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A social literary study of Hebrew Esther: characterizations as a narrative construct for discussing diasporic identity

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

A SOCIAL LITERARY STUDY OF HEBREW ESTHER:
CHARACTERIZATIONS AS A NARRATIVE CONSTRUCT FOR DISCUSSING DIASPORIC
IDENTITY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL
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STUDIES)

BY
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THESIS ACCEPTANCE CERTIFICATE

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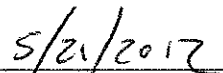
TITLE:

**A SOCIAL LITERARY STUDY OF HEBREW ESTHER:
CHARACTERIZATIONS AS A NARRATIVE CONSTRUCT
FOR DISCUSSING DIASPORIC IDENTITY**

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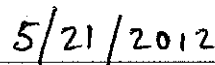
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	5
SOCIAL-LITERARY STUDIES.....	13
PROTAGONISTS CHARACTERIZATION STUDY.....	28
CONCLUSION.....	53

Abstract

This study is a preliminary attempt to ascertain insights into diasporic Persian/Second-Temple period ideas concerning Jewish identity. Through the book of Esther this study utilizes the methodological tool of literary characterizations as a means for gaining insight into the narrator's conceptual framework. The first section highlights some of the important recent Esther studies, along with studies concerned with sociological questions and the Hebrew bible. Section two presents a broad discussion of the sociological and literary concerns for this study. The third section presents a study on the characterizations of the story's co-protagonists, Esther and Mordecai. Two aspects of characterization, the narrator's primary description and descriptions of character reactions and interactions, are used to build a sketch of the co-protagonists and suggest possible sociological readings. Finally, section four highlights needed further studies in developing the initial questions of diasporic identity highlighted here.

1. Introduction

The Esther story is compelling. Concerns and issues like genocide, social unrest, gender and power dynamics affirm Esther's place within the concerns of modern scholarship. Its literary complexity, which includes provocative characters, fanciful scenes, and intriguing plot twists, maintains its place in narrative studies. Thus, Esther's complexity provides an ideal starting point for studying ideas surrounding diasporic Jewish identity concerns. This study is a preliminary attempt to address the socially-minded concern of diasporic identity using the literary method of characterization study.

Within the Esther story there are several verses which, among other things, allude to or seem to give insight into issues like social relationships, institutions, identities and agendas, and ideologies. For example:¹

- * Esther 2:5 "Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite."
- * Es. 2:6 "Kish had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with King Jeconiah of Judah, whom King Nebuchadnessar of Babylon had carried away."
- * Es. 2:7 "Mordecai had brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his cousin, for she had neither father nor mother; the girl was fair and beautiful, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter."
- * Es. 2:9 "The girl pleased him and won his favor, and he quickly provided her with her cosmetic treatments and her portion of food, and with seven chosen maids from the king's palace, and advanced her and her maids to the best place in the harem."
- * Es. 2:10 "Esther did not reveal her people or kindred, for Mordecai had charged her not to tell."
- * Es. 3:2 "And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and did obeisance to Haman; for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or do obeisance."
- *

1. Verses quoted are from the NRSV.

- * Es. 3:4 "When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would avail; for he had told them that he was a Jew."
- * Es. 4:13 "Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, 'Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews.'"
- * Es. 6:13 "When Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him, his advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, 'If Mordecai, before whom your downfall has begun, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him.'"

Texts such as these provide the reader with complex and intriguing information about the sociology presupposed in the text, and most likely also in the understanding of the narrator and the original audiences. Yet, how are we to read these sociological clues of the text? And how are we to read them appropriately, even accurately?

The scholarly writings on the book of Esther are numerous. Some of these writings, including those consulted for this study, are highlighted below. Many studies concentrate on text/source critical or redactional concerns. For example, Charles Dorothy's *The Books of Esther: Structure, Genre and Textual Integrity* analyzes the multiple versions of Esther and argues for the validity of the Greek versions on their own merit.² Similarly, David J. A. Clines in *The Esther Scroll* studies the multiple versions of the Esther story.³ Although text and source issues are not the primary concerns of this study, understanding broadly these issues help shape the boundaries of its textual base.

2. Charles Dorothy, *The Books of Esther: Structure, Genre and Textual Integrity*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

3. David J.A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1984). See also his commentary, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ Co., 1992).

There are plentiful writings on the Esther story from almost as many viewpoints and with almost as many purposes. Writings, such as Michael Fox's *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, seek to understand how the narrator's portrayals of characters demonstrate information about the social context of the writing itself.⁴ Fox attempts to do this with all of the characters in the story from Vashti to the Jews to the anonymous 'world' of the story. Linda Day in *Three Faces of a Queen* attempts to mediate the text critical studies and literary studies by comparing how Esther is characterized in the Greek versions and the Hebrew version.⁵ Sandra Berg's study, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure*, emphasizes a literary reading of Esther focusing on motifs and themes.⁶ Kenneth Craig capitalizes on the comedic overtones in his work *Reading Esther: A Case for Literary Carnavalesque*.⁷ Other studies are concerned with particular social issues. Timothy Laniak's *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther* attempts to parse out the theme of honor and shame as a central element of the story.⁸ Timothy K. Beal's *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* reads the Esther story through the concept of hiding and the inability to find and fix the "other."⁹ Finally, there are numerous commentaries which seek to address all of these issues and more. Jon Levenson's commentary (*Esther: A Com-*

4. Michael Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

5. Linda Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

6. Sandra Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure*, (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979).

7. Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for Literary Carnavalesque*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

8. Timothy Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

9. Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther*, (New York: Routledge, 1997).

mentary) is a key commentary on Esther as is Adele Berlin's commentary (*The Jewish Publication Society's Esther Commentary*).¹⁰ Both of these offer detailed studies of the text and address pertinent issues, including textual, literary, and social concerns. While Berlin focuses mainly on the Masoretic Text, Levenson's commentary attempts to include additional scenes from the Greek text.¹¹

Several works helpful to this study address social scientific concerns and literary concerns in Hebrew biblical writings. Works like Pether H. W. Lau's *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft: Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach*, Lowell Handy's *BibleWorld: Jonah's World: Social Science and the Reading of Prophetic Story*, Shane Kirkpatrick's *Competing for Honor: A Social-Scientific Reading of Daniel 1-6*, and Daniel L. Smith-Christopher's essay "Prayers and Dreams: Power and Diaspora Identities in the Social Setting of the Daniel Tales" address biblical stories with a social-scientific (and often

10. Jon Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); Adele Berlin, *The Jewish Publication Society's Bible Commentary: Esther אסתר*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001).

11. There are of course many commentaries which attempt to address Esther and the concerns of the story. For example, see Frederic W. Bush's commentary (Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 9) and Carey A. Moore's Anchor Bible commentary on the additions of Esther (and Daniel and Jeremiah). Carey Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 44, (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1977).

literary) approach.¹² These, while not necessarily addressing directly the Esther story itself, help navigate a path for developing social-scientific readings of the Esther story.

Additionally, a number of studies addressing more technical aspects help orient the questions of this study. John H. Elliott's introduction of social-scientific criticism (*What Is Social-Scientific Criticism?*) is a helpful tool for understanding some of the basic presuppositions in this type of study.¹³ Essays like the ones contained in *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism: A Sheffield Reader* (ed. David J. Chalcraft) provide an overview for the issues of this type of criticism especially for the Hebrew Bible and readings in social-scientific criticism.¹⁴ Others like Judith Lieu's study *Christian Identity in the Jewish World and Graeco-Roman World*, and John J. Collins' *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora* provide glimpses into the possible social setting of the Esther story.¹⁵ Although Lieu and Collins' studies may not address specifically the probable time period of Esther's composition (MT version), they certainly help construct an understanding of the ancient world with its growing global concerns and issues and the concerns of those in a diaspora.¹⁶ Similarly, studies like Robert Alter's *The Art*

12. Pether H. W. Lau, *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft: Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010); Lowell Handy, *BibleWorld: Jonah's World: Social Science and the Reading of Prophetic Story*, (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2008); Shane Kirkpatrick, *Competing for Honor: A Social-Scientific Reading of Daniel 1-6*, (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Daniel L. Smith-Chorisher, "Prayers and Dreams: Power and Diaspora Identities in the Social Setting of the Daniel Tales" in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception*, ed. John J. Collins, (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002).

13. John H. Elliott, *What is Social-Scientific Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

14. David J. Chalcraft, *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism: A Sheffield Reader*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

15. Judith Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish World and Graeco-Roman World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); John J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem: Jewish Identity in the Hellenistic Diaspora*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2000).

16. Similarly, Erich S. Gruen addresses issues and concerns of diaspora in his study, *Diaspora: Jews*

of *Biblical Narrative*, David Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell's book, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, and Adele Berlin's *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* all help navigate literary questions and issues.¹⁷

"We learn through fiction because we encounter in it the translucent images the writer has cunningly projected out of an intuitively grasped fund of experience not dissimilar to our own, only shaped, defined, ordered, probed in ways we never manage in the muddled and diffused transactions of our own lives."¹⁸ In this statement, Alter alludes, although perhaps unintentionally, to the reciprocal relationship between literary/rhetorical criticism and social scientific criticism. The social-scientific and literary focused studies mentioned above reflect the complexity, and interest, surrounding biblical works like the Esther story. Because Esther's text history is quite complex but with robust resources available for study, there are a number of studies on those issues. While more studies address its literary side, with some addressing social-scientific concerns, these areas are in need of further exploration. Thus, this study attempts to navigate the sociological concern of diasporic identity through application of a literarily-focused methodology, characterization.

Through story a narrator (and his/her audience) engages images and concepts, which in other genres, may elude or contort into other concerns. Esther, as a story, conforms to these parameters. This 'intuitively grasped fund of experience' behind the narrator's telling of the Esther

Amidst Greeks and Romans (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

17. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, (New York: Basic Books, 1981); David Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983).

18. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 156.

story comes to light in the manner of the narrator's story-telling. Thus, it is an attempt to meld both social scientific and literary concerns, drawing on both in order to learn about the narrator's perceptions and/or assumptions of the diasporic experience. Of particular interest is the narrator's perception of diasporic Jewish identity.

For the narrative's protagonists, Esther and Mordecai, identity is uncertain. The characterizations themselves reveal a tension in defining and understanding identity in diaspora. Through the Esther and Mordecai characterizations it becomes clear that diasporic identity cannot be easily defined to or confined by a set of concrete empirical standards. Instead, the narrator highlights this uncertainty and explores the tensions of competing paradigms of identity. For example, the issues of adaptation, fluidity, social group, history and social memory permeate these characters; yet, the characterizations rest not in an ideological concept of permanence but in the experience of tension.

