

Esther's Story
Composition, Literary Unity, Textual
Development, and Noble Characters

I The Story of Esther

In the preexilic period the relationship between the Israelites and the Persians was very restricted, if any existed at all. This situation changed when the Judahites were exiled to Mesopotamia, and particularly when they came under control of Cyrus II, the Great.¹ A range of royal decrees regarding the Jews is attributed to the Persian kings in late biblical literature. Of these, two are particularly well known and even revolutionary: a positive one – the “Cyrus Decree,” recounted in Ezra 1:1–3 (// 2 Chr 36:22–23)² – and a totally negative one – the “Haman Decree,” recounted in the book of Esther (3:13–14).³

The book of Esther is the story of a beautiful orphaned Jewish girl who became queen of the Persian Empire (Esth 2:16–18). Together with her cousin Mordecai she successfully saved her people from total ethnic annihilation (or, if you wish, from an inclusive antisemitic pogrom/holocaust), which Haman, the vizier of the king, had planned and attempted to execute.

The geopolitical setting of the Esther story is far from the Jewish homeland, Eretz-Israel (the Land of Israel), which in fact is not mentioned even once in the entire book. It takes place in the Diaspora, at the court of a foreign king, King Ahasuerus of Persia and Media, in the Elamite city of

¹ See Chapter 5, §IV.

² The final execution of the Cyrus Decree took place in the reign of Darius the Great (522–486 BCE), who canceled the prohibitions that had in the meantime been imposed on the Judeans due to the strong opposition and malicious words of their surrounding neighbors (Ezra 4:17–24), and allowed the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple – as Cyrus had promised. Darius even provided funding and supplies for the Temple services (Ezra 6:1–11 esp. 1–5). Some scholars dispute the historical authenticity of the Cyrus Decree, in my opinion without any solid justification. For a survey of such opinions, see J. Liver, “Cyrus,” *Encyclopedia Biblica* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1962), vol. 4, pp. 55–64 esp. 62–63 (Hebrew); P. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), pp. 46–48.

³ And, of course, the counter-decree of Mordecai (which was written in the name of King Ahasuerus), that canceled Haman’s decree (Esth 8:7–14).

Shushan/Susa, one of five capitals of the Persian Achaemenid Empire.⁴ Therefore, it is no wonder that there are similarities between the Esther story and the stories of Joseph, Daniel, Fourth Ezra, and Aḥiqar, which also took place in the courts of foreign rulers in the diaspora.

Esther's story is concerned, first and foremost, with protecting the Jewish people from those who wish to destroy them. It is an example of the classical story of the Jews' struggle to survive under foreign dominion (in this case, the Persian Empire), controlled by an unpredictable, absolute autocrat (the Persian king) and his capricious official(s). As such, the book narrates the struggle between life and death, between light and dark, between liberty, tolerance and plurality of religious beliefs and opinions on the one hand, and the tyranny of racial and religious fanaticism, hatred, prejudice, and intolerance on the other. Indeed, threats against Jewish existence like that recounted in the story of Esther have frequently repeated themselves in various ways and at different times and places throughout the long and bitter history of the Jewish people. In that struggle the Jews have often turned to Esther to ground their trust that God will keep his covenant with them, and – in one way or another – redeem his people from annihilation (cf. Esth 4:13–14).⁵

II Place and Time of Composition

Prior to studying any text, it is important to clarify where and when exactly it was composed, or, if that is not possible, at least the geographic area and the historical era. It is essential to read the composition within its socio-cultural environment and its religious and historical settings.⁶ In the case of Esther, it is hard to say exactly where the story was composed. Adele Berlin suggests that, in principle, it could have been written anywhere in the eastern Jewish diaspora.⁷ However, since the author is so familiar with Susa,⁸ it is reasonable to assume that Esther was composed there.

There is no doubt that the book of Esther originated at some point in the Second Temple period. However, scholars have suggested a wide range of potential dates for the composition of the book within that framework.

⁴ On Shushan/Susa see Chapter 5, §II, 5.

⁵ For more details see Chapters 4 and 9.

⁶ See I. Kalimi, "Placing the Chronicler in His Own Historical Context: A Closer Examination," *JNES* 68 (2009), pp. 179–192 esp. 179–180.

⁷ Cf. A. Berlin, *Esther: A Commentary* (Mikra Leyisra'el; Jerusalem: Magnes Press / Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2001), p. 28 (Hebrew).

⁸ See further Chapter 5, §II, 5.

These run from the early Persian period to the early Hasmonaean period. There is a gap of about 340 years between the earliest and the latest suggested dates, with many or additional options proposed between these two extremes. For example, Shemaryahu Talmon and Edwin M. Yamauchi date the book “in the beginning of the Persian era. The traditional setting of the book in the days of Xerxes I cannot be wide off the mark.”⁹ Robert Gordis dates the book to “approximately 400 B.C.E.”¹⁰ Carey A. Moore is of the opinion that “it is most likely that Esther reached its final form in either the late Persian or early Hellenistic period,” though the first edition was probably even earlier.¹¹

In contrast to these datings of the book in the Persian or early Hellenistic periods, Wesley J. Fuerst thinks that “the present written form of the book may be traceable to the *early part of the second century B.C.* in Palestine” (italics added).¹² On the basis of some similarities between the book of Esther and the book of Judith, Ruth Stiehl classifies the book as a typical Hellenistic novel that includes erotic elements, and dates the composition of Esther to the Maccabean era, sometime around 140 BCE.¹³ Elias J. Bickerman asserts that “It was in the Hasmonean period, in which Esther was written, that mass conversion to the true faith began”¹⁴ Most recently, Beate Ego puts it only slightly earlier, arguing for a “pre-Hasmonean origin for the book.”¹⁵ However, such late dating of Esther by Stiehl, Bickerman, and Ego are particularly problematic, as will be discussed below.

At the least, the book of Esther could not have been written *before* the time of the historical figure, King Ahasuerus/Xerxes I, who reigned in the

⁹ See S. Talmon, “‘Wisdom’ in the Book of Esther,” *VT* 13 (1963), pp. 419–455 esp. 453; followed by E. M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), p. 228 (he miscites it as p. 449). See also S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 44; Missoula, MN: Scholars Press, 1979), p. 2: “not far removed from the events it describes,” that is, ca. 485–465 BCE.

¹⁰ See R. Gordis, *Megillat Esther: The Masoretic Hebrew Text* (New York: Ktav, 1974), p. 8.

¹¹ See C. A. Moore, *Esther: Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (Anchor Bible 7b; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), pp. lvii–lx. See also J. D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (The Old Testament Library; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 26.

¹² W. J. Fuerst, *The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Lamentations: The Five Scrolls* (Cambridge Bible Commentaries on the Old Testament; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 40.

¹³ See R. Stiehl, “Das Buch Esther,” *WZKM* 53 (1957), pp. 4–22 esp. 6–9, 22.

¹⁴ See E. J. Bickerman, *The Jews in the Greek Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 247.

¹⁵ See B. Ego, “The Book of Esther: A Hellenistic Book,” *JAJ* 1 (2010), pp. 279–302, and most recently in her commentary: *Esther* (Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament 21; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), pp. 59–69. See also H. M. Wahl, *Das Buch Esther: Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), p. 25; For a further survey and bibliographical references, see Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, pp. 226–228, and Ego, “The Book of Esther.”

years 485–465 BCE (*terminus a quo*),¹⁶ but it also could not be written *after* the composition of 2 Maccabees (ca. 143 BCE; *terminus ad quem*), which affirms that the “Day of Nicanor” (the 13th of Adar) is “the day before the Day of Mordecai” (πρὸ μιᾶς ἡμέρας τῆς Μαρδοχικῆς ἡμέρας; 2 Macc 15:36), which is called “Purim” (in plural!) in Esth 9:26, 28, 32. This implies that at the beginning of the Hasmonaean period, the Purim Festival was already well known also among the Jews in Judea.¹⁷ Since 2 Maccabees referred to one of the key figures of the book – Mordecai – and the festival of Purim in some form that related to him, the author was most likely aware of at least the main story of Esther.¹⁸

As is usual in the biblical literature from the Persian period, such as Ezra-Nehemiah and Chronicles, the language and style of the *Megillah* are Late Biblical Hebrew.¹⁹ It contains several Aramaic words, for example, אנס (“force,” Esth 1:8), יקר (“honor,” 1:20), איגרת (“letter,” 9:26, 29), פתגם (“decree,” 1:20), and, even more significantly, many Persian loanwords, such as פרתמים (“nobles,” Esth 1:3; 6:9), דת (“law,” 1:8; 3:14; 9:13),²⁰ פתשן (“copy,” 3:14; 4:8; 8:13), אחשתרפן (“satrap,” 3:12; 8:9; 9:3), אחשתרן (“courier/courser,” 8:10, 14), and Persian names such as Zeresh (5:14) and Vaizatha (9:9).²¹ On the other hand, the book of Esther lacks any Greek word,

¹⁶ On Ahasuerus/Xerxes I, see the discussion in Chapter 5, §II, 2.

