has an indestructible vitality and a life-creating and transforming power.[12] If Esther is indeed the comic-ironic *contre-partie* to Israel's literary traditions and torah (akin to the ancient satyr plays or "fourth dramas" that follow tragic trilogies), it has a unique function as the laughing image of Israel's official texts. The official traditions are not discredited by the laughing image, but the book of Esther does provide the opportunity to view the world differently and present the possibility for change and for a new order of things to unfold. The dialogue of heteroglossia in the book of Esther, as stated succinctly by Fewell, "keeps the canon from becoming a law that cannot change; it helps to keep the canon alive and talking."[13]

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[9] Holquist, *Dialogic Imagination* , 312.

[10] Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque*, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 37.

[11] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 34.

[12] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics," *Theory and History of Literature*, vol 8, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 107.

[13] Danna Nolan Fewell, "Introduction: Writing, Reading and Relating," in *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, Edited by Danna Nolan Fewell (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 14.

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