In order to explore these questions, this study begins with broad overviews of both social-scientific concerns and literary/textual concerns. A brief summary of social-scientific criticism concerns begins the discussion by asking: what is social-scientific criticism, how (generally) it functions, and what are some key concerns in applying this form of criticism including a short discussion about the complexity of defining 'identity' (which provides some necessary boundaries for the overall discussion). Next, this study engages the literary concerns of dating, social setting, and genre. Using characterization, as an expression of the narrator's conceptual framework, it attempts to highlight some social-literary conclusions pertaining to ancient understandings of diasporic identity. By examining the narrator's characterizations of the story's protagon-

ists, Esther and Mordecai, the narrator's experiences and/or assumptions about life in diaspora, and specifically 'identity', begin to surface.¹⁹

19. Although there is not sufficient room in this study, future studies on subsidiary characters like the king, Haman, Vashti, etc. would be beneficial in providing a more thorough understanding of the complex social concerns of diasporic Jewish identity.

2. Social-Literary Studies

Social Scientific Criticism

Social Scientific critical approaches are not uncommon in biblical studies. In a primer for this field of criticism, John Elliott defines it as ". . . that phase of the exegetical task which analyzes the social and cultural dimensions of the text and of its environmental context through the utilization of the perspectives, theory, models, and research of the social sciences."²⁰ Simply understood, this approach seeks to utilize social scientific concepts, perspectives, and methodologies, etc. in ascertaining insight into social and/or cultural elements of a text.²¹

There are presuppositions to any sort of critical study. Elliott highlights several in the field of social scientific criticism. These presuppositions include the following: "all knowledge is socially conditioned and perspectival in nature", which applies not only to the narrator/editor but to the interpreter.²² The interpreter brings, at some level whether conscious or not, presuppositions and his/her own ways of comprehending/categorizing/dissecting concepts and events (resulting from internal and external drivers), that is, the interpreter's social location.²³ Thus, a

20. Elliott, *What is Social Scientific Criticism?*, 7.

21. See Charles E. Carter's summary of the history of social-scientific criticism and the Hebrew Bible, "A Discipline in Transition: The Contributions of the Social Sciences to the Study of the Hebrew Bible" in *Community, Identity, and Ideology: Social Science Approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, (ed. Charles E. Carther and Carol L. Meyers; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 3-36.

22. Elliott, *What is Social Scientific Criticism?*, 37.

23. This presupposes a confluence between subjectivism and objectivism. It is not meant to summarize the complex arguments for these competing ways of understanding agency. Within the sociological frame, questions of self, reflexivity, etc. are also questions concerning theories like subjectivism and objectivism making a discussion of reflexivity part of a larger ontological discussion. For example, reflexivity, as a sociological concept, may be considered an element of, or a concern of subjectivism. Margaret Archer's *Conversations About Reflexivity* discusses this complex concept. In Archer's introduction she notes, from Plato onwards, the issues of reflexivity have varied from considering it the same as known self-conversation, to the issues of the impossibility of

methodology must include a means for distinguishing the social location of the interpreter and the social location of the narrator/editor and audiences.²⁴ Specific sociological methods and methodologies are used in order to differentiate the social locations and clarify those locations.²⁵ These methods can be problematic, especially if the interpreter is unaware of, or too casual in understanding, his/her paradigm which shapes how he/she interacts with (and interprets) the data of a study, and applies the methodology without caution. Social scientific criticism also utilizes the concept of 'abduction' which derives conclusions working backwards from evidence to hypothesis.²⁶ Further, social scientific criticism assumes it is complementary to historical studies and conclusions.²⁷

A key issue with applying modern social scientific methodologies to biblical studies (i.e. arriving at "historical sociology"), is the tension of inappropriately applying modern philosophical concepts and constructs to cultures and systems. Cyril Rodd strongly cautions against misapplying contemporary sociology with its ability to both attain and test evidence in order to arrive at conclusions, especially to ancient societies where evidence is the result of non-empirically

differentiating such self-knowledge (i.e. inability to be both the observer and the observed) and more with various nuances. Margaret Archer, *Conversations About Reflexivity*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 4-5. More generally, its meaning is that of ". . . a self-referential second-order observational activity. . ." Archer, 77.

24. Elliott, *What is Social Scientific Criticism?*, 38-40. The terms *Emic* and *etic* are one way for differentiating these perspectives. "*Emic* descriptions and explanations are those given by the natives themselves from their experience and point of view." "*Etic* constructs. . . attempt to explain how native concepts and perceptions correlate with and are influenced by a full range of material, social, and cognitive factors." More simply, *Emic* explains the how and what and *Etic* explains the why.

25. Elliott, *What is Social Scientific Criticism?*, 40-48.

26. Elliott, *What is Social Scientific Criticism?*, 48.

27. Elliott, *What is Social Scientific Criticism?*, 55-57.

minded data production.²⁸ This concern is legitimate. Too incautious an approach and we may succeed in imposing modern paradigms on premodern culture(s) rather than learning about the social conditions and concepts of the premodern culture(s) itself. Lowell Handy in his social scientific study of Jonah notes that social models, while appropriate for use, used for reconstruction ". . . are 'imagined,' and need to be taken solely as illustrative of community life as it *may* be, let alone as it *might* have been."²⁹ Inappropriate assumptions based on incautious sociological methodologies is complicated further by the experience of unaware self-dialogue both by the narrator and his/her interpreters. This is the case whether the author (narrator/editor) is aware of his/her experiences and conceptual frameworks or not.

One example of the challenge to avoid the pitfall of applying modern philosophical constraints on ancient culture and philosophy is in constructing and applying definitions. As is the case with this study, attempting to arrive at a definition of identity, as understood by a biblical narrator, needs a careful approach lest modern preoccupations obscure ancient concerns. Modern definitions or understandings of concepts like identity do not necessarily correlate to ancient un-

28. Cyril S. Rodd, "On Applying a Sociological Theory to Biblical Studies," in *Social-Scientific Old Testament Criticism: A Sheffield Reader*, ed. David J. Chalcraft, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 33. However, Kirkpatrick points out that "since *no one can* establish with certainty who someone else made sense of a text, there is a certain freedom to imagine possibilities and explore probabilities - the fruits of which may be found to be valuable for reasons other than their "accuracy" (which cannot be verified or falsified anyway)." Kirkpatrick, 4.

29. Lowell K. Handy, *BibleWorld: Jonah's World: Social Scient and the Reading of Prophetic Story*, (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2008), 5. "The world that the author projects in a fictional narrative can only be imagined in relationship to the actual world as the author experiences and construes it." Clarence Walhout, "Narrative Hermeneutics" in *The Promise of Hermeneutics*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1999), 77. Walhout clarifies the difference between *referent* and *mimesis* in literature. "All fictional texts are referential because they designate characters, events, and situations, and all fictional texts are mimetic because their fictional world stand in a certain relationship to the actual world of the authors and readers." Walhout, 74.

derstandings. Additionally, there is the danger of assigning a concept like identity a generalized definition and applying it without constraint to varied and diverse cultures.³⁰ These cautions are important to bear in mind through the course of this study. Future studies will help refine the discussion of ancient concepts of identity by including a broader conceptual sociological schema including those articulated by non-Western sociological models.

Nuancing Identity

Even modern definitions and understandings of identity vary greatly. The *Dictionary of Sociology* sums up its discussion by acquiescing, "There is, therefore, no clear concept of identity in modern sociology."³¹ 'Identity' may include everything from one's feelings or sense of self to social roles, social groups and social expectations. For instance, to some, modern identities are fragmented, ever-changing, and directly dependent or constituted by relation to the 'Other'.³² Modern, especially Western, concern of identity appears to function mostly around ideas of 'self' (especially around the ability for 'self'-awareness) which may describe both the individual and

30. In this we may also see the issue of reflexivity, or self-recognition, being especially important. A lack of this consciousness may raise tendencies towards privileged, biased, or stereotyped readings of a culture.

31. John Scott and Gordon Marshall, "Identity" *A Dictionary of Sociology*, (Oxford University Press, 2009) *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press, Cited 22 March 2012, Online: <http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/viewsENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t88.e1061>

32. Stuart Hall, "Who needs 'identity'?" in *Identity: A Reader*, (ed. Paul Du Gay, Jessica Evans and Peter Redman; London: Sage Publications, 2000), 17. ". . . identities are constructed through, not outside, difference. This entails the radically disturbing recognition that it is only through the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks, to what has been called its *constitutive outside* that the 'positive' meaning of any term - and thus its 'identity' can be constructed."

the 'collective self,' i.e. social groups.³³ Judith Lieu, in her study of ancient Christian identities, argues ancient understandings and sense of self are not comparable to the modern (i.e., post-Enlightenment) fixation on self-determination.³⁴

Identity, as a way of describing or discussing self-determination, actualization, etc. is the provenance of modern concerns. Without obliterating the possibility that ancients were concerned with the individual, the social context of community and groups seems a more fitting starting place for discussing ancient identity(ies). Thus, "A sociological approach to self and identity begins with the assumption that there is a reciprocal relationship between the self and society."³⁵ In this, Stets and Burke point out the importance of society, or groups, in an overall discussion of identity. Still others recognize the importance (or the place) of groups in forming/establishing/functioning identity. Michael Hogg's study of social identity highlights these reciprocal relationships by describing the important role groups play in influencing how people are known by others and how they know themselves. In this sense, identity emerges through or as relationship to others, i.e. to social group(s).³⁶ Still, as Lieu clarifies, a collective identity may

33. Michael Hogg, "Social Identity," *Handbook of Self and Identity*, (eds. Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney; New York: The Guilford Press, 2003), 463.

34. Judith Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12. Similarly, Peter Lau cautions, "Certainly, an ancient Israelite would not have understood his/her individual identity in the same way as the current Western conception; it would be flawed methodology to impose a strict post-Enlightenment understanding of selfhood onto the HB [Hebrew Bible] Scriptures." Peter H. W. Lau, *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft: Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach*, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 21. However, Lau does discuss several ways he believes "individuality surfaces" including specific vocabulary, individual voices in the prophets, the autobiographical genre, self-reflection in texts, and retribution theology. Lau, 21.

35. Jan E. Stets and Peter J. Burke, "A Sociological Approach to Self and Identity," in *Handbook of Self and Identity* (eds. Mark R. Leary and June Price Tangney; New York: The Guilford Press, 2003), 128.

36. Hogg, "Social Identity," 462.

be conceptually different from ideas of individual identity. This points out again the need for caution when approaching questions of both collective and individual identity. Neither necessarily conform to definitive interpretations. Despite the complexity of terms and definitions of concepts like 'identity,' Lieu suggests such concepts are appropriate as ancient writers ". . . did use what can best be called 'ethnic categories' to describe others as well as themselves."³⁷ This suggests there are ancient concepts of what constitutes inclusion in a social group. As becomes evident in the Esther narrative, alignment with social groups is a central element in the discussion of (diasporic) identity.