¹⁷ See the detailed discussion by B. Bar-Kochva, “On the Festival of Purim and Some of Succot Practices in the Period of the Second Temple and Afterwards,” *Zion* 62 (1997), pp. 387–407 esp. 387–402. For the inaccurate opinion that the Festival of Purim was unknown in the Second Temple period, see A. Oppenheimer, “The Historical Approach: A Clarification,” *Zion* 61 (1996), pp. 225–230 esp. 227–228; idem, “Love of Mordechai or Hatred of Haman? Purim in the Days of the Second Temple and Afterwards,” *Zion* 62 (1997), pp. 408–418. All three articles are in Hebrew.

¹⁸ Interestingly, Mordecai and Esther are not mentioned in the “Praise of the Fathers” in the Wisdom of Ben Sira 44–49, which was composed ca. 180 BCE, but this need not imply that the book was only written after that date. On “the Day of Mordecai,” see also Chapter 8, §I and §VIII.

¹⁹ For the language and style of the *Megillah*, see for example, H. Striedl, “Untersuchung zur Syntax und Stilistik des hebräischen Buches Esther,” *ZAW* 55 (1937), pp. 73–108; M. Z. Segal, *An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sepher, 1967), vol. 3, pp. 718–728 esp. 725–727 (Hebrew); R. Weiss, “The Language and Style of Megillath Esther,” *Masbot beMikra* (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, [1976]), pp. 114–128 (Hebrew); R. Bergey, “Late Linguistic Features in Esther,” *JQR* 75 (1984), pp. 66–78.

²⁰ On this word see Chapter 5, §II, 8.

²¹ There has been much written on the Persian words and names in Esther. See for example, H. Gehman, “Notes on the Persian Words in the Book of Esther,” *JBL* 43 (1924), pp. 321–328; A. R. Millard, “The Persian Names in Esther and the Reliability of the Hebrew Text,” *JBL* 96 (1977), pp. 481–488 (indeed, the conclusion of Millard regarding the foreign names in Esther is valid: “the Old Testament text has often been disparaged, yet when the evidence of its own contemporary world is evaluated beside it, it is seen to be as reliable a source as any newly excavated inscription”; p. 488); R. Zadok, “Notes on Esther,” *ZAW* 98 (1986), pp. 105–110 (Zadok’s notes are concerned with proper names); Berlin, *Esther: A Commentary*, p. 19; M. Hutter, *Iranische Namen in Semitischen Nebenüberlieferungen – Faszikel 2: Iranische Personennamen in der Hebräische Bibel* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaft, 2015). See also Chapter 5, §I, 2, A.

name, idiom, or anachronism from the Hellenistic era. Moreover, in the Megillah the Elamite capital city is called שֻׁשָׁן (Shushan), that is, Akkadian Šušānu, and not by its Greek name Σοῦσα (Susa). Thus, on this basis it is reasonable to assume that Esther was composed sometime in the Persian Achaemenid period, that is, between the time of Xerxes I (485–465 BCE) and the final collapse of the Persian Empire with the conquest of Persepolis by Alexander the Great (330 BCE).²²

Yet, if the main story of Esther could have been composed around 340–330 BCE as Moore suggests, then why did its author choose to ascribe his story to the time of Ahasuerus/Xerxes I who reigned about 145 to 165 years earlier? Why didn't he ascribe the story to the time of one of the last kings of the Persian Empire, such as Darius III (336–330 BCE)? Indeed, the Esther story ridicules the Persian king and his court in many ways, as will be detailed below (Chapter 3, §XI). But these kinds of descriptions of a Persian king and court do not necessarily require us to date the composition of Esther to a time when the central government was very weak and dying or even after its collapse. Probably, it would still have been possible to compose such a story in Hebrew even when a powerful Persian emperor was in control, as later parallels attest. For instance, if Maimonides could call Mohammad “crazy” and “insolent” while serving in a Muslim royal court in twelfth-century Egypt, Persian-period Jews could have produced a satirical account of a Persian Emperor in Hebrew as well.²³

It appears that the core story of the book of Esther was probably composed either sometime during the reign of the historic figure, Ahasuerus/Xerxes, when at least some of the events of the book took place, or within a generation or two after that, let's say sometime between ca. 475 to 425 BCE. As we will see below in Chapter 5, the author of the book is intimately familiar with a variety of aspects of the Persian court and the empire, and the core of his story is broadly plausible within that context.

III Structure and Literary Unity

The book of Esther has been preserved in quite different versions: a short one in Hebrew (the Masoretic Text, the *textus receptus* of the Jewish Bible), and two versions in Greek that each contain considerable additions and

²² In fact, officially it was destroyed with the conquest and destruction of Persepolis, in 330, by Alexander the Great.

²³ Regarding Maimonides' comments, see I. Kalimi, *Fighting over the Bible: Jewish Interpretation and Polemic from Temple to Talmud and Beyond* (The Brill Reference Library of Judaism 54; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2017), pp. 116, 119–120, 254, and the references there to primary literature.

variations. Whereas the Greek versions of the book are not coherent texts, overall, the Hebrew version seems relatively unified.²⁴ It comprises two major parts:

1. The first and the largest one is the core story/narrative of the book in chapters 1:1–9:19 and 10:1–3. Here the author presents the full story with fixed structure: Prologue (or exposition; 1–2), the story (3:1–9:19), and closing section of the epilogue (10:1–3, see later).
2. The second part regards the origin of the institution of the Purim festival – two “Purim letters” (9:20–32). Here the establishment of the feast of Purim on the 14th and 15th of the month of Adar is recounted, the explanation of why the feast is called “Purim” is provided, and why it takes place on two different days in different places is explained. Mordecai and Esther call the Jews to observe the feast forever. The call is stated by two Purim letters: one from Mordecai (9:20–28), and another from Esther together with Mordecai (9:29–32).

Some scholars are of the opinion that Esth 9:20–32 and 10:1–3 is secondary, a late addition.²⁵ In what follows, I will discuss this issue in three parts: (1) 9:20–28 – the first Purim’s letter; (2) 9:29–32 – the second Purim’s letter; (3) 10:1–3 – the closing chapter of the book.

1 *Esther 9:20–28 – The First Purim Letter*

In my opinion the paragraph in 9:20–28 is part and parcel of the original book. This paragraph together with 10:1–3, builds an epilogue to the core story of the book. In fact, there is no decisive evidence – linguistic, stylistic

²⁴ Some scholars speculated that the book was built from a different bulk of sources, see H. Cazelles, “Note sur la composition du rouleau d’Esther,” in H. Gross and F. Mussner (eds.), *Lex tua veritas* (Festschrift Hubert Jonker; Trier: Paulinus, 1961), pp. 17–29; LaCocque follows him and asserts: “The book of Esther may very well be dependent upon pre-existing sources. There seems to remain an imperfectly smoothed out seam between the story of Esther and the one of Mordecai”; see A. LaCocque, “The Different Versions of Esther,” *BibInt* 7 (1999), pp. 301–322 esp. 321. Niditch concludes correctly: “The book of Esther divides into sources only by the most wooden exegesis”; see S. Niditch, “Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority,” in A. Brenner (ed.), *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 26–46 esp. 32–33.

²⁵ See, for example, L. B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (The International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), pp. 57–60; D. J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans / London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984), pp. 253, 331; idem, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 30; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), pp. 50–63; M. V. Fox, *The Redaction of the Books of Esther: On Reading Composite Texts* (Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series 40; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991); F. W. Bush, “The Book of Esther: *Opus non gratum* in the Christian Canon,” *BBR* 8 (1998), pp. 39–54 esp. 41–42.

or any other – that distinguishes 9:20–28 (or 9:6–28) and 10:1–3 from the core narrative. The latter serves as a historical setting and rationale for the former. The contents of the two parts are closely related to each other: The chief figures – Mordecai, Esther, Ahasuerus, and Haman – play a role in both. The phrase הפיל פור הוא הגורל (“cast *pur*, that is, the lot”), appears in both parts (3:7 and 9:24) and connects them. The text in 9:24–27 that offers a summary of the key events in the central narrative, also connects the two parts. The purpose of the book – to show how God keeps his promises and redeems Israel by an unseen divine hand ends with thanksgiving and the celebration of Purim.²⁶ In this sense, Esther is the “Torah of Purim,” the story behind the festival. In other words, the feast and the celebration of Purim are the outcome of the story, rather than vice versa: the latter was not composed to justify etiologically an existing old pagan festival (*ätiologische Festlegende*) whose origin is unknown. It is not a rejection of an old pagan festival and the replacement of it by the new one – Purim. In fact, all the speculative theories regarding the hypothetical “old pagan festival,” which scholars consider to be self-evident, fail to match with or to explain the origin of the feast of Purim.²⁷ As Gerleman rightfully concludes: “That with that kind of circumstantial evidence using a very questionable divining rod becomes clear as soon as we look more closely at the literary character of the story of Esther.”²⁸ That is, you are theorizing on the basis of what you want to hear, without proper proof, and that becomes clear as soon as you take a good look at the book of Esther from a literary standpoint. Thus, the confident assertion – without presenting any verification – such as that of Johannes Meinhold: “Only one thing is certain in this horror, this completely a-historical, bloodthirsty story, that the Purim festival of the Jews existed, and should be explained,” cannot be accepted.²⁹ Instead, it is likely that Purim was introduced as a natural outcome of the essential events that

²⁶ For further details see Chapter 4. For the opinion that “the genre of Esther is that of a *festival etiology*” (italics original), see F. W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (Word Biblical Commentary 9; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1996), p. 306 and the references there to several other scholars that hold a similar opinion.

²⁷ For such hypothetical theories as that suggested by Paul de Lagarde, Heinrich Zimmern, and Peter Jensen, see Chapter 5, §I, 2, A. For a survey of some others, see G. Gerleman, *Esther* (Biblicher Kommentar Altes Testament 21; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), pp. 23–25.

²⁸ Gerleman, *Esther*, p. 25: “Daß man bei Indizien dieser Art sich einer sehr fraglichen Wünschelrute bedient, ergibt sich, sobald wir uns den literarischen Charakter der Esthererzählung vergegenwärtigen.”

²⁹ See J. Meinhold, *Einführung in das Alte Testament* (3rd ed.; Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1932), p. 360 (in the 1st ed., 1919, this quotation appears on p. 305): “Gewiss ist bei dieser grausen, gänzlich unhistorischen blutdürstigen Geschichte nur eins: das Purimfest der Juden bestand und soll erklärt werden.” Similarly, Theodor H. Gaster, *The Festivals of the Jewish Year* (New York: William Sloane Associate Publishers, 1953), pp. 215–232. Edward L. Greenstein concludes that “the scroll was custom-made for

the Esther core story recounts – the redemption of the Jews. The many later “Megillot” that have been composed to tell the stories of the redemption of the Jewish community and the “Second Purims” that were consequently established and celebrated,³⁰ support this approach. This is not an anachronistic view, but a realistic observation concerning similar occasions that recur and follow the same pattern. So, why should one consider the similar case in Esther itself differently and search for something that we have no indication that it existed at all? Thus, all in all, we can say that Esth 9:20–28 is an integral part of the book rather than a late addition.

2 Esther 9:29–32 – The Second Purim Letter

After the writing and sending of the (first) Purim letter by Mordecai (Esth 9:20–28), why should Mordecai join with Esther to write and send the second letter (Esth 9:29–32)? Presumably Esth 9:29–32 is a late addition to the book.³¹ The secondary nature of Esth 9:29–32 is clear also from the resumptive repetition (*Wiederaufnahme*) in the text:

... ויכתב מרדכי את הדברים ... וישלח ספרים אל כל היהודים אשר בכל מדינות המלך אחשוורוש ... (Esth 9:20), and the words in bold type are repeated at the beginning of the “second letter” (Esth 9:29):

ותכתב אסתר המלכה ... ומרדכי היהודי את כל תקף לקים את אגרת הפורים הזאת השנית וישלח ספרים אל כל היהודים אל שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה [ב] מלכות אחשוורוש.

Moreover, the phrase: אגרת הפורים הזאת השנית (“this *second* letter about Purim”; 9:29) furnishes an additional indication for its lateness and *secondary* nature.³²

the feast [of Purim],” see E. L. Greenstein, “A Jewish Reading of Esther,” in J. Neusner, B. A. Levine, and E. S. Frerichs (eds.), *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 225–243 esp. 226–228, 233. André LaCocque considers Esther story as *hieron logos* for the feast, and declares without hesitation that “the book was written to clean up a pre-existing, more or less pagan festival celebrated by provincial Jews of the Eastern diaspora”; LaCocque, “The Different Versions of Esther,” pp. 302, 305. Adele Berlin (*Esther: A Commentary*, pp. 3–5) is also of the opinion that the main story is an etiological-historical background to justify the festival.

³⁰ See Chapter 9 for further details.

³¹ Here I am joining several scholars who have already identified this passage as a late addition to the book; see, for example, S. E. Loewenstamm, “Esther 9:29–32: The Genesis of a Late Addition,” *HUCA* 42 (1971), pp. 117–124; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 331; *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, p. 1380; L. M. Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends* (Harvard Dissertations in Religion 26; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 169–170; Berlin, *Esther: A Commentary*, p. 149.

³² For a similar late addition that was inserted into an earlier text and defined as the “second time,” see Gen 22:15: “The angel of the Lord called to Abraham from heaven the *second time* ...” On the secondary nature of Gen 22:15–18, see I. Kalimi, *Early Jewish Exegesis and Theological Controversy: Studies in Scriptures in the Shadow of Internal and External Controversies* (Jewish and Christian Heritage 2; Assen: Royal Van Gorcum [now under: Brill, Leiden and Boston], 2002), p. 9 and note 1 with additional bibliography.

In his comment on Esth 9:30, Abraham ibn Ezra explained the necessity of this “second letter of Purim,” which was because the feast was not well established until Esther wrote her letter, together with Mordecai. However, perhaps Mordecai’s name was inserted there just to honor him.

3 *Esther 10:1–3 – The Closing Chapter of the Book*

The short final chapter of the book – Esth 10:1–3 – is not just “another appendix” to the book, in addition to “the first appendix (9:20–32),” as asserts Samuel Sandmel.³³ Why should it be considered as an “appendix,” and for what purpose was such an appendix needed here? Sandmel does not clarify. David Clines, who considers Esth 9:20–10:3 as “the appendices of the Esther scroll,”³⁴ explains that “Est. 10:1–3 also bears all the marks of an addition, since its vague generalities contribute nothing to the concrete narrative of the book.”³⁵ It is not clear, however, what “all the marks of an addition” that Clines refers to are. Elsewhere Clines provides a few more details: “This paragraph [i.e., Esth 10:1–3], like 9:20–28 and 9:29–32, is strictly unnecessary for the purposes of the narrative, and may well be yet another secondary addition. The style is very stilted with a conventional formula referring to the record of the ‘act of Mordecai’.”³⁶ But the author of the paragraph does not refer “to the record of the ‘act of Mordecai’,” rather to the “Annals (lit., the book of chronicles) of the Kings of Media and Persia” (ספר דברי הימים למלכי מדי ופרס; Esth 10:2). Also, Clines’ statements that 10:1–3 “contribute nothing to the concrete narrative of the book” and “is strictly unnecessary for the purposes of the narrative” are inaccurate. This paragraph is part of the core narrative. It is sophisticatedly connected to the opening of the book that describes Ahasuerus and his empire as well. The names *מדי ופרס* (“*Media* and *Persia*”) in Esth 10:2 repeat and stand in chiasmic order to those in Esth 1:3, *פרס ומדי* (“*Persia* and *Media*”), and both together construct a literary form of *inclusio* to the book.³⁷ Moreover, Esth 10:1–3 closes the epilogue of the book, as the antithesis to the prologue of it: While the latter opens with the lewd and silly drunker King Ahasuerus who acts irresponsibly, the former closes with King Ahasuerus who rules the lands and “islands of the sea” and demands a

³³ See S. Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures: An Introduction to Their Literature and Religious Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 503.

³⁴ Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, pp. 50–63.

³⁵ Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, pp. 253–254.

³⁶ Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 331.

³⁷ See also Chapter 3, §VII, 1.

tribute/taxes (lit., forced payment) from them. He accredits himself with achievements – “acts of his power and of his might.” Moreover, the book opens with Mordecai the courtier, a Jew who was subjected to the whims of the evil Haman, and ends with Mordecai the vizier, who ranked “next to king Ahasuerus and was influential (lit., great) among the Jews,” but still does not forget his people and continues to seek good for them.

Clines’ attempt to explain the necessity of the “appendix” saying: “we may presume that some editor was unhappy with the prominence given to Esther by a book ending with 9:32 and decided to bring Mordecai back into the limelight for the closing verses.”³⁸ However, Esth 10:1–2 speaks mainly about Ahasuerus and his reign. Besides, why should we assume the ending of the book with 9:32? Is there any textual or other evidence for such an ending? What guarantee have we that it was ever so? In this way, the research moves in a circle: one assumption leads to another, the latter is built on the unproven former.

Regarding the tax that the king imposed (Esth 10:1), Carey A. Moore acknowledges that “Unfortunately, the author does not say why this was imposed, and many scholars have had difficulty seeing its relevance to the theme of Esther.”³⁹ Indeed, the author does not state explicitly why the tax was imposed.⁴⁰ However, he expresses the relevance of this paragraph to the theme of his book not explicitly, but rather by sophisticated literary forms and connections. As Johan Wolfgang von Goethe already affirmed: “Content determines form; form never exists without content” (*Gehalt bringt die Form mit; Form ist nie ohne Gehalt*).⁴¹

IV Textual Development: The Hebrew and Greek Versions

I *B-Text, A-Text, and MT*

There are two Greek versions of the book of Esther, which were produced mainly by Jews,⁴² but preserved by Christians: The first one is included in the Septuagint/LXX and called simply “Septuagint” or “B-Text,” the other is known as the A-Text (Alpha-Text, or the Lucianic- [= L-] Text). Of the

³⁸ Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 331.