Therefore, a social-scientific approach should be mediated through collaboration with additionally relevant academic approaches/readings.. For example, Shane Kirkpatrick, writing on Daniel 1-6, notes that there is a strong relatedness between a social-scientific reading and a rhetorical reading.³⁸ These two approaches work in tandem- each contributing to how the other is understood. This is an important observation applicable also to the Esther story. In reading Esther, appreciating its literary complexity, the social context of the story, the narrator's social conceptions, and potentially, the social and cultural world of its audience become available for the reader (even if not readily apparent at a first reading). Thus, through appreciating the narrator's literary skills, ideas about the overarching socially-concerned question (e.g., what can we know about the narrator and his/her understanding of life in diaspora) begin to suggest themselves.

37. Lieu, *Christian Identity*, 16.

38. Kirkpatrick, *Competing for Honor*, 6.

Literary Aspects

In spite of the complex language and theory of these concepts many biblical scholars engage in social-scientific criticism in an attempt to reconstruct ancient paradigms.³⁹ A text communicates on multiple levels. Correspondingly, the Esther narrative does so in accordance with its innate literary expectations. This requires any interpretation to be done through the narrator's framework and literary compulsions. In order to engage these questions of identity, the story (text) itself needs first to be understood.

"The Esther story is a metaphoric world, a concentrated vision of the reality of exile and the vision itself teaches Jews how to make their way through the life they face."⁴⁰ Such is a common understanding of the Esther story and the narrator's intention for the story's reception. In this perspective, the narrator's concern is to construct or bolster their expression of life and further, as is the concern of this study, identity. Although there are many ways through which to approach the story, the narrator's protagonist characterizations are the primary literary concern of this study. Characterization is an important element of any narrative construction. Esther and Mordecai are no exception. Through these characters the audience may glimpse some of the narrator's conceptual framework addressing elements of the diasporic life, including that of identity, community affiliation and loyalty.

39. A few examples have already been cited (e.g. Handy's *BibleWorld*, Kirkpatrick's *Competing for Honor*).

40. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 5. Berlin argues stories like Esther, " . . . are designed to promote pride in Jewish identity and solidarity within the Jewish community and with Jewish tradition." Berlin, *JPS Commentary*, xxxiv.

Version and Date

The MT version of the Esther story is the textual base for this study. "Hebrew *Esther* is not so much a single, unique text as it is a snapshot of a literary tradition in process."⁴¹ Although the many alternate versions are helpful for source critical studies, it is not within the scope of this study to do a comparative literary analysis of the Greek versions and additions against the MT version.⁴² Still, further study analyzing the versions comparatively would be beneficial for understanding the particular cultural nuances of the various narrators/final redactors which should help further understanding of the complexity of ancient concepts of identity.

Some scholars suggest dating the Esther story, as found in the MT version, between 400 and 200 BCE.⁴³ This view attempts to make the best use of information gleaned from embedded clues in the story - clues such as historical inaccuracies and improbabilities, use of Late Biblical Hebrew, and archaisms.⁴⁴ Additionally, Berlin notes a literary connection between the Greek historical novel and the Esther story which may suggest either a familiarity by temporal proximity

41. Lawrence Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 104-5.

42. See Charles V. Dorothy's *The Books of Esther: Structure, Genre and Textual Integrity* for a thorough study of the multiple versions with emphasis on the integrity of the Greek versions. Contra Carey Moore's opinion in *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1977). See also chapter 1 of Kristin De Troyer's *The End of the Alpha Text of Esther: Translation and Narrative Technique in MT 8: 1-17, LXX 8:1-17, and AT 7:14-41* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000) for a detailed timeline of the developments in study and thought on the multiple versions and their relationships to each other.

43. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 140. Berlin, *JPS Commentary*, xli. Levenson, *Esther*, 26.

44. Also present in the MT are Persian and Aramaic loan words. See Berlin's discussion of these elements in *JPS Commentary*, xli-xliii. Also Levenson, *Esther*, 23-27. Lewis Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (New York: C. Scribener's, 1908), 60-63. See Ron Bergey, "Late Linguistic Features in Esther" in *JQR* 75 (July 1984), 66-78, for a discussion of the presence of EH, BH, and LBH in Esther.

or a dependency on a common ancient genre.⁴⁵ Assigning a more specific date to Esther within those several hundred years is arbitrary. Although similarities and constancies surely existed there is a wide disparity between life at the end of the Persian period and life during the time of the Maccabean revolts. Understandably social constructs inform the narrator's composition; however, without more definitive data, it is problematic to rest an interpretation of the narrator's ideas to a narrow time period or to a specific (a)historical event. While tensions between Jews and other cultures are present in Esther, the story itself is (in the MT version) less polemic than later texts/stories such as Greek Esther and 3 Maccabees.⁴⁶ This suggests employing caution in suggesting polemic or nationalistic concerns to the story.

Even the geographical location from which this version of the story originates is unknown. Generally, the majority of scholars assume Esther, as a story set within the diaspora, and often with the corresponding purpose of encouraging, etc. the diasporic peoples, is a production of those *in/experiencing* diaspora. However, Elsie Stern offers another opinion. Stern argues Esther was written in the land of Israel, and thus was directed at a local audience (rather than a diasporic audience). In this perspective, ". . . Esther represents a nationalist Judean fantasy about the Diaspora that, like Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel, is pro-Judean and deeply critical of strategies of Diaspora living that are not oriented toward Jerusalem and grounded in particularist prac-

45. Berlin, *JPS Commentary*, xlii. Berlin concludes the narrator drew upon a collection of standard or conventional literary motifs. " . . . the author of Esther seems to have been very familiar with the kinds of stories and motifs that occur in the Greek writing about Persia during the Persian period, and that may have been conventional literary fare at that time."

46. See Collins's discussion of Greek Esther. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 110-112. See also Collins's discussion of 3 Maccabees. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 122-131. See also Erich S. Gruen's work *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

tices."⁴⁷ Thus to Stern, Esther is a political satire looking in at diasporic Jews rather than as a story for the enrichment of the diasporic community (e.g. Laniak's argument).⁴⁸

Although neither the generally standard view nor Stern's view are verifiable empirically, it is reasonable to assume the narrator operates either within or is concerned with the world of the Jewish diaspora. In John Collins' study of Jewish identity in the Hellenistic period, he sketches out the social realities of the non-coerced exile of this (perhaps slightly later) period.⁴⁹ Although the dating of Esther is uncertain (beyond the significantly diverse span of a few hundred years), Collins' insights may be helpful in understanding some of the perspectives within and/or of diaspora. This exile (as compared to the Babylonian exile) was not compulsive or "a cause of derision."⁵⁰ Even if the diaspora was not innately problematic, the persuasions of the dominant culture certainly challenged and influenced those in diaspora. So, for Collins, "The basic problem in the Jewish Diaspora was how to maintain the Jewish tradition in an environment dominated by Gentiles."⁵¹ Similarly then, for this study, this basic problem centers on one aspect - identity. In this sense, the Esther story, set in a temporally accessible (i.e. conceptually viable), albeit

47. Elsie Stern, "Esther and the Politics of Diaspora" in *JQR* 100/1 (Winter 2010, 25-53), 30.

48. Timothy S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998). Esther is " . . . a carefully designed characterization of the social realities of the diaspora and one which provides direction for living in those realities." Similarly, Day suggests, "The intent of the author/redactor . . . is secondarily to entertain, but primarily to encourage and to give hope in an apparently hopeless situation." Linda Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 6.

49. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*.

50. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 3. Laniak disagrees suggesting that any sort of exile was shameful. "To be separated from land, temple, and monarchy in the ancient world was to be separated from one's source of identity as a people." Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 172.

51. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 3. See also Collins' discussion of Gentile perceptions of Judaism. Collins, 6-13.

possibly remote (perhaps both geographically and temporally) context, allows the narrator and audience to engage these questions within their own particular cultural paradigm. Thus Berlin argues Esther becomes a medium for expressing and encouraging Jews in the culturally transitory experience of diaspora and solidifying aspects of that identity which transcend a nebulous diasporic experience.⁵²

Genre

Suggestions for Esther's genre include wisdom literature, Persian chronicle, historical novella or romance, diaspora story, history, festical etiology, folktale, and various composites.⁵³ Despite some discussion about the genre, general consensus concludes it is a work of fiction with perhaps some kernels of historical happenings/peoples at its core.⁵⁴ Additionally, Esther may fall within the literary category of 'court narrative' or 'court tale' similar to Daniel 1-6, Joseph (Gen 42-58), and the Egyptian tale of Ahiqar.⁵⁵ The similarity of Esther to other ancient stories (especially, the tale of Ahiqar) suggests a confluence between cultures. Thus, Humphreys believes the congruent elements suggest, ". . . in certain circles [of diaspora Jewish communities] at least the possibility

52. Berlin, *JPS Commentary*, xxxiv.

53. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 142-150. Fox believes diaspora story, history, and festival etiology are the most likely genres. Berlin, xxxiv. Berlin notes the close associate between Esther and other court narratives like Daniel and Joseph.

54. Fox puts it a bit more bluntly, "A work that is full of legendary features and improbable incidents and that has no external attestation should be presumed to be fictional." Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 138.

55. Collins discusses the similarities between these stories in his commentary, *Daniel*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 40-52. See also Lawrence Wills *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

of a creative and rewarding interaction with the foreign environment was present and could work for the good of the Jew; and [which] further indicates that tales of courtiers and court life and intrigue were popular."⁵⁶ If the narrator's primary concern includes portraying ideas about diasporic identity, the choice of this subgenre becomes particularly interesting. Although weaving a story, the narrator picks environments and motifs which appeal to the collective understanding (and experience) of being a foreigner who ultimately reinvents him/herself so that he/she is both successful and, in the case of Daniel, able to maintain some sense of affinity to his preexilic roots (specifically through religious orientation). This subgenre then provides an ideal setting for discussing the transitory and problematic issues of diasporic identity. Additionally, Esther conforms to most of the elements of the Hebrew folktale genre. Eli Yassif notes there are three key themes in Hebrew folktale in the Second Temple Period. These are: "the rise of the wise courtier" (Mordecai could be described in this manner, as could possibly Esther), "the defiler of the sacred is punished" (perhaps Haman) and the "miraculous rescue of the Jewish community" (certainly the Jewish community is rescued through quite proposterous if not miraculous means).⁵⁷ Most likely, Esther's genre is a composite of a few different genres drawing on the cultural milieu of other ancient cultures. As Gruen notes, popular historical fiction (in the Hellenistic-Roman period) allows for "creativity and imagination" and "The playful toying with pseudo-history allowed for wit and caprice."⁵⁸

56. Lee Humphreys, "A Life-Style For Diaspora," *JBL*, (92:2, 1973), 212-213.

57. Eli Yassif, *Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning*, trans. Jacqueline S. Teitelbaum, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 69.