³⁹ Moore, *Esther*, p. 98.

⁴⁰ Moore, *Esther*, pp. 98–99, cites some suggestions that attempt to explain this issue.

⁴¹ See J. W. von Goethe, “Paralipomena,” *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche* (edited by E. Beutler; Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1949), vol. 5, pp. 539–619 esp. 541; see also Kalimi, *The Reshaping of Ancient Israelite History in Chronicles*, pp. 404–405.

⁴² See the discussion in Chapter 10, §1.

36 preserved manuscripts of the Greek Esther, only four medieval copies preserve the A-Text.⁴³

These Greek versions of Esther differ from each other: the A-Text is shorter than the B-Text, and some events are presented in a different order.⁴⁴ They both differ substantially from the MT/Hebrew version not only in many minor (and sometimes important) variants, but they also contain six major (pre-Christian) additions, comprising 107 verses altogether, which are scattered throughout the book.

2 The Six Major Greek Additions and the Colophon

The six major Greek additions include:

- A. An opening prologue describing a dream of Mordecai (before 1:1);
- B. The verdict against the Jews of the Persian Empire (after 3:13);
- C. Prayers for God's intervention offered by Esther and Mordecai (after 4:17);
- D. An extension of the scene in which Esther is presented to Ahasuerus (also after 4:17);
- E. A copy of the verdict in favor of the Jews (after 8:12);
- F. An interpretation of Mordecai's dream from the prologue (after 10:3).⁴⁵

Also, at the end of B-Text a colophon appears:

In the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, Dositheus, who said he was a priest and Levite, and Ptolemy his son, brought this Letter of Purim, stating that it was authentic and that had been translated by Lysimachus [son of] Ptolemy, [a member] of the Jerusalem community.

The purpose of the colophon was to show the originality and the authenticity of the text: It is based on a copy of the "Letter of Purim" – Megillat

⁴³ Mss. 19, 93, 108 and 319; see K. H. Jobes, *The Alpha-Text of Esther: Its Character and Relationship to the Masoretic Text* (Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 153; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), p. 2 and Appendix 2 (unnumbered).

⁴⁴ See K. H. Jobes, "Esther," in A. Pietersma and B. G. Wright, *A New English Translation of the Septuagint and the Other Greek Translation Traditionally Included under that Name* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 424–440. Jobes presents the English translation of both Greek versions in two parallel columns, thus one can easily see all the differences between them.

⁴⁵ For the additions and their analysis, secondary features, original language, date, and authorship, see C. A. Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Bible 44; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), pp. 153–252 esp. 153–172; Jobes, *The Alpha-Text of Esther*, pp. 162–194; I. Kottsieper, *Zusätze zu Ester* (Altes Testament Deutsch Apokryphen 5; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), pp. 109–207; J. Trebolle Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible* (Leiden and Boston: Brill / Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 182; S. A. White Crawford, *The Additions to Esther: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections* (The New Interpreter's Bible 3; Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), pp. 945–972.

Esther – that was sent from the Holy City, Jerusalem, by a priest and Levite. It also indicates that the Greek B-Text of Esther was translated by a scribe in Jerusalem, and then brought to Alexandria.⁴⁶ The colophon refers simply to Ptolemy and Cleopatra, which could refer to any of three different Cleopatras and Ptolemys: 114, or 78/77 or 48 BCE, a matter that is debated among scholars. Usually, the commentators date the colophon to 114 BCE; thus, for instance, Jolio Treballe Barrera asserts that “the translation was made around 114 B.C.E.”⁴⁷ Elias Bickerman, however, is of the opinion that it was written between “September 12, 78 and September 11, 77 B.C.”⁴⁸ At any rate, we can conclude that the Greek B-Text/Septuagint was translated from Hebrew in Jerusalem in the last quarter of the second century or the first quarter of the first century BCE and was sent to Alexandria.⁴⁹

When Jerome (Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus; ca. 347–420) translated the Christian Bible into Latin (which became known as the “Vulgate”), he also included the Greek additions, but not in their proper places as in LXX; instead, he collected them at the end of the book of Esther. Thus, when Stephen Langton divided the Bible into chapters in 1225, he numbered the six additions consecutively as Esth 10:4–16:24, as if they formed a direct continuation of the main story found in the Hebrew text. Accordingly, Addition A became Esth 11:2–12:6; Addition B – 13:1–7; Addition C – 13:8–14:19; Addition D – 15:1–16; Addition E – 16:1–24; Addition F – 10:4–11:1.

Since the Reformation and Luther’s translation of the *Biblia* into German, in the first half of the sixteenth century (see Chapter 11), this group of additions has typically been collected separately, as one of the fifteen Deuterocanonical (or Apocryphal) books that were excluded from the Jewish canon, but included in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Bibles. Yet, some modern Catholic English Bibles, for instance, *The New American Bible*, reestablished the Septuagint order of the book of Esther including the additions.⁵⁰

It is basically a question of whether these additions were added by the Greek translator(s), or they were already an integral part of the Hebrew *Vorlage* used by the translator(s). Treballe Barrera, for instance,

⁴⁶ On the uniqueness, meaning and significance of this colophon, see E. J. Bickerman, “The Colophon of the Greek Book of Esther,” *JBL* 63 (1944), pp. 339–362.

⁴⁷ See Treballe Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible*, p. 399.

⁴⁸ Bickerman, “The Colophon of the Greek Book of Esther,” p. 347; see also Bar-Kochva, “On the Festival of Purim,” pp. 189–190.

⁴⁹ Contra Cordoni who dates this Greek translation of Esther to the third century BCE; see C. Cordoni, “Wenn du in diesen Tagen schweigst’ (Est 4,14): Zur mittelalterlichen biblischen Heldin Ester,” in C. Bakhos and G. Langer (eds.), *Das jüdische Mittelalter* (Die Bibel und die Frauen 4,2; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2020), pp. 37–56 esp. 38.

⁵⁰ The project of *The New American Bible* was completed in 1970.

thinks that apart from Additions B and E, “these additions already form an integral part of the Hebrew text in the period when it was translated into Greek.”⁵¹ However, this still does not mean that the additions were also an integral part of the original Hebrew Esther story. Besides, in the Greek version the language of these additions to Esther is considerably better than that of the translated texts of the book. This means either that the additions are not from the same hand that translated the core text of the book, or, as Martin Hengel suggests, that “The author seems to have taken particular care over the Greek of these additions.”⁵² But if Hengel is correct, it would raise the question: why have these additions received such special attention, more so than any other part of the book?

3 Which Text Is Closest to the Urtext?

In 1944, Charles C. Torrey asserted that “Our standard Greek version [i.e., B-Text] deserves to be regarded as a most important witness to the original form of the Esther narrative.”⁵³ According to him, the Hebrew and Greek versions of the book of Esther are the translation of an original Aramaic version. Moreover, he concluded: “Our Hebrew book is an abbreviated translation from an Aramaic original,” and dates the “Hebrew edition ... later than the time of Josephus.”⁵⁴ However, Torrey’s opinion remains a single and isolated one in the scholarship. Hanna Kahana, who compared the Hebrew MT with the Greek B-Text, concludes that the differences between the two are *not* due to different *Vorlagen*, but rather due to the translator’s work and techniques. According to her, the *Vorlage* of the B-Text was different from that of the MT only in some unimportant variations.⁵⁵ Moreover, while the B-Text without the six additions is a text close to the MT, the Alpha-Text even with the six additions is about 20 percent shorter than the MT, and without them it includes only about half of the text in comparison to the MT.⁵⁶

Some scholars, such as David Clines and Michael V. Fox who followed him, have argued that the A-Text (apart from the additions) represents an

⁵¹ See Trebelle Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible*, p. 182.

⁵² M. Hengel, *The “Hellenization” of Judaea in the First Century after Christ* (London: SCM Press / Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), p. 25.

⁵³ C. C. Torrey, “The Older Book of Esther,” *HTR* 37 (1944), pp. 1–40 esp. 27.

⁵⁴ Torrey, “The Older Book of Esther,” pp. 34–38 esp. 38–39.

⁵⁵ See H. Kahana, *Esther: Juxtaposition of the Septuagint Translation with the Hebrew Text* (Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 40; Leuven: Peeters, 2005).

⁵⁶ See Jobes, *The Alpha-Text of Esther*, p. 62; idem, “Esther,” in Pietersma and Wright (eds.), *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, pp. 424–425. On the Greek versions of Esther, see also C. D. Harvey, *Finding Morality in the Diaspora? Moral Ambiguity and Transformed Morality in the Books of Esther* [Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 328; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003], pp. 8–12.

old pre-MT Hebrew version of Esther.⁵⁷ Clines' assertion is sharply criticized by André LaCocque, who concludes that "the A-Text cannot be used for retrieving an *Urtext* of Esther."⁵⁸ Many other scholars, however, consider the A-Text as a reworking of the B-Text. Thus, for example, Julio Trebolle Barrera thinks that the A-Text depends on and is shortened from the B-Text, and is actually a Lucianic revision of it (L-Text).⁵⁹ Emanuel Tov has also defended the secondary character of the A-Text, but denies that it is Lucianic.⁶⁰

4 Provisional Summary

All in all, it seems that the MT and the B-Text had very similar *Vorlagen*. The Greek translators made several minor and major changes to their Hebrew *Vorlage* – above all, they inserted into it the six substantial additions. The A-Text is secondary, a late revision and shortened version of the B-Text, from which it also kept the six additions. In other words, the Hebrew version (Masoretic Text) of Esther is probably the oldest and closest to the original form of the book, except for the late insertion of the second letter (Esth 9:29–32). The Greek translators of the B-Text added to, omitted from, and altered their core Hebrew *Vorlage* in order to interpret and to adapt it to their own religious norms, social and political needs, and time. This is true for both the minor differences and the six major additions mentioned above. Indeed, the contents of these additions change the overall themes of the book of Esther as a whole, particularly regarding the absence/silence of God, much as the additions found later also in the Aramaic translations (Targums) of the book do.⁶¹

V Noble Characters

Obviously, the most notable characters of the book are Ahasuerus, Haman, Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai. Because the first two characters are discussed – in this or other ways – throughout this volume, there is no necessity to provide specific paragraphs on them here as well. I would like just to state that the author of the scroll portrayed King Ahasuerus as an unpredictable ruler, often drunk, and playing into the hands of his vizier and

⁵⁷ See Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, pp. 139–174; Fox, *The Redaction of the Books of Esther*, pp. 9, 127–133 *et passim*.

⁵⁸ LaCocque, "The Different Versions of Esther," pp. 301–302, 308–322; the quotation is from p. 321.

⁵⁹ See Trebolle Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible*, pp. 399–400.

⁶⁰ See E. Tov, "The 'Lucianic' Text of the Canonical and Apocryphal Sections of Esther: A Rewritten Biblical Book," *Textus* 10 (1982), pp. 1–25; see also R. Hanhart (ed.), *Esther (Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum Auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Göttingensis editum* 8,3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966; 2nd ed., 1983).

⁶¹ See the examples in Chapter 4, §III.

his wife, but also as an emperor with achievements, who imposed taxes on his land. Haman is presented as an Agagaite/Amalekite – a symbol of the Israelite's bitter enemy,⁶² as an egocentric and megalomaniacal person, and as a wicked mass murderer who, despite all that he has – a very high-level position, a lot of honor, a wife, sons, houses – remains unhappy unless he can see Mordecai and his people dead (Esth 5:11–13).⁶³ His plan was to annihilate the human beings – the Jews – but to keep and take their property; in terms of murder and also inheritance of the possession (cf. 1 Kgs 21:19).

In contrast, the figures of Ahasuerus and Haman, Queen Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai are presented solely as noble characters. Certainly, it is important for its own sake to introduce these important figures of the story. But I particularly present here the portraits of these characters as reflected in the biblical story, because of their relevance for Parts II and III of the volume. Simply, it furnishes us with the necessary background to understand and evaluate the conflicting views of them held by different later groups of Jews and Christians, as will be discussed in the subsequent parts of this volume.

1 *Vashti: A Queen with Dignity and Self-Respect*

The Esther story opens with King Ahasuerus' protests of his great prosperity, supremacy, and glory. It details how the king reveals to his assembled nobles and officials his enormous wealth (Esth 1:4–7),⁶⁴ and then – “when the heart of the king was merry with wine” (Esth 1:10) – he wishes also to impress them by showing his wife's, Queen Vashti's, extraordinary beauty. Vashti, however, refuses to obey the king's capricious *order*. She does not explain her refusal, and also the narrator neither discloses nor gives any indication of her motive, but only alludes to Vashti's act: She courageously maintains her self-respect and royal dignity and does not display her beauty before the lustful and drunken males (Esth 1:12). Seemingly, Vashti was aware that her refusal would make the king angry and perhaps also cause her to lose if not her life then at least her royal crown (Esth 1:10–15). The king with his council of seven “wise” men overstate the incident and conclude that Vashti's refusal to obey her husband's order challenges all the imperial social norms regarding women and could become a destructive model for others. Thus, Vashti was removed from her position as the queen of the Persian Empire (Esth 1:10–22). From here the entire story takes its starting point, and all the rest of the

⁶² See Exod 17:8–16; Deut 25:17–19; Judg 6:1–6; 1 Samuel 15; 30:1–21; see also Chapter 4, §II, note 24.

⁶³ On Ahasuerus, see Chapter 5, §II, 2; on Haman, see Chapter 6, §I.

⁶⁴ For further details see Chapter 5, §II, 5.

tale is based on what is told here in this chapter about Vashti and the king. In fact, “Queen Vashti’s demotion is Esther’s promotion to the throne.”⁶⁵

The story implies a disparity between Vashti’s brave and noble behavior and her excessive and unbalanced punishment. The biblical story gives no indication that Vashti’s fate was deserved. Once again, the author leaves readers to fill in the gap and come to their own conclusions. In later generations, some rabbis attempt to find a balance between Vashti’s noble act and her retribution.⁶⁶

2 *Esther: Beauty, Courage, and Wisdom*

The author identifies the common Babylonian name of the heroine “Esther” (רֶסְתָר > Istar) with her Hebrew personal name “Hadassah” (הַדַּסָּה הִיא אֶסְתֵּר; Esth 2:7). Perhaps he presents that the foreign name “Esther” was given to her as she became the queen of the Persian Empire, similar to the case of Joseph, whom Pharaoh called “Zaphnath-Paaneah” when he appointed him as a vizier (Gen 41:45).⁶⁷

The orphan Jewess, Esther, was adopted by her exiled cousin (Esth 2:7, 15), Mordecai; she behaved reasonably (Esth 2:15), followed Mordecai’s instructions (Esth 2:10, 20), and finally ended up replacing Vashti as the Queen of the Persian Empire. Esther does not reveal her ethnic origin and her descent (2:10, 20), as Mordecai ordered. The narrator does not disclose why Mordecai ordered such a thing and leaves this open for speculation by his potential readers. Probably, he meant to secure her status in the palace and to avoid some obstacles on her route to the position. In any case, Esther’s obedience to Mordecai at this point is crucial for the development of the story later in Esther 7, and as such it serves as an exposition of it.

Certainly, the greatest blessing of Esther was her extraordinary beauty, as stressed already in introducing her in the prologue of the tale (Esth 2:7). However, it is inaccurate to describe her as one who “wins her victories not by skill or by character, but by her beauty.”⁶⁸ Indeed, in her first steps as queen, Esther plays a passive role and follows Mordecai’s instructions. She had to be motivated and persuaded by Mordecai to act on behalf of her people, being told that if she does not approach the king and request him

⁶⁵ LaCocque, “Haman in the Book of Esther,” p. 207.

⁶⁶ For the treatment of Vashti by the talmudic sages, see Chapter 8, §IV, 4, B. For further discussion on Vashti, see Chapter 5, §II, 3, A.

⁶⁷ On the names “Hadassah” and “Esther,” see the discussion in Chapter 5, §I, 2, A.

⁶⁸ Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, p. 96.

to cancel Haman's evil decree, she will perish together with all the Jews of the empire. From that moment and on, Esther acts alone and independently until the complete illumination of Haman (Esther 7).

Although she was the wife of the king and the queen of the empire, she, like everyone else, was prohibited from uninvited visiting of the king – her husband – at the royal court, and whoever goes there without invitation risks death penalty (Esth 4:11). Still, she courageously took the risk and put her life in danger (and that is not nothing!) by going to King Ahasuerus in order to attempt to save the lives of many others to whom she owed loyalty (Esth 4:10–11, 16; 5:1–8; 7:1–10).⁶⁹ She is best characterized as an altruist, a selfless person who is concerned for the wellbeing of her people.

The narrator emphasizes the incomparably lower status of Esther in comparison to the king through a sophisticated literary description. In Esth 5:1 he states that “Esther put on her *royal dress*,” and in the same verse he stresses five times the king and his royal status, saying, she “stood in the inner court of the *king's* palace, opposite the *king's* palace; and the *king* sat upon his *royal throne* in the *royal palace*, opposite the gate of the house (i.e., the palace)” (ותלבש אסתר מלכות ותעמד בחצר בית המלך הפנימית נכח בית המלך והמלך יושב על כסא) (מלכותו בבית המלכות נכח פתח הבית). In other words, although Esther put on “her *royal dress*,” still Ahasuerus is the king, sitting on his royal throne in his royal court, and controls all the royal authorities, and can make sudden decisions regarding her very existence!