58. Gruen, *Diaspora*, 180.

Further, the comedic or farcical tone nuances the Esther narrative. This tone both captures and exploits the realities and questions of life in diaspora through levity. It "is a comedy, a book meant to be funny, to provoke laughter."⁵⁹ Additional study on the role and place of comedy in ancient compositions, and in particular, in addressing social and/or cultural concerns and values is necessary in order to gain a better understanding of the social values at play in the nature of how stories and ideas are communicated.⁶⁰

Summary

The socially concerned question of how the narrator understands Jewish diasporic identity is the primary concern of this study. In order to examine this, it is important to recognize the likelihood of self-reflection or self-identification of the narrator (and interpreters) in the story, that is, the experience of mimesis in the audience, both ancient and modern.⁶¹ Although 'identity' is not

59. Berlin, *JPS Commentary*, xvii. See also Edward L. Greenstein's "A Jewish Reading of Esther" for a discussion of Jewish readings of Esther in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and Ernest S. Frerichs, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 225-243.

60. Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 24. Craig draws on the uses the Bakhtinian concepts (or concepts developed by Bakhtin) of carnival to conclude, "In the ancient Hebrew story - replete with clownish crownings and uncrownings, an official and non-official culture, lavish banquets, and the persistent fool - we witness a transposition of carnival into the language of literature." Craig, 168. The narrator then tells the story without expecting the audience to be truly affected or concerned by Haman's plot to kill the Jews. Instead the narrator, through numerous reversals of fortune prepares his audience to expect the Jews of the story will be victorious over their enemies. "The book's comic spirit aims to emphasize that life should be taken more lightly, that the Exile should be seen not as a tragedy, but as a comic situation that may be exploited for the sake of a better life." Chyutin, 46. See also Erich S. Gruen's chapter "Diaspora Humor I: Historical Fiction" in *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* for a thorough summary of the various interpretation of comedy in Esther.

61. Mimesis figures both into the audience's experience of a story and the narrator's experience in constructing and/or telling a story. Similarly, as one of the primary issues of sociological reflection is remembering to acknowledge an interpreter's social location and influences, it is important to note this study is a product of modern questions and concerns constructed within a context which

defined easily in modern or premodern culture, attempting to understand pieces of it is important in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the ancient world and their conceptual frameworks. Still, the narrator composes a story for his/her audience which, in some way, transcends the audience's experiences yet connects the audience to the story. As Day aptly notes, "As readers, we analyze characters in literature as if they were alive. Such is the mimetic aspect of literature in general, to reflect life back to us."⁶² Story is a form of expression which mediates and transcends historical worlds and experiences in the unique form of narrative.⁶³

How an audience perceives a story is bound in the way the story is constructed- how the narrator describes characters and settings, plot development and resolution, etc. Correspondingly, how an audience understands/learns about ancient concepts, results from how these literary compositions are read. For this study, two aspects of character construction suggest possible conclusions of a sociological nature. First, the narrator's primary description of the characters sets up the conceptual boundaries for the overall discussion. Second, the descriptions of character reactions and interactions further develop and nuance the discussion. Viewed together, these suggest

advocates reading (and attempting to understand) multiple varied approaches to a text or story.

62. Day, *Three Faces*, 20. As modern readers may experience their own lives and experiences in the Esther story, so must also have the narrator's first audiences. Works like "Exile in the Hebrew Bible: A Post Colonial Look from the Cuban Diaspora" access the metaphor of exile and discuss the experience of exile, navigating multiple identities, and how the literature of diasporic cultures help us read and understand the literature of biblical diasporas. Francisco O. Garcia-Treto, "Exile in the Hebrew Bible: A Post Colonial Look from the Cuban Diaspora" in *They Were All Together in One Place: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, eds. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Liew, and Fernando F. Segovia, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009).

63. Berlin, *Poetics*, 13.

ways of understanding how the narrator uses the Esther and Mordecai characters to discuss issues of diasporic identity, including negotiating identity and loyalty, within the diasporic world.⁶⁴

64. Although modern ideas place an author in a specialized, independent category, this essay will presume the narrator is more than just an individual telling a story. This assumption is due to the place Esther plays (and has played) in culture and religion suggesting its importance is communal. With this presumption it seems fitting the narrator, who shows such concern for social groups, operated as part of such a framework.

3. Protagonist Characterizations

Introduction

In Esther, as with many good stories, the narrator uses the characters to draw the audience into the story. There is a tension in attempting to define identity, as is expressed through the protagonist characterizations. It is both fluid and bound to, and within, social group ties. This tension is especially apparent when Esther, with her shifting and changing alignments, is compared to Mordecai, who reflects the concerns of maintaining an affiliation with a 'historical' social group as the orienting aspect of identity.

Esther and Mordecai are co-protagonists, contrasting and balancing each other. Berlin describes the Esther character as a type embodying the "paragon of feminine heroism."⁶⁵ Mordecai, Esther's co-protagonist, guides Esther into her heroism and contrasts the uncertainty of her position and identity with a constancy fitting what might be a less dynamic character. Through the plot's advance, Esther's characterization proves to be quite complex. In this, the narrator explores the complexity of identity in diaspora. Further, in this complexity (shifting from passivity to power), Esther's character is more accessible to the audience than is Mordecai's character. "In the Scroll, it is Esther who stands at the center of the book's artistic interest. She emerges as the most distinct and memorable character in the book, the one with whom the reader most naturally identifies."⁶⁶ For Fox, Esther most readily evokes the mimesis experience in the narrator's audience. Contrary to this, Mordecai's characterization is less complex. To Esther's complexity, even

65. Adele Berlin, *JPS Commentary*, xx. Berlin's assumption of type proceeds from her assumptions regarding the importance of Purim as a narrative scheme.

66. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 196.

instability, Mordecai is a balance. His identity never wavers and only his level of influence, which grows significantly, hints at the possibility of a societal re-invention of identity.

Certain tensions emerge when an attempt to clarify the narrator's concept of identity is pursued. Esther's overall characterization evokes a feeling of uncertainty and suggests an inability to ascribe a definitive depiction of what it is to be a Jew in diaspora. Especially when held against the Mordecai characterization, it is evident there is no one definition of Judaic diasporic identity. However, tensions concerning negotiating identity are conceptually pivotal elements of the diasporic experience. Assuming the narrator's story of Esther and Mordecai is informed either by experience or popular understanding, the characterizations, then, are expressions of and within the narrator's ideological framework. Although this does not equal a manifesto attempting to concoct or disseminate a particular ideology of diasporic identity, presuppositions about how that world operates do figure into the genesis of the narrative. Through observing how the narrator speaks directly and alludes to concerns of diasporic Jews, specifically, how the narrator portrays, and thus, conceives of 'identity' for those separated from homeland, it is possible to begin to reconstruct some ancient ideas about identity.⁶⁷

Narrative Descriptions:

Introduction to Social Groups as Indicators of Identity and Identification

67. This is not to assume that Esther's narrator represents a prevalent or dominant ancient view. It would be beneficial to study other similar stories and the concepts and questions of identity therein in order to gain a better grasp of the breadth of ancient dialogue on these issues.

Esther Characterization

ויהי אמן את-הדסה היא אסתר בת-דדו כי אין לה אב ואם והנערה ופת-תאר וטובת מראה ובמות אביה ובמות אביה ואמה לקחה מרדכי לו לבת⁶⁸

Esther's characterization starts out with introduction by means of her relationship to Mordecai.

Initially, this contributes to the assumption that Esther is a passive character in the story.⁶⁹

Mordecai's relationship and social connection orient Esther's relationship around Mordecai, and thus suggests familial ties (i.e. a primary social group) are a normative means of defining social affiliations. Further, since Esther's genealogy is Mordecai's familial history, the narrator emphasizes the similarity of her story to his and recalls their communal history (e.g. social memory) while solidifying and capitalizing on the experience of exile.⁷⁰ Thus, for the narrative, community affiliations span more than current experiences and present affiliations.

Esther's characterization begins by capitalizing on her secondary and fragile status. More specifically these details, ". . . make clear Esther's precarious place as orphaned, exiled Jewoman within the story world. . ."⁷¹ Esther's lack of father or mother, and connection in essence to the

68. Esther 2: 7 "And he was foster father of Hadassah, that is Esther, daughter of his uncle for there was no father or mother to her; the young woman was beautiful and lovely in appearance and when her father died and her mother died Mordecai took her to himself as a daughter."

69. Fox suggests three phases in the development of the Esther character: passivity, activity, and authority. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 196.

70. "For people to identify themselves corporately, they must share memories of the past that have been deemed worthy and capable of transmission so as to recognize the group affiliation. This calls for images that are conventionalized in order to hold meaning for an entire group, and simplified in order to be capable of transmission." Mary B. Spaulding, *Library of New Testament Studies: Commemorative Identities: Jewish Social Memory and the Johannine Feast of Booths*, (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2009), 9.

71. Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 34-5. Beal goes on to note this figures into viewing Esther's ". . . potential status as object of exchange among men."

exilic experience through Mordecai heightens awareness of the uncertainty of her position and identification in society. Perhaps her aura of fragility is an important element in the narrator's plot construction. If such memories of fragility were common among exiled Jews (and certainly, even if diasporic life was a choice) it seems likely that such memories of other exiles and the corresponding lack of power were still felt at some communal level. In this context, Esther's adoption by her relative Mordecai suggests not only are family ties and social groups important but that they fulfill life-sustaining and orienting needs, especially when disoriented due to cultural separation.

Exile as an Orienting Social Marker

אשר הגלה מירושלים עם—הגלה אשר הגלתה עם יכניה מלך—יהודה אשר הגלה נבוכדנאצר מלך בבל⁷²

In Mordecai and Esther's 'historical' background the narrator's construct emphasizes the experience of exile. Levenson notes that the repeated use of גלה emphasizes the importance of the "Jewish plight" of exile as formative both past and present.⁷³ In doing so the narrator aligns Mordecai (and as mentioned earlier, Esther too) with the 'full plight' of the Jewish people. In this sense, exile is more than a matter of geographical placement- it is a formative and life-defining experience. Hence, Beal's comment, "To be Jewish is, in the book of Esther, to know exile as a formative experience. To be a Jew, after 587 BCE, is always to have been unhomed. Jewish

72. Esther 2:6 "...who was exiled from Jerusalem with those exiled who were exiled (taken away) with Jeconiah, king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon exiled."