To get a sense of how dangerous and heroic Esther's act was, it is worthwhile to cite the Greek Addition D 1–16 (// A-Text 6:1–12; Vulgate 15:4–19). Here the late author took advantage of the scene in the Hebrew text of Esth 5:1–2 and deliberately expanded it with a dramatic description of that moment, while expressing his own theological view:

When she had passed through all the doors, she stood before the king. He was seated on his royal throne . . . Upon seeing Esther, his face glowered in fiercest anger. The queen stumbled, turned pale and fainted, keeling over on the maid who went before her. But God changed the king's spirit to gentleness. The king leaped down from his throne in alarm and took her up in his arms until she revived. He comforted her with reassuring words, telling her, “what is the matter, Esther? I am your brother. Relax. You are not going to die! . . . Come to here!” Then he raised his scepter, and tapped her neck; he hugged her and said, “talk to me!” . . .⁷⁰

⁶⁹ It is not clear on which basis Ellens argues that Esther went to the king, “*sexually seduced him*, and persuaded him thereby to hang the perpetrators and protect the Jews”; J. H. Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration* (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2006), p. 42 (italics added).

⁷⁰ For the text, cf. Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions*, pp. 216–217.

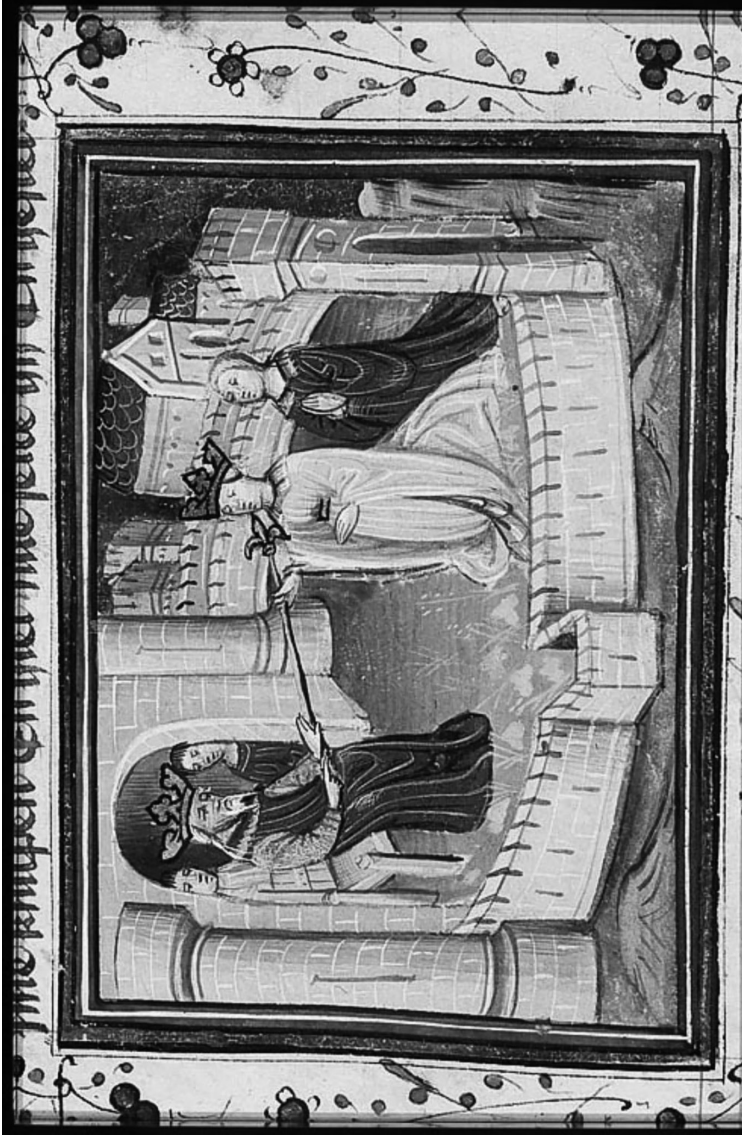


Figure 1 Anonymous Dutch master, Esther before Ahasuerus (Esth 5:1-2), Utrecht, ca. 1430; The Hague, Royal National Library

Mordecai requested Esther to go to the king, “make supplication to him, and entreat him for her people” (Esth 4:8). However, she acted differently and strategically planned everything; she invited the king and Haman to dine with her twice, and employed all her physical beauty, mental strength, intelligence, and rhetoric, as well as her personal relations with the king, in order to demolish Haman and his genocidal plan (Esther 5 and 7). Also, Esther “spoke once more before the king, and fell down at his feet, and pleaded with tears to prevent the evil design of Haman the Agagite, and the plan that he had devised against the Jews” (Esth 8:3; cf. 4:8). Thus, Esther accomplishes her goals not only with her unique natural beauty, but also with her rhetoric, social skills, and personal character (Esth 2:15, 17; 8:3).⁷¹

By acting so and saving the entire Jewish people from annihilation, Esther joins earlier saviors in the history of Israel, such as Deborah, Yael, and the wise woman from Abel of Beth-Maachah (Judges 4–5; 2 Sam 20:14–22), and as such she serves a model for generations to come. The figure of Esther and her actions as the savior of the Jews, shines particularly in comparison to and contrast with those of her bitter opponent, Haman, who is presented in the book as a wicked man of boundless ego and self-importance, and as a bloody mass murderer of innocent Jewish people (Esth 3:3–15; 5:11–14; 6:4–9; 7:6; 8:5).

The courageous acts of Esther were praised even by the Protestant reformer, Martin Luther, who is otherwise harshly critical of the book of Esther. In 1523, in a sermon on Luke 16, Luther names Esther as “the beloved daughter of God,” for she did not care about her life but rather about the lives of her people (WA, vol. 12, p. 593 lines 1–5).⁷² In contrast, the German poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, describes Queen Esther in a short play (1778) as not having the courage to speak to the king in order to save her people.⁷³ By doing so, Goethe inaccurately reverses the sense of the biblical story.⁷⁴

In the last decades, there is lively discussion of Esther's character in modern feminist biblical interpretation. However, this interesting and important matter is beyond the focus of the current volume. There are

⁷¹ See also Talmon, “‘Wisdom’ in the Book of Esther,” pp. 419–455; J. Magonet, “The Liberal and the Lady: Esther Revisited,” *Judaism* 29 (1980), pp. 167–176 esp. 173; Niditch, “Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority,” p. 39. Contra Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, p. 96.

⁷² For further details see Chapter 11, §II.

⁷³ See J. W. von Goethe, *Sämtliche Werke nach Epochen seines Schaffens* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1987), vol. 2.1, pp. 211–234 esp. 229–232.

⁷⁴ On the historicity of Queen Esther, see Chapter 5, §II, 3, A. For additional discussions of Esther's reception history in Judaism and Christianity, see Chapters 8 (esp. §V, 1) through 13.



Figure 2 Aert de Gelder, *Esther and Mordechai*, ca. 1685, the Netherlands

many studies on this issue in the scholarly literature, all easily accessible to the interested readers.⁷⁵

3 *Mordecai: “Seeking the Welfare of His People”*

A The Major Persona of the Book

Without a doubt, Mordecai is the major persona and the most leading figure of the book of Esther. He is the first Jewish character that the book presents in the prologue (Esth 2:5–6), and the last one who closes the epilogue (10:1–3). Mordecai initiated the composition of the Megillah, established the Purim feast, and distributed them among the Jewish communities all over the kingdom (9:20–28, cf. 29). The core story deals with him, his conflict with Haman (3:2–6), and his efforts to cancel Haman’s edict against the Jews.

⁷⁵ See, for example, Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*; M. McClain-Walters, *The Esther Anointing: Becoming a Woman of Prayer, Courage, and Influence* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House, 2014); L. Brownback, *Esther: The Hidden Hand of God* (Flourish Bible Study; Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2020); C. B. R. Howard, “When Esther and Jezebel Write: A Feminist Biblical Theology of Authority,” in P. K. Tull and J. E. Lapsley (eds.), *After Exegesis: Feminist Biblical Theology: Essays in Honor of Carol A. Newsom* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), pp. 109–122; S. A. White Crawford, “Esther,” in C. A. Newsom, S. H. Ringe, and J. E. Lapsley (eds.), *Woman’s Bible Commentary* (3rd ed.; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012), pp. 201–207; O. Avnery, “Gender, Ethnicity, Identity: Duality in the Book of Esther,” in P. Machinist, R. A. Harris, J. A. Berman, N. Samet, and N. Ayali-Darshan (eds.), *Ve-’Ed Ya’aleh (Gen 2:6): Essays in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies Presented to Edward L. Greenstein* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2021), vol. 2, pp. 1099–1121, and the additional bibliography therein. See also the discussion of A. C. Silver, *The Book of Esther and the Typology of Female Transfiguration in American Literature* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018) in Chapter 13.

Mordecai was a descendant of a noble lineage that goes back to the first king of Israel – Saul from the tribe of Benjamin (Esth 2:5–6; 1 Sam 9:1–2). He is a dynamic, self-confident, and nonconformist who acts and advises others contrary to regulations. Thus, officials who keep the king's order and bow down to Haman (3:2) still conspire to assassinate the king. In contrast, Mordecai who does not keep that order of the king and does not bow to Haman, yet stays loyal to the king, indirectly warns him – via Esther – on time, and saves his life (2:21–23). In other words, when it is necessary, Mordecai follows the regulation and perfectly fulfills his duty. Although “no one might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth,” nevertheless Mordecai does so (4:2); Esther stresses the risk to life involved in coming to the inner court of the king (4:11), but Mordecai still pushes her to go there, against all regulations (4:13–14).

After the death of Esther's father and mother (the author does not say when, where, or why this happened), Mordecai adopted the orphan girl as his own daughter (Esth 2:7).⁷⁶ He is the authority behind Esther, who guides her in her first steps at the palace concerning how to behave, what to do, and what not to disclose (2:7, 10–11, 20, 22; 4:8–16).

While the villain Haman uses his influence on King Ahasuerus to destroy the Jews of the Empire, Mordecai uses his influence on Queen Esther to rescue them. He definitely did not “sacrifice his cousin to advance his interests,” as Paton asserts.⁷⁷ A careful reading of the biblical text shows clearly that Mordecai did not send Esther to the king's palace, and it was not Esther's free will to go there. Rather, “when the king's command and his edict were proclaimed, and many girls were gathered into Shushan the capital, into the custody of Hegai, *Esther was taken* [also] to the king's house” (יהי בהשמע דבריהמלך ודתו ובהקבץ נערות רבות אל-שושן הבירה אלייד הגי ותלקח אסתר) (אל-ביית המלך; Esth 2:8).

B A Courtier at the King's Gate

According to the prologue of the book, Mordecai “the Jew” began his career as a courtier in the king's gate (Esth 2:21; cf. 6:10, 12), and according to the epilogue he ended as a vizier of Ahasuerus (Esth 10:2–3).⁷⁸ At first glance, one gets the impression that Mordecai was just an ordinary

⁷⁶ Regarding the Septuagint version here and the statement in the Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 13a that Esther was the wife of Mordecai, see Chapter 8, §V, 1.

⁷⁷ Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, p. 96.

⁷⁸ On the possibility of the identification of Mordecai with “the *Mar-duk-ā* the Sipir,” and that Mordecai (or one of his ancestors) was exiled by Nebuchadnezzar from Judah to Babylonia, see Chapter 5, end of §I and §II, 4.

resident of Susa, who had a low-level court position (“sat in the king’s gate”; Esth 2:21), but still he had indirect access to the king via his agent – Esther. However, the implication of the reference to “sitting in the gate” is, probably, that he served as a kind of security police at the royal court, a position that was called the “eyes of the king” or “ears of the king” or “listening-watch,”⁷⁹ and somehow, he found out about the conspiracy against the king. The “eyes of the king” was a high post. Thus, Mordecai already had an important position in Xerxes’ court even before the main story begins. He was blamed for not keeping “the king’s laws” (Esth 3:18), however, he was loyal to the gentile king, Ahasuerus, whom he saved from the conniving plans of the officials (/ eunuchs), Bigthan and Teresh, who probably kept “the king’s laws,” but sought to assassinate him (Esth 2:21–23).⁸⁰ This is just the opposite portrait of a Jew compared to the false description of the Jews by Haman that “it is not for the king’s profit to tolerate them” (Esth 3:8).⁸¹ Moreover, in contrast to some Christian anti-Esther and antisemitic interpreters, this scene shows clearly that the Jews do not hate Gentiles as such.⁸²

C The Clash between Mordecai and Haman

In contrast to some Israelites in Egypt who accused Moses and Aaron that “you have made us loathsome in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of his officials, to put a sword in their hand to slay us” (Exod 5:21), the story of Esther does not imply that Mordecai provoked Haman and caused all the trouble for the Jews.⁸³ Because of the immediate proximity of the brief story regarding the conspiracy of Bigthan and Teresh (Esth 2:21–23) to the story of the appointment of Haman as Ahasuerus’ vizier and his clash with

⁷⁹ See, for example, Aristotle, *On the Cosmos* 6 (398a-b); D. J. Furley, “On the Cosmos,” in E. S. Forster and D. J. Furley, *Aristotle, Volume 3: On Sophisticated Refutations, On Coming-To-Be and Passing-Away, On the Cosmos* (Loeb Classic Library 400; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955; reprinted 2000), pp. 333–409 esp. 386–391: “The pomp of Cambyses and Xerxes and Darius was ordered on a grand scale and touched the heights of majesty and magnificence: the king himself, they say, lived in Susa or Ecbatana, invisible to all, in a marvelous palace ... fortified with brazen doors and high walls; outside these the leaders and most eminent men were drawn up in order, some ... called Guards and the Listening-Watch, so that the king himself ... might see everything and hear everything” (ibid., pp. 387, 389; Greek on pp. 386, 388; emphasis added). On this office in the Achaemenid Empire and later in Athens, see J. Balcer, “The Athenian *episkopos* and the Achaemenid King’s Eye,” *AJP* 98 (1977), pp. 252–263.

⁸⁰ On this issue, see the discussion in Chapter 5, §II, 10.

⁸¹ This text serves also as an early preparation and background – an exposition – for the turning-point of the story in Esther 6.

⁸² On this issue, see the full discussion in Chapters 11, §VII and 12, §III.

⁸³ Cf. D. Daube, *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1972), p. 90.

Mordecai (Esth 3:1–15); and because the two stories are related by the phrase אחר הדברים האלה (“after these things”; Esth 3:1a), the author of the Greek Addition to Esther (A 12:6) connects these stories. It says that Haman “determined to injure Mordecai and his people *because of the two eunuchs of the king*” (italics mine). However, the fossilized biblical phrase “after these things” only indicates the sequence of the stories in the book, rather than implying an organic and causal connection between them.⁸⁴ Therefore, the proximity and the phrase cannot support the conclusion of the author of the Greek Addition.

According to the biblical story, the conflict between Haman and Mordecai stemmed from the instructions of the king that everyone must stop and bow down before Haman wherever and whenever he is present. Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman. The story does not clarify Mordecai's rationale for his refusal to do so, when all the other servants of the king fulfilled the king's instruction (Esth 3:2–5). David Daube explains this as follows: “It looks – especially when we bear in mind the opening chapter about Queen Vashti – as if it were primarily a matter of dignity and pride. While Haman is a descendant of the Amalekite king, Mordecai belongs to a noble Jewish house: Saul's father is his ancestor (Esth 3:2; 2:5).⁸⁵ He would not recognize Haman as his superior.”⁸⁶ Elias J. Bickerman also stresses that “Mordechai fights for his honor.”⁸⁷

Some cases in the Hebrew Bible show that bowing down – even to a foreigner – was unproblematic. For example, “Abraham bowed to the people of the land, to the Hittites,” (Gen 23:7, 12). In the beginning, Joseph's brothers considered him as an Egyptian ruler and still “bowed down before him with their faces to the earth” (Gen 42:6, cf. 43:26). Thus, bow down to a foreigner should not be considered as a transgression. However, it is plausible that Haman demanded *divine* honor (as Nebuchadnezzar demanded; Judith 3:8), and Mordecai considered this to be idolatry, which is forbidden according to Jewish law. A clear hint of this view appears in Esth 3:3–4: when the king's servants asked Mordecai, “Why do you disobey the *king's command* (מצות המלך)?” The latter told them that “he is a Jew” (הגיד להם אשר הוא יהודי). In other words, the reason that he does not obey the king's command/ law

⁸⁴ On this expression in the Hebrew Bible, see Kalimi, *The Reshaping of Ancient Israelite History in Chronicles*, pp. 23–24; idem, “Go, I Beg You, Take Your Beloved Son and Slay Him!: Binding of Isaac in Rabbinic Literature and Thought,” *RRJ* 13 (2010), pp. 1–29 esp. 6–7.

⁸⁵ On this issue, see Chapter 6, §II, 9.

⁸⁶ Daube, *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, p. 89.