73. Levenson, *Esther*, 56.

identity in Esther is always already dispersed, dislocated."⁷⁴ While the lack of historical plausibility (e.g., Mordecai's ability to go through the Babylonian exile and be a spry participant of the much later Persian dispersion) may concern some, understanding the narrator's reference to exile literarily allows the essence of exile to permeate the story and characterizations, albeit in the literary setting of the Persian diaspora. Also, referencing the exile may be one of the ways the narrator bolsters Mordecai's identity (and place) in the story. Berlin reads it as an exercise which "bestows a pedigree" on Mordecai, which may affirm Mordecai's 'Jewishness'.⁷⁵ For the narrator's audience Mordecai reminds them of their collective experience in a homeland. (This may be the narrator's attempt to link conceptually the narrator's community to the Jerusalem community.) If Mordecai is the archetypical exiled Jew, such reference ". . . gives them [the narrator's possible exiled audience] added status and authenticity in the Diaspora. Their own personal histories embody the history of the nation."⁷⁶ Mordecai, then, expresses a sort of constancy despite the inconstancy of exile. His 'identity' transcends both changing social and geographical location.

Comparatively, Esther seems anything but the 'archetypical' Jew. Initially introduced by her Hebrew name "Hadassah" the narrator quickly re-identifies her by her Persian moniker, "Esther."⁷⁷ Although this brief narrative aside may not have any particular significance behind it, the

74. Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 33.

75. Berlin, *JPS Commentary*, 25.

76. Berlin, *JPS Commentary*, 31.

77. See also Daniel 1:6-7 where Daniel and his companions names are changed. Interestingly, the narrator of Daniel maintains using their hebrew names throughout rather than their Babylonian names as the narrator of Esther does for Esther. See D. L. Smith-Christopher's essay "Prayers and Dreams: Power and Diaspora Identities in the Social Setting of the Daniel Tales" in *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception*, vol. 1, ed. John J. Collins and Peter W. Flint, (Boston: Brill, 2002), 266-290, for discussion of re-negotiating identity (for diaspora Jews) through wisdom especially, the Daniel tales.

abrupt shift suggests the narrator has some reason or purpose for noting it. Perhaps, as Randall Bailey suggests, this renaming is part of the narrator's ideological concern to characterize Esther within the Persian context.⁷⁸ Or, perhaps the renaming signals metaphorically the transitional nature of diasporic life. Ultimately, Esther's personal identifiers and connections recall both her "history" and her present experience in the Persian diaspora which highlights how her plight corresponds to the situation of the Jewish people.

Mordecai's Description: Social Roots

אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה וּשְׁמוֹ מֵרְדֵּכָי בֶּן יָאִיר בֶּן-שֹׁמַעִי בֶּן-קִישׁ אִישׁ יְמִינִי⁷⁹

Germaine to Mordecai's (and Esther's initial characterization) initial description are two main elements: who Mordecai is in terms of genealogy and how the narrator appears to link Mordecai to older stories. Both of these shape Mordecai's characterization and suggest possible insights into the narrator's ideological concerns.

The first aspect in the characterization of Mordecai's identity is the translation of יהודי as "Jew", meaning "belonging to Judah, Judean, Jewish".⁸⁰ Mordecai's genealogy positions him as both from Judah (a Judahite) and a Benjaminite. This incongruency suggests a need to read

78. 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*. Ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Liew, Benny Segovia, Fernando F., (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 241.

79. Esther 2:5 "There was a man of Judah/Jewish man in the fortress of Shushan, his name was Mordecai, son of Jair, son of Shemei, son of Kish, a man of Benjamin . . ."

80. *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 394.

this as either the narrator's attempt to integrate Mordecai deeply in social memory so as to confirm his place within the social ('historical') groups of Israel or as part of the attempt to weave a story with mythic quality. However, Levenson reconciles this contradiction by pointing out that post-exile, wherein Judah is the only tribe left, יהודי is most appropriately translated as "Jew" rather than "Judahite."⁸¹ Still by aligning Mordecai with both Judah and Benjamin, the narrator emphasizes Mordecai's overall connection to 'Israel'. Of course, this shows the narrator operates within a paradigm wherein there is some way of identifying who does and does not qualify as a 'Jew'. However, when the final scenes of the story are set against this, the Persians who 'became Jews' (ורורים מעמי הארץ מתיידיים) suggest there is more flexibility in identifying as a Jew than only coming from a specific community or homeland. Although Mordecai's characterization seems to rest quite staunchly in his genealogy, this vignette shows some understanding that identification, and associations, with social groups can and do change and adapt per need. Whether the narrator understands these adaptative Persians as Jews as on par with Mordecai is not clear. This raises the question of how appropriate it is to bear in mind the modern definitions for ethnicity when reading ancient stories. Whether there is (an) ancient understanding of ethnicity equal to modern discussion is unclear. Heeding earlier cautions, certainly modern discussions about what comprises ethnicity were not likely in the mind or context of the narrator. While the narrator is not attempting to state a standard of qualification for who is and who is not a Jew, he is operating under the persuasion that there is such a reality as "being a Jew" or "not being a Jew," "being from the line of Agag," "being a Persian," etc. and is telling his story within this conceptual framework. Although the narrator may use "Jew" as an "ethnic epithet", as Berlin suggests,

81. Levenson, *Esther*, 57.

emphasizing it as part of Mordecai's overall characterization, other elements in the narrative suggest it is not necessarily the same understanding of ethnic as is understood today.⁸²

The second aspect of Mordecai's initial description is the narrator's use of genealogy to link Mordecai (and Esther) to other biblical stories. This links Mordecai to Saul and to stories from Exodus and Deuteronomy. In doing so the narrator frames the Mordecai story (and Haman conflict) within the story of Saul and Agag's conflict. Thus, "In this way, Mordecai and Haman become latter-day embodiments of an old ethnic feud, which has its origin in the battle between King Saul and Agag, the Amalekite king (1 Samuel 15)."⁸³ The story of the apparently ethnic feud between Israel and the Amalekites shows up in Exodus (c.f. chapter 17) and Deuteronomy (c.f. chapter 25).⁸⁴ This allusion is significant in Mordecai's characterization, suggesting the narrator is attempting to recall Saul's story or retell it with a more appropriate ending.⁸⁵ The narrative's driving conflict between Mordecai and Haman appears to be an example of the narrator exploiting the enduring conflict between Israel and the Amalekites. Further, Haman's description as "בן-המדתא האגגי" confirms the narrator's intentional allusion to the older stories of conflict with Agag.⁸⁶ Haman functions as the reiteration of Agag, which makes the conflict expected, and per-

82. Berlin, *JPS Commentary*, 24. Also, it is important to note that ethnicity and race are not identical concepts. Ethnicity may incorporate racial elements; however, it is limited to only these.

83. Berlin, *JPS Commentary*, 25. 1 Samuel 15 is the story of king Saul's fall from grace when Saul disobeyed God's command to destroy all of the Amalekites.

84. Exodus 17:14, "כי-מחה אמה את זצר עמלק מתחת השמים . . ." and Deuteronomy's interpretation ". . . תמחה את-זכר עמלק מתחת השמים . . ."

85. Michael Chyutin suggests this is a sort of "second round" between Saul and Agag. Michael Chyutin, *Tendentious Hagiographies: Jewish Propagandist Fiction BCE* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 36-37.

86. Chyutin notes, "Amalek has become the symbol for all nations that have sought to exterminate the Jewish people . . ." Chyutin, *Tendentious Hagiographies*, 37.

haps sets up the narrator to provide a "corrected resolution" to the conflict. (So Haman meets the requirements for the archetypical villain in the narrator's story.)⁸⁷ In this then the conflict between Mordecai and Haman, indeed the driving conflict of the narrative, holds cultural significance.

Analysis

These initial descriptions raise several issues pertinent to this study. The narrator operates within a paradigm where community, or the social group, is pivotal in defining oneself and one's place in society. Mordecai's genealogy is the closest thing to a definition of what it is to be a 'Jew'. By harkening to older stories, and to other dispersions, Mordecai's character confirms a sense of continuity between the past and present, highlighting the importance of social memory for creating identity. Yet, while the community (social group) is central, the narrator reinterprets the place of social groups, and the individual relationship to and within, suggesting some level of fluidity in both placement and expression. This raises other questions (especially when viewed against the story's statement that some Persians became or professed to be Jews) about what constitutes being a Jew.. It seems this is more than about one's 'historical' social group, but also incorporates what one does, that is, calling oneself a Jew or acting in according with orienting activities or expectations (e.g. religious tradition, etc.). Nevertheless, Esther's name change fosters the idea there is flexibility in identification, and maybe, in identity. This suggests that not only is identity

87. Levenson notes, "Agag's nation, the Amalekites, had long been conceived as the archetypical enemy of Mordecai's nation, the Israelites or Jews (e.g. Exod. 17:8-16; Deut 25:17-19)." Levenson, *Esther*, 67. See also Greenstein, "A Jewish Reading," 230.

in diaspora not simple to define or easy to resolve but that there are numerous ways of forming and negotiating identit(ies).⁸⁸

Character Interactions and Reactions:

Social Group Impermanence and Adaptation Developed

Another way to understand how a narrator develops a character is to look at character interaction and reaction. That is, how does the character interact with subsidiary characters and how do such secondary characters react to the primary character? This section addresses aspects of interaction and reaction between the protagonists, and between the protagonists and secondary characters. Such interactions, by developing Esther and Mordecia's characterizations, help further nuance the narrator's identity constructs(s) by calling attention to the transitory or fluid experience of identification with and within social groups.

Esther and Mordecai: Shifting Alignments

⁸⁹ לא-הגידה אסתר את-עמה ואת-מולדתה כי מרדכי צוה עליה אשר לא-תגיד. . .

88. See *Jewish Identities : Fifty Intellectuals Answer Ben-Gurion* for a discussion of the complex issues surrounding this question from early Judaism through modernity. Eliezer Ben-Rafael, ed., *Jewish Identities: Fifty Intellectuals Answer Ben-Gurion*, (Leiden: Brill, 2002). Further, this narrative may reflect developing or changing opinions of Jewishness, or the growing movement which ultimately results in Second Temple Judaism.

89. Esther 2:10 "Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred for Mordecai lay charge on her that she

Esther submits to Mordecai's authority throughout all of the rising action of the plot. Initially, the narrator attributes little independent action and no direct speech to Esther. She seems more a secondary character than one expects of the story's namesake. When Esther finds herself in the king's harem she submits to Mordecai's instruction to not reveal her people or her kindred.⁹⁰ Ultimately, Esther exists in a paradigm facilitated by Mordecai's oversight. This is an interesting glimpse into the narrator's paradigm as it suggests Esther's 'identity', or connection to her social group is powerful but unsafe. However, according to Joshua Berman's synthesis of Simone de Beauvoir's "typology of the Other," Esther's passivity is because of the situation rather than due to nature. "In a strongly patriarchal culture, the woman who wishes to survive has no choice but to accede to Otherness and thereby forego subjectivity, transcendence, and a will of her own."⁹¹ The narrator's context expects Esther to act passively submitting to the guidance of Mordecai. More than just the proverbial 'other,' Esther begins to embody the tension of multiple identities, and corresponding loyalties. In her experience within the Persian system, Esther is more than Persian and more than hidden Jew. Yet, until Mordecai's conflict rises to the surface, the narrator does not suggest this tension needs to be resolved. Alternatively, Mordecai operates

not declare [it]."

90. Esther 2:10, 20. As Berlin notes (*JPS Commentary*, 30-31) v. 20 emphasizes Esther's action in not revealing her identity per Mordecai's instruction. "The syntax (a clause beginning with the subject and then a stative, or participial construction expresses synchronicity. (It means "All the while, Esther did not reveal her kindred. . .") All throughout the events narrated, and even after having been made queen, Esther still does not reveal her Jewishness." Berlin, 30. However, Fox suggests the repetition is ". . . because her rise to prominence could so easily have given it away." Fox, 39. Both readings suggest the repetition is important to the narrator's narrative. In contrast, Levenson suggests the repetition may be an example of "textual garbling." Levenson, 63.

91. Berman, "Hadassah Bat Abihail," 643. In this way Esther fills the lost character Vashti, ". . . the consummate Other, a wife prepared to surrender entirely her own subjectivity and will." Berman, 649.

as a fully-disclosed Jew within the Persian system. For example, Mordecai's place at the king's gate (ומרדכי יושב בסער-המלך) may indicate his status within the Persian community. Berlin suggests this reference to the king's gate describes Mordecai's "official position" within the royal court.⁹² Noticeably, there is no hint that Mordecai makes any effort to obscure his connection to the Jewish community.⁹³

Esther 4 rewrites Esther's role in the story moving her from passive to active and focusing on the tension of existing in multiple worlds. Yet, here she begins to act independently. She initiates the negotiation with Mordecai about what role she will or will not play in acquiescing to his final authoritative command even though the audience ultimately expects her to conform.⁹⁴

Mordecai's actions in response to Haman's edict suggest he is protesting rather than lamenting Haman's edict. So he intentionally draws attention to himself as a Jew. It is curious that Mordecai approaches the situation this way instead of immediately attempting to communicate with Esther as an advocate under his influence and authority. Instead he coaxes her out (metaphorically) of her safe palace by startling her with his dramatic actions.⁹⁵ Mordecai uses his public protest authoritatively, even manipulatively, to provoke Esther's action. However, this emphasis on his need to provoke her action suggests there is a shift in the nature of their relation-

92. Berlin, *JPS Commentary*, 31. Berlin suggests Mordecai may have operated as one of the king's secret police making his knowledge of Haman's plot more understandable for narrative purposes.

93. Beal suggests "In fact, it appears that Mordecai's *place* in the world of the narrative is always on the edge or periphery, on borderlines. Mordecai is neither inside nor outside, but is always found along the edges, gazing in, keeping his eyes fixed on Esther, whose circulation inside the palace walls is of some interest to himself." Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 51.

94. Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 77. "The always obedient Esther, who the audience expects, is replaced in this scene by a queen who issues her own commands."

95. Perhaps the narrator is attempting to highlight a connection between Mordecai and stories like that of the king of Ninevah or the prophets.

ship. Mordecai's speech to Esther explicitly requires Esther to step out of her safe identity as a hidden Jew but 'out' Persian. It negates the idea that it is possible to disavow oneself from one's community.

ויאמר מרדכי להשיב אל-אסתר אל-תדמי בנפשך להמלט בית-המלך-היהודים. כי אם-החרש תהרישי בית הזת
הזאת רוח והצלה יעמוד ליהודים ממקום אחר ואת לבית-אויך תאבדו ומי יודע אם-לעת כזאת הגעת למלכות⁹⁶

Mordecai's speech is clear. Hiding, or even not acknowledging, one's social group, even if seemingly protected, will not be protection enough. As Levenson suggests this overall scene highlights the disparity between Mordecai *the Jew* and Esther *the Persian* and is a possible critique of those who "fail to identify with their people."⁹⁷ Perhaps critique is too harsh as the narrator seems more interested in exploring the issues of identity and loyalty rather than resolving them. Again Mordecai acts as a 'representative Jew' as he calls Esther to remember her place within the Jewish community. "Mordecai understands that Esther will be able to embrace the challenge he sets before her only if she engages in the task of restructuring her sense of personal identity."⁹⁸ The fluidity of Esther's experiences meet in Mordecai an important caveat. One may need to choose to (re)align with a primary social group. Moreover, the good of the social group rests in how individuals interact and react with and within the group.

96. Esther 4:13-14 "And Mordecai said to the repliers to Esther, 'Do not imagine that your life will slip through in the house of the king rather than [as it is for] the Jews. For if you keep silent at this time relief will come to the Jews from another place but you and the house of your father will perish. Who knows? Perhaps on account of this you reached royalty.'"

97. Levenson, *Esther*, 79.

98. Berman, "Hadassah Bat Abihail," 654.

Esther's challenge to assert her Jewish identity is the crux of Esther's shift or development from passive and hidden to assertive and "out." This shift consists of a new emotional depth in the narrator's composition of the Esther-Mordecai relationship. Narratively, ותתחלחל המלכה מאד ("and the queen was greatly agitated") signals the change for the audience. The subject of this fear is 'the queen,' suggesting the narrator wants to emphasize that the relationship between Esther and Mordecai here is one of reversed power and authority. Here also, this phrase is the first real emotion the narrator assigns to Esther. חיל (G) means 'to be seized by fear' but this hitpael occurrence (Esther 4:4) is quite unique.⁹⁹ Berlin suggests it means 'to writhe in fear' which she understands as a physiological reaction.¹⁰⁰ Although Berlin assumes this indicates Esther's fear of some serious calamity, Levenson suggests this great emotion is more an issue of embarrassment than fear, hence, Esther's "embarrassment at his [Mordecai's] grossly inappropriate appearance amid the opulence of the fortified compound of Susa."¹⁰¹ Pieced together these elements suggest the narrator wants to highlight the tension between Esther's relative security, and obliviousness to the rising tensions outside, in the royal compound when compared to Mordecai, the narrator's representative 'traditional' Jew. "Mordecai calls upon Esther to adopt a subjective identity more fully and publicly, yet it is an identity that is highly stigmatized - an identity marked for death."¹⁰² Esther's initial 'identity' is quite subjective. This further subjectivity may actually prove

99. HALOT, 311.

100. Berlin, *JPS Commentary*, 46. Bush concurs, "In its literal sense, then, the word connotes a physical reaction occasioned by the shock of calamity or pain. Here it must bear the figurative meaning 'to be deeply distressed.'" Bush, 390, note 4.b.

101. Levenson, *Esther*, 79.

102. Berman, "Hadassah Bat Abihail," 653. Berman further discusses the internal actions necessary for Esther to overcome her 'diminished self-esteem,' that is, her 'stigmatized identity.' Berman, 353-4.

to be the converting element in her characterization. Still, Esther hesitates, stalls, and does her best to refuse taking up Mordecai's new command to reveal herself as a Jew to the king. Perhaps this hesitancy is because of her fear of breaching royal protocol. Or, as Harvey suggests, the hesitancy may be because of ". . . her feeling of disconnectedness from the larger Jewish community."¹⁰³

In this moment of hesitation the narrator captures the experience of having to decide between one's loyalties. Although the audience does not expect Esther to do anything but ultimately obey and reveal herself as a Jew, the narrator shows the struggle latent in any such decision. In the story's conflict (primarily through Mordecai and Esther's interaction revolving around it) the narrator pulls Esther out of her seclusion in the Persian court, and eventually, out of a passive anonymity. In this, the narrator highlights questions of identity, group affiliation, and loyalty before the audience. Perhaps the narrator mirrors common concerns about the tensions of living in multiple social groups, even if those social groups are not in direct conflict. (Of course, Mordecai's argument is that those groups are in conflict and Esther must essentially choose a side.) Esther's obedience to Mordecai comes only after a major shift in their relationship. With the scene closing on Mordecai acting according to Esther's command, the narrator inverts the power dynamics. In this scene, through Esther's shifting interaction with Mordecai, the narrator develops a more complete picture of Esther as a disconnected, albeit secure figure, negotiating her place in newly (to her) competing social groups, and thus her identity as part of those groups/relationships.

103. Harvey, 29.

Mordecai and Haman: Negative Aspects of Identity

וכל-עבדי המלך אשר-בשער המלך כרעים ומשתחוים להמן כו-כן צוה-לו המלך ומרדכי אל יכרע ולא ושתחוה¹⁰⁴

The Mordecai/Haman conflict is the overall narrative plot conflict. In it, the narrator's sketch of Haman portrays him as both Mordecai's antagonist and as a fool.¹⁰⁵ The narrator sets up the conflict by placing Mordecai in a situation wherein he must acknowledge Haman's authority. Yet Mordecai refuses. Whether Mordecai's refusal is expected or not is uncertain. As the narrator does not bother to clarify *why* Mordecai refuses it suggests the narrator expects his audience to understand Mordecai's motivations.¹⁰⁶ Possible motivations include avoiding idolatry, the underlying ethnic conflict, Mordecai's own arrogance, or the narrator's reliance on literary motifs.¹⁰⁷ If the narrator's emphasis on the conflict between Israel and Agag is as intentional as it appears, it seems likely it is being drawn upon here in this scene, too. The narrator hints that in some way Mordecai's Jewishness figures into the equation of his refusal, i.e. יהודי אשר-הוא יהודי. כי-הגיד להם אשר-הוא יהודי. Again, through this conflict the narrator places Mordecai within the cultural (or religious or ethnic) spectrum of 'Jewishness'. Hence, "If Mordecai's refusal is based on ethnic grounds, then no

104. Esther 3:2 "And all the servants of the king who were at the gate of the king bowed down and made obeisance to Haman for thus the king commanded but Mordecai did not bow and did not make obeisance."

105. Actions suggest Mordecai is a faithful and wise subject of the king who does not seek his own honor. Contrary to this, Haman receives honor, for what the narrator does not bother to discuss, seeks it relentlessly, and reacts harshly when he does not receive it from Mordecai.