⁸⁷ See E. J. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 1967), pp. 179–180, and cf. Berlin, *Esther: A Commentary*, p. 95, who stresses the well-known conflict between Israelites and Amalekites as the background for Mordecai's refusal.

is because he is a Jew – in the cultural and religious sense – who is obliged to follow the ancestral law that forbids him to bow down to any human who demands a divine honor. Against this background, Haman's claim is also clearer: He tells the king, "There is a certain people ... *their laws are different* from those of every other people, and they do not keep *the king's laws*" (ישנו עם אחד ... ודתיהם שונות מכל עם ואת דתי המלך אינם עשים) (Esth 3:8). The words דתי המלך in Haman's claim is parallel to מצות המלך. That is, Mordecai does not keep the *king's command/law*, because it contradicts his own *religious law*. If so, then this is not only a personal clash between the pride of Haman and that of Mordecai, but also a cultural-religious conflict.⁸⁸ Thus, the story is – at least to some extent – a martyr's tale (*Kiddush Hashem*, i.e., the sanctification of God's name, martyrdom) in which the hero (i.e., Mordecai) is prepared to take a great risk, even to die, rather than to deny his ancestral faith or a single one of its norms. Mordecai protested against the rule of imperial power which arbitrarily imposes new law on him (and others) – a law that contradicts his own Jewish law and religious heritage.

Indeed, it seems that already the author of Addition C (Mordecai's Prayer) in Greek Esther 13:12–14 has interpreted the refusal of Mordecai to bow down to Haman in this direction: "You know, O Lord," says Mordecai, "that it was not in insolence or pride or for any love of glory that I did this, and refused to bow down to this proud Haman; for I would have been willing to kiss the soles of his feet to save Israel! But I did this so that *I might not set human glory above the glory of God, and I will not bow down to anyone but you, who are my Lord; and I will not do these things in pride.*"⁸⁹

A similar explanation is proposed also by the Jewish historian, Josephus Flavius, at the end of the first century CE: "Mordecai because of his wisdom and his native law would not prostrate himself before any man" (*Jewish Antiquities* 11.210).⁹⁰ Likewise Targum Sheni to Esther ascribes to Mordecai the claim that he does not bow down to a human being, but "I only bow down to the ever-existing God who is One in heaven ... who lifts up the earth ..."⁹¹ Also, some midrashic sources interpret the clash

⁸⁸ Cf. Daube, *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, p. 89.

⁸⁹ Bickerman (*Four Strange Books of the Bible*, pp. 220–221) clarifies that Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman, which appears in his prayer in the Greek Addition of Esther, should be understood against the background of the Hellenistic custom not to bow down to any human being, even a king.

⁹⁰ See R. Marcus, *Josephus with an English Translation* (Loeb Classical Library; London: William Heinemann / Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. 6, p. 417.

⁹¹ B. Grossfeld, *The Targum Sheni to the Book of Esther: A Critical Edition Based on MS. Sassoon 282 with Critical Apparatus* (New York: Sefer-Hermon Press, 1994), pp. 45–46; idem, *The Two Targums of Esther: Translated, with Apparatus and Notes* (The Aramaic Bible 18; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), pp. 142–143.

between Mordecai and Haman as a cultural–religious conflict. For instance, *Pirke deRabbi Eliezer*, ch. 50 (Eretz Israel, ca. eighth century), writes that Mordecai did not bow down to Haman because the latter “had an image (צילם) embroidered on his garment, and anyone who bowed down to Haman bowed also to the abomination (תועבה) which he had made. Mordecai saw this and did not consent to bow down to his disgusting thing (שיקצו).”⁹² The same line has been taken also by Abraham ibn Ezra: “What our rabbis, God bless their soul, expounded is correct, namely that he had the image of an idol on his clothing or on his hat” (ונכון מה שדרשו רז"ל כי צורת צלם וע"ז היו בבגדיו או על מצנפתו).⁹³

Some scholars note that the author of Esther interprets the conflict between Mordecai and Haman as the exemplary war between Israel/Jews and Amalek (Exod 17:8–16; Deut 25:17–19). “This war is represented more personally in 1 Samuel 15 as that between Israel’s king, Saul son of Kish the Benjaminitite, and the Amalekite king, Agag. In Esther, Mordecai son of Yair son of Shimei son of Kish a Benjaminitite, plays the role of Saul (Esth 2:5), while Haman ‘the Agagite’ (Esth 3:1) stands in for his eponymous ancestor,”⁹⁴ and he is “the Jews’ enemy” (Esth 8:1; cf. 3:6, 10; 7:6).

From the moment that Mordecai found out about Haman’s evil decree against his people, he did not rest, but promptly and decisively did everything he could to cancel it and protect them (Esth 4:1–17). Later, when Mordecai was promoted to serve as the king’s vizier – “next to king Ahasuerus” – and became the most powerful Jew in the court of the king, he did not forget where he came from and to whom he belonged: He constantly continued “seeking the welfare of his people, and speaking peace to all his descendants” (Esth 10:3) – “seeking the welfare of his people” and not vengeance and hatred for others; “speaking peace” and not confrontation and war. Thus, Mordecai is presented as a valiant character, in contrast to the wicked Haman, who was seeking evil and destruction for the Jewish people.

⁹² The English translation follows Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, p. 157. Horowitz presumes that “The author of this late midrash transforms Haman into a Christian bishop who proudly wears upon his chest the sign of the cross ...” (ibid., pp. 157–158). Horowitz himself admits this midrashic writer lived in the Land of Israel under the Islamic rule of Umayyad. This fact does not weaken his presumption, because at that time Christians had been in the Land of Israel for more than half a millennium already.

⁹³ See A. Mishaly and M. A. Zipor, *Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Two Commentaries on Megilat Esther: An Annotated Critical Edition* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2019), p. 77 (Hebrew); in his second commentary on Esther, ibn Ezra put this in different words: על כן היה בבגדי המן צורת צלמי אליל, על כן לא השתחוה לו מרדכי (ibid., p. 140).

⁹⁴ Greenstein, “A Jewish Reading of Esther,” p. 230; see also Berlin, *Esther: A Commentary*, p. 95.

All in all, the book of Esther presents Mordecai as one who is loyal to his ancestral tradition, to his family, to his people, and to his king.⁹⁵ No wonder, therefore, that generations of Jews have identified with “Mordecai the Jew” (Esth 6:10; cf. 2:5). They considered his triumph on Haman as the triumph of the Jewish people over their foes (or, if you wish, the “Amalekites” – as a personification of the evil), the triumph of the light and good over the dark and evil. Once again, even Luther who severely criticized the book of Esther, spoke warmly about Mordecai.⁹⁶

VI Conclusion

The biblical story of Esther focuses on Mordecai and his orphaned cousin Esther, whom he adopted as his daughter (Esth 2:7). She became the queen of the Persian Empire, then she took advantage of her position to destroy Haman’s genocidal plan and save her people.

The origin of the book of Esther is disputed, but its date of composition cannot have been earlier than the second quarter of the fifth century BCE, nor later than the mid-second century BCE. The book’s use of numerous Aramaic and Persian loan words and names but the lack of Greek ones or any allusion to event in the Hellenistic era support this. The author’s apparent familiarity with many aspects of Persian culture and imperial administration, also support seeing it as a product of the Persian period rather than the Hellenistic or later period. There is no convincing reason to doubt that it could have been written within a generation or two of the essential events it describes, probably in Susa.

The book of Esther has been preserved in quite different versions: a short one in Hebrew, and two versions in Greek. The Hebrew, and most likely the oldest, version of Esther contains two parts, namely 1:1–9:19 and 10:1–3 (prologue, core story, and part of the epilogue), and 9:20–32 (the institution of Purim). In contrast to the Greek versions of Esther, the Hebrew version of the book seems overall a coherent text, with the exception of one late insertion – “the second letter of Purim” (Esth 9:29–32). Esther 9:20–28 and 10:1–3 is the epilogue of the book, and, as such, an integral part of it.

The Greek versions (the B-Text, and the Alpha-Text/ A-Text/ the Lucianic [L] Text) contain not only many different minor variants, but

⁹⁵ On historicity of Mordecai, see the discussion in Chapter 5, §II, 4. On Mordecai in the rabbinic literature, see Chapter 8, §V, 2.

⁹⁶ See Chapter 11, §II.

also six major additions (altogether 107 verses), which were preserved in the Christian Bible. Probably the MT and the B-Text had very similar *Vorlagen*. The Greek translators made many small and large changes of their Hebrew *Vorlage*. The A-Text is a shortened version of the B-Text. The Hebrew version of Esther is probably the oldest and closest one to the earliest form of the book.

Esther's story reflects a noble portrait of Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai. They are portrayed as respectable figures who refused to give up their integrity, even before the "king of kings" – the Persian emperor who controlled their fate. Vashti refused to flaunt her beauty before the king's drunken male guests, even though it cost her her position. Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, even though it put his life in danger. Queen Esther risked her life and acted courageously and cleverly to free her people from that danger of destruction. The admirable characteristics of Esther and Mordecai and their audacious behaviors and acts for the sake of their people were and are a guidance to generations of Jews and non-Jews all over.

Mordecai, who was "sitting in the gate" of the king, perhaps served as a kind of security force at the court. It was a high position called the "eyes of the king" or "ears of the king" or "listening-watch," and in one way or another he found out about the plot against the king and saved him. Most likely, the clash between Haman and Mordecai was a religious-cultural one.