106. Alternatively, this could be a literary device wherein Mordecai's refusal parallels Vashti's refusal in chapter one. Or, it may be influenced by other court narratives like that of Joseph. Levenson suggests this is the case between the two refusals. Levenson, 68.

107. Levenson, *Esther*, 67-68. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 42-44. Regarding the literary motif, Berlin thinks it is derived from the Greek motif of "*poskynesis*" that is, "For the Greeks in the Persian period, *proskynesis*, the gesture of deference usually understood as bowing down before the Persian monarch, became one of the motifs associated with despotism of Persia that the Greeks found inimical to their own culture." Berlin, *JPS Commentary*, 35.

Jew will bow down to Haman."¹⁰⁸ It seems Haman's understanding of the situation is thus as his argument to the king rests on construing Mordecai as a sort of representative for the Jews. The narrator's use of this referent fosters the vision of a faceless Jewish community conforming to the leadership of this representative leader.

Haman's reaction to Mordecai's disobedience may suggest some of the possible (perceptions of) reactions to (diaspora) Jews, that is, anger, social backlash and oppression. However, Haman's argument, although the king accepts it, is blatantly that of someone with wounded pride. Haman's argument suggests a few possible perceptions about Jewish identity, or those which Haman uses to bolster his request. These points include the Jews (although Haman never identifies them by name) exiled position (מפוזר ומקרד בין העמים) and placement throughout the entire Persian kingdom, their unique laws, and their refusal to obey the king's laws (i.e. Mordecai's refusal). Apparently, Haman's argument hinges on the perceived social abnormal exclusivity of this people (e.g. their loyalty to their own laws and social groups threatens the stability of the Persian rule.) Of course, lest it be unclear this is not true, the narrator also goes to great pains to demonstrate that Mordecai is quite loyal to his Persian rulers and that Haman's argument is based in his own foolishness.¹⁰⁹ Thus, Haman's argument suggests the Jews cannot or are not able to be loyal Persians and Jews. Haman argues there cannot be identification with multiple loyalties.¹¹⁰

108. Berlin, *JPS Commentary*, 37.

109. Chapters two and six highlight Mordecai's loyalty to his Persian monarch without suggesting there is any conflict in holding loyalty to the monarch *and* to his non-Persian community/history/culture.

110. Although Haman's argument to the king centers around the potential danger of the Jews to the king and his kingdom, this danger obviously is not Haman's primary concern. The narrator characterizes Haman as a figure concerned only over his honor and promotion. Mordecai's refusal to bow before him (c.f. Esther 3:5) so enrages Haman that he wants to revenge himself not only on Mordecai alone but also on all of the Jewish people. The narrator portrays Haman as

Haman, as the story's antagonist, conveys some possible ideas about how Jews were understood, i.e. disloyal to the state, different, etc. (Although, given the narrator's comedic tendencies, it may be just as well that the narrator intends Haman's statements about the Jews to be understood as foolish.) The narrator explicitly links Mordecai to the Jews as a sort of representative in the Mordecai/Haman conflict. After all, this is how Haman understands it. His vengeance is not complete if only experienced by Mordecai, hence, the need for an edict against all of the Jews. Nevertheless, the narrator does not let any assumption exist about Haman's potential success—Mordecai's victory over his foe is inevitable. After all, as Zeresh, Haman's wife summarizes,

... אם מזרע היהודים מרדכי אשר החלות לנפל לפניו לא=תוכל לו כי—נפול תפול לפניו.¹¹¹

Zeresh's comment reaffirms the success of the Jewish community despite the threats against them. Although Haman's interactions with and to Mordecai could suggest some level of tension, the narrator reminds the audience of Mordecai's inevitable success. Perhaps this suggests a sort of nationalistic impulse in the narrator's story. This is not completely obvious; however, the narrator clearly connects the individual well-being to that of the social group. Mordecai's fearless stance in opposition to Haman suggests an expectation that there is a level of constancy to the social group.

the 'fool' which is also according to Levenson ". . . symptomatic of impending disaster." Levenson, 68. Haman's foolishness only becomes more evident as the narrator develops the story.

111. Esther 6:13 "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish stock, you will not overcome him; you will fall before him to your ruin." (JPS)

Esther, Hegei, and the King: Flexible Identification and Favorable Outcomes

והיטב הנערה בעיניו ותשא חסד לפניו. . .¹¹²

Hegei's reaction (perhaps even the narrator's 'representative' reaction to Esther) is a key element in the narrator's set-up. For Beal, Hegei's impression, "To 'gain' or, more literally, '*lift [nasa']* loyalty in his eyes' is essentially to 'cause him to look loyally.' This is, in this sense, a play of appearances by the object, suggesting that she might possess a kind of unexpected agency in relation to the male subject - a power to lead him away from where he intends to be."¹¹³ This latter point becomes more evident as the story progresses. The narrator does not describe how Esther "raises up favor/extreme good" to Hegei; however, as Bush notes, this idiom "has an active sense 'to win or earn favor.'"¹¹⁴ She is more than just the pretty girl of verse seven. The narrator starts to build his public image of Esther through her extremely positive reception by the representative. Particularly, the harem official's extreme pleasure with Esther foreshadows the king's opinion of Esther. Such emotive terms as חן, אהב, חסד communicate effectively Esther's positive reception in and by the royal compound.¹¹⁵

ויאהב המלך את-אסתר מכל-הנשים ותשא חן וחסד לפניו מלך-הבתולות. . .¹¹⁶

112. Esther 2:9 "And the girl was pleasing in his eyes and she lifted up *hesed*. . . "

113. Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 35.

114. Frederic W. Bush. *World Biblical Commentary*, vol. 9 *Ruth, Esther*, 368.

115. Per HALOT, חן and חסד suggest "favour, popularity" as in "to find favour." HALOT, 332. אהב (G) means simply "to love."

116. Esther 2:17 "And the king loved Esther more than all the women and she lifted up favor and good will in his eyes more than all the young women . . . "

Beal's suggestion of Esther's agency may have merit as the narrator clearly plays up Esther's ability to influence the king in the story's latter scenes. By assigning the emotion/reaction of love to the king's reaction to Esther, the narrator suggests their relationship is more than the expected exchange between a girl of the harem and the king. This also sets up the narrator's move of Esther from unknown Jewish girl to influential Persian by creating space for Esther to influence the king according to her needs.¹¹⁷ After all, of Esther's emotions for the king the narrator never speaks. Ultimately, Esther's ability to navigate the complex issues of loyalty and social identification seem, at least in part, due to her positive reception in the Persian court.¹¹⁸

Of course, the narrator uses these connotations to flavor Esther's subsequent scenes before the king as the queen. All of Esther's interactions with the king are encased in this positivity. This makes literary tension almost nonexistent.¹¹⁹ After all, in Esther's scenes before the king, her actions are brazen but the reactions are positive. For example, in chapter five, after agreeing to approach the king on behalf of the Jews, she approaches the king after dressing royally (perhaps as a signal to both the audience and the king of her position in the royal court) despite the inherent threat in doing so unbidden. As Fox suggests of Esther, "The royalty is not now only a station but

117. Esther's positive reception hinges on the sexual nuances in the text. Bailey, 242. Thus, Esther is read as a seductress participating in or bringing about national liberation. If this is the case, it is as Bailey notes, a highly misogynist reading although often overlooked. Fox agrees while stressing Esther's passivity. "Almost every word stresses Esther's passivity in all this. She is 'gather' and 'taken' to the seraglio, then 'taken' to the strange man in the palace, who when she pleases him sexually, makes her queen." Fox, 37.

118. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social capital may provide some helpful insights into Esther's power (or lack thereof) within the Persian court.

119. Although the narrator may succeed in creating some literary tension through Esther's multiple feasts.

a personal quality."¹²⁰ Yet, here again she "נשאה הן בעיניו." Her independent approach only succeeds in piquing the king's interest and his extreme benevolence! After all, before she responds to his query about the reason for her approach he offers her half of his kingdom. This is surely a hyperbolic offer but nevertheless proves only again how the narrator wants to emphasize how positively the court views Esther (especially when the king makes the same offer yet again.) It is on account of this that Esther is able to request the feasts with the king and Haman where she reveals her ultimate request for salvation from Haman's edict against the Jews.¹²¹

Esther's breaches in protocol do not change how the king perceives her. Before the king in the palace, and before the king at her multiple feasts, Esther, even though she stalls in making her requests to the king, still experiences favor. Her many approaches to the king, several slightly odd requests for banquets, and clear tactics to delay the inevitable do not change how the king, Hegei, even Haman, receive and interact with her. Additionally, Esther capitalizes on this favor in her requests for salvation and retribution from the king against Haman as found in the final scenes of the story. Quite simply, the narrator does not portray Esther as under a threat of harm or injury. There is no tension between Esther and the Persian court. This suggests that while there certainly are issues and concerns with living away from one's initial or primary social group, harm is not necessarily a universal reality of that experience. In fact, the narrator's positive por-

120. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 68.

121. Further studies examining the nature of gender and power will be beneficial in the attempt to parse out more developed and nuanced social-scientific readings of both the Esther story and comparable literature. Unfortunately, the breadth of such a study is beyond the scope of this particular study.

trayal of Esther's reception (even her high position in the royal court) suggests such possibilities are even advantageous.

Analysis

The narrator tells this story navigating expectations and questions of the socially/culturally generated identity. Evidently, given Esther's ability to hide her Jewishness, being a Jew or existing within that particular social group is not dependent on physical norms.¹²² Nor, it seems, is it tied to religious beliefs or practices, geographical locations, etc. While it would be a bit of an overreach to suggest the narrator is addressing the modern questions of ethnicity, cultural identity, or even collective consciousness, it appears the narrator is addressing the experience of diaspora with cultural assumptions about identity, etc. even if not couched in modern terminology.

Despite the ambiguity, the narrator does seem to have some sort of idea about what does factor into making these social groups what they are and thus suggests there are ancient ideas of how to understand 'identity'. Primarily, Mordecai's initial directive against revealing kinship suggests connections to and within a social group is an identifier for an individual. The question becomes, does the narrator understand kinship and family as part of the modern concept of 'ethnicity', i.e. the consideration of sharing common characteristics as distinct from other social

122. One of the narrator's presumptions becomes quite evident here. Being a Jew is not necessarily physically apparent. "Jewish identity does not necessarily have anything to do with looks." Beal, 35.

groups?¹²³ Mordecai's directives (both to not reveal and then to reveal Esther's connections) suggests familial 'history' is a/the commonality which binds individuals to the social group.¹²⁴

Through relationship the narrator draws the audience into Esther's story. Her relationships to Mordecai, to Persian officials, to the king, even to the Jewish people orders her experiences. She moves from the unknown Jewish girl to favorite of the Persian king and finally to an authoritative queen. Her characterization is complex, and in this the narrator explores the complexity of identifying with social groups and assuming an identity in keeping with the collective identity. Also important to note are the issues of gender and power in Esther's characterization. Esther's interactions with Mordecai, Hegei, and the king all suggest to the modern reader questions about the nature of interaction between gender and power when constructing identity. Further studies of these concerns in ancient stories will help nuance further ancient concepts of how gender and power figure into social groups and identification within and without these groups.

In Esther's interactions with the Persian world the narrator suggests existing in multiple worlds, or between worlds, is not necessarily negative. Further, the narrator suggests conformity to the dominant culture is possible and can be taken advantage of for the advantage of the Jew. The narrator does not express a conflict of interest between being a Jew in Israel and being a Jew in a foreign place. For example, the descriptions of the Persian court are comical, but they are not di-

123. John Scott and Gordon Marshall. "Ethnicity" A Dictionary of Sociology. Oxford University Press 2009. Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. Cited: 26 March 2012 <<http://0-www.oxfordreference.com.catalog.georgefox.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t88.e752>>

124. Parsing the relationship(s) of the individual to the social group and vice versa would be helpful. Further study is needed to understand the nuances of ancient concepts of group affiliation, identity, etc.

rectly antagonistic. This is not a story about uprisings and political conflict per se; although the Persian backdrop nuances Esther's story with, perhaps, satirical undertones. Still, Esther's character moves within the Persian system without much issue. She moves between the worlds of Persian royalty and Jewish community quite fluidly notwithstanding a bit of complexity. Thus, for Esther, social groups and connections therein are malleable. Since, as some modern social ideas posit, one's connections to social group(s) contributes to one's self-understanding, this suggests that one's identity is not immutably defined; and it develops or transforms dependent on one's connections.

Mordecai's characterization appears to be altogether different from Esther's characterization. Her complexity is unmatched in Mordecai. If we only follow the story's plot we see Mordecai at the beginning as strong and authoritative, and then at the conclusion as strong and authoritative. Literarily we might say his is a flat character without many fluctuations or deviations. It may be that this consistent characterization also supports the narrator's concept of diasporic life.

One of the interesting aspects of Mordecai is his almost universal authority. He is Esther's authority, becomes an authoritative figure in the Persian court, and stands both as a representative of the Jews and as their advocate and authority despite not being a priest or other authority figure. Fox notes the narrator shows no concern for issues like the temple or priesthood, or any other institutionalized authority. This suggests the narrator "envision[s] a self-sufficient diaspora community."¹²⁵ Whether this self-sufficiency is celebrated or critiqued is unclear. It does point out, however, that the narrator does not hinge life in diaspora, identity, etc. around a community's re-

125. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 228.

ligion or religious practice. "In Esther, not miracles but inner resources - intellectual as well as spiritual- even of people not naturally leaders, are to be relied upon in crisis."¹²⁶

Mordecai's interactions with Haman suggest the narrator holds some sort of idea about the victorious nature of the Jewish people. Mediated by the lack of a unique conflict between the Persian state and the Jewish people (other than what is instigated by Haman), it is important to avoid reading an overly nationalistic agenda into the story. After all, had the narrator desired such, growing the king from a comical character to an antagonistic one, etc. would have been a simple task.

Even more so than in Esther's characterization, the narrator emphasizes the pervasiveness of the relationship between an individual and his/her 'native' social group. Further, the narrator expects this relationship to be protected. This suggests the narrator operates under a paradigm wherein an individual functions, even exists, within the parameters of the community.

126. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 205. A helpful future study should compare the presence of 'religious paradigms' in Esther with those in other post-exilic writings like Daniel, Tobit, Judith, etc.

4. Conclusion

Summary

By examining the protagonist characterizations of the Esther story, this study attempts to piece together a picture of the narrator's understanding of the issues of identity and identification for diasporic Jews. An examination, albeit brief, of social-scientific criticism helps this discussion by identifying some concerns and issues of addressing ancient texts from modern perspectives.

Next, through a study of literary issues like date, setting, and genre, the literary aspects and particularities of the Esther story become more accessible to the reader. The literary tool of characterizations (in this study of the Esther and Mordecai characters only) then is the means through which this study draws social-scientific conclusions. Even the narrator's humor reflects a particular approach to understanding life in diaspora. Thus, the story seems to have a message of more than comfort; it is also a reminder that diaspora (at least the diaspora of the Second Temple period) is not a defeating experience to those in the midst of it.¹²⁷

Although this study of identity in Esther is just an initial attempt at understanding some of the complex issues to understanding identity in the ancient world, it is an engaging starting point for these important questions. Stories like Esther express the complex issues and questions of those in exile through the approachable medium of story.¹²⁸ Whether or not Esther provides

127. See Erich S. Gruen's discussion of Diaspora Humor in *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* for a discussion of these implications on the study of diasporic literature. Gruen, 135-181.

128. Of course, this story is not the only expression of diasporic life in the biblical world; however in it, generations of both those who experience exile and those who do not, hear an ancient understanding of what it means to live in diaspora and what that means for creating or maintaining identity.

insight into a specific "Jewish political self-perception", Beal's caution against making over-reaching conclusions is important. "This is not to suggest that it represents diaspora Judaism as a whole, for there has never been any such homogeneous cultural entity as 'diaspora Judaism,' . . ."¹²⁹ Still, Esther offers a sort of looking-glass through which perspective may be gained in understanding some of the complex issues surrounding identity in diasporic cultures.

That the Esther story is a 'product' of a certain time and place (although the specifics of both are uncertain making blanket statements about the narrator's social/literary purposes unwise) is easily acceptable. Despite the discussion over date, place, and even genre, the story itself transcends these concerns over time and location by communicating experiences, even if descriptively different, to and between disparate cultures. Modern authors also address the issues of modern diasporas. Their insights may help bridge ideological gaps between ancient and modern. An example of this is a work like Francisco O. Garcia-Treto's, "Exile in the Hebrew Bible: A Post Colonial Look from the Cuban Diaspora."¹³⁰ Garcia-Treto avoids the tendency to see exile only metaphorically by discussing the realities of exile, including navigating identities, the place of language, etc. Further, he notes how the literature of diasporic cultures helps guide modern readers to an understanding the literature of biblical diasporas by providing an important partner to biblical diasporic literature.

129. Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 112.

130. Francisco O. Garcia-Treto, "Exile in the Hebrew Bible: A Postcolonial Look From The Cuban Diaspora" in *They Were All Together in One Place: Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, eds. Randall C. Liew Bailey, Benny Tat-Siong, Fernando F. Segovia, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature), 2009.

In the brief discussion of social-scientific criticism, this study highlights the complexity of approaching ancient stories through a social-scientific approach. Primarily, modern preoccupations are not necessarily also the concerns of the ancients. While, as noted above, reading diasporic literature informed by modern diasporic literature can be advantageous, in doing so, to attempt to draw more than reflective parallels (that is, in order to make definitive statements about biblical diasporic experience) is highly problematic. Such an approach is in danger of obscuring what it seeks to learn by projecting its own concerns on the text. Thus, in order to avoid the danger of over-reading modern issues into a story, it is important to recognize one's propensity to do exactly that. A 'pure' reading, free of such internalizing, is impossible; however, caution will help prevent completely obtrusive and inappropriate interpretations.

Social-scientific criticism appropriately takes advantage of sociological methods and methodologies. While incautious applications of such methods and methodologies may result in extremely problematic readings, there are many positive possibilities to harnessing these methodologies appropriately. For example, Pierre Bourdieu's theories of *habitus*, *field*, and *social capital* may help parse Esther's place and power within her social groups. Further study is necessary in order to arrive at an appropriate utilization of social scientific theories and methodologies within the fields of biblical studies.

The narrator's protagonist characterizations show the tension in understanding identity and the complexity of negotiating those identities within diasporic culture. The Esther characterization suggests a few ideas about identity. Interestingly, it seems the narrator does not understand there to be an incontrovertible definition of one's identity. That is, one's means and methods of identification can and do shift and change resulting in an always changing identity. Hence Es-

ther's identity shifts and develops as the narrator portrays her at first as a passive figure and finally as an authoritative one. Similarly, group affiliations are fluid for Esther. She exists in multiple social groups which seem to exist separately and unrelatedly (or only minimally so) but then bump against the other, overlapping and interweaving as the narrator progresses the plot conflict. Also, these group affiliations are a key element in one's identity; however, identity is not equal to a specific group affiliation.

Mordecai's characterization, although a bit more steady than Esther's, is just as compelling, if for other reasons. Although Esther may resonate with the audience as a complicated character, Mordecai reflects the need for a stable and constant connection to one's 'historical' connections. So Esther shows fluidity in identity, Mordecai shows the balance of constancy in identity. There is never any doubt about Mordecai's place in the world of the narrator's creation. Perhaps in this he provides a sense of orientation, a reminder of home, the familiarity of the social group which may or may not be any longer accessible. Thus, in both Esther and Mordecai's characterizations, group affiliations, or social groups, are a key element in the narrator's conceptual ideology of identity. For both Esther and Mordecai, their connections to social groups inform their decisions and actions. Although there is tension in defining diasporic identity, the narrator seems assured that there is a consistency to Jewish identity which transcends cultural threats and shifts.

Further Studies

Further studies on the other characters in the Esther story will help elaborate and develop ideas about how the narrator understands the experience of life in diaspora and diasporic identity. A

few of the studies which might benefit a more thorough discussion of identity in Esther include further analysis of Esther's literary components, of comparative literature, of specific issues like gender and power and how they contribute to a narrator's construction, as well as studies addressing the interpretations of Esther throughout the span of history.

Additional analysis of the characters, setting, plot development and resolution are important in any attempt to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of self-identification in the Jewish diaspora. Similarly, these studies will be advanced through comparative analyses with other biblical (and non-biblical) diasporic literature. For example, examining Esther's lack of religion against Daniel's religiosity, or Judith's or Susanna's piousness, will help develop a greater receptivity to understanding the complex (and diverse) voices and opinions expressed by those in (and concerned with) diaspora. As Esther is a impressive story for discussing gender and power dynamics further studies may well focus on gender and power as aspects of the narrator's perception of identity. Comparative analyses will assist these studies in providing as broad a context as possible for coming to conclusions based in the stories themselves.

Finally, one of the key aspects of social-scientific criticism is that it concerns itself with not only the texts themselves but with the interaction of communities/peoples with those texts. An expanded study which incorporates this aspect of social-scientific criticism will be advantageous as it provides another venue for understanding how self-reflection contributes to interpreting and understanding a text.

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