

DESCRYING ESTHER:
A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF ESTHER 4

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Among the female figures of Hebrew narrative, few eclipse the legendary stature of humble Hadassah,¹ better known by her Persian name Esther, hoisted to sovereign status by the unassuming beauty that lands her in the luxurious lap of Ahasuerus' royal harem. From its outset, the Book of Esther showcases intricate threads of irony, comedy and symbolism, a complex work of literary genius. Themes of power, loyalty, inviolability and reversal dance through the pages of her story, perhaps the most popular Jewish diaspora novella.² Esther's fairy-tale rise from orphan to royalty unfolds in the wake of prior Queen Vashti's dramatic fall from grace. Eschewing Ahasuerus' demand to display her beauty before the kingdom, defiant Vashti contrasts with a seemingly submissive Esther who accommodates the king's appetite (Esth 1:12 NASB). At Mordecai's admonishment, Esther carefully conceals her Jewish heritage, even while she wins the king's favor and joins the Persian court as queen. Both Vashti and Mordecai serve to frame Esther's dramatic self-revelation before Ahasuerus and Haman, the king's vizier, in the narrative's climax. Some scholars have hereby argued Esther's objectified oppression as a female pawn locked into the schemes of the male characters who surround her. Others insist she capably earns her undeniable reputation as Purim's cunning and composed heroine. Standing at the intersection point of this debate, the fourth chapter of the Book of Esther functions as the central textual unit through which the narrator unveils Esther's autonomy and fortitude, creating suspense and heightening tension through

¹ Leland Ryken, et al., ed. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 75.

² Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure*, (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 96-113.

literary elements of Hebrew narrative, chiefly structure, point of view, symbolism, repetition, and characterization.³ As the focal point in Esther's mobilization, from lady in waiting to mediator of exilic survival amidst an anti-Jewish pogrom, this pericope retains extraordinary exegetical interest for any reader who seeks to understand this complex marquis character. This paper will examine the New American Standard Bible translation⁴ of Esther chapter four through the lens of literary analysis, drawing upon poetic frameworks established by Robert Alter, Adele Berlin, and Meir Sternberg, in order to discern the queen who subtly subverts patriarchal structures to deliver her people from certain death.

Literary Structure: Construing the Scene

Within Esther's narrative, chapter four stands structurally framed by the person of Mordecai, whose presence facilitates the text's envelope shape,⁵ ushering into and leading out of the dialogue at the heart of this literary unit. Mordecai has just learned of Haman's savage plans to "destroy, kill, and annihilate" (Esth 3:13) the Jews in Persia, seizing all their goods as plunder. He tears his clothes, dons sackcloth and ashes, and wails bitterly as he goes through the city (Esth 4:1). His public expression of mourning at this imminent evil captures the eye of the reader, inviting the audience to enter the ensuing progression of communication that unfolds between

³ Meir Sternberg, in "Narrativity: From Objectivist to Functional Paradigm," in *Poetics Today* 31, no. 3 (2010): 640-641. Cited 8 March 2013. Online: <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=61353914&site=ehost-live>. Sternberg argues that "suspense arises from rival scenarios envisaged about the future: from the perceptible discrepancy between what the telling lets us readers know about the happening (e.g., a conflict) at any moment and what still lies ahead, ambiguous because yet unresolved in the told world, or not to our knowledge." Readers experientially enter this suspenseful world of possibility.

⁴ Choice of translation and version admittedly shapes any literary analysis. Recognizing that two Greek and one Masoretic version of Esther's narrative have circulated, as documented by A. Kay Fountain, *Literary and Empirical Readings of the Book of Esther* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002), 19-21, this paper will focus on the NASB and adhere to a literary reading of the Masoretic text.

⁵ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 30.

Mordecai, positioned at the king's gate in the city square, and Esther, within the palace (Esth 4:4-16).

Preparation, transmission and reception of each message unfurls in a pattern of intensifying call and response, initiated by Esther and facilitated by supporting characters. Esther's maidens and eunuchs alert her to Mordecai's situation. She sends garments to restore him to seemly public appearance (Esth 4:4). When Mordecai refuses her ministrations, Esther hand selects her attendant Hathach to function as courier (Esth 4:5). Direct dialogue between Esther and Mordecai hinges on the formality of relayed messages that eventually broach topics heretofore taboo—namely, Esther's Jewish heritage and the issue of loyalty to her people—in almost whispered tones. Esther discretely recognizes the responsibilities of her royal post. She recaps Persian law: prescribed death to anyone who approaches the king without being summoned (Esth 4:11). Mordecai's indictment of her seeming impassivity at “such a time as this” (Esth 4:13-14) reveals his failure to trust her intuition about how to best integrate her training, resolve, and strategic position. Her advance upon the king's inner court will unfold on her own terms, after thoughtful consideration, fasting and prayer. In this way, Esther gets the last word in her argument with Mordecai. Her first distinct expression of agency within the larger narrative flashes forth with executive force, as she succinctly instructs and he obeys (Esth 4:16). Mordecai, proxy for the Jews in Susa, pledges solidarity and support, as Esther prepares to take action.

No less forceful for its sparseness, the dialogue at the heart of this literary unit focuses the reader on Esther's activated agency. Verbal sparring between Esther and

Mordecai heightens tension and impels the plot forward. As Zefira Gitay reads, illuminated by the monarchical portrayal of Esther in synagogue art from Dura Europos, Esther's "genealogical affiliation to the house of King Saul, together with her training at the house of King Ahasuerus and her personality,"⁶ show her to be "a woman capable of reigning."⁷ Esther's next actions are executed without consulting any but God, accentuating her self-reliance and wisdom as the narrative unfolds. Much like his entrance, Mordecai's departure ushers the audience away from dialogue with reprised symbols of mourning, fasting and prayer. The Jews who mourned "in each and every province where the command and decree of the king" had come, at the start of this pericope, will assemble to fast with a purpose, rallying behind their queen as she stands against their ruthless aggressor, Haman. Mordecai leads the Jews, properly subordinated to their sovereign, from the fasting, weeping and wailing of terrorized grief into purposeful supplication, beseeching with hopeful longing, *God save our queen!*

Point of View: Telling and Showing

Whatever the narrative voice brings to the surface is rarely complete,⁸ Meir Sternberg reminds us. Adele Berlin elaborates on point of view, likening the "multi-faceted perspective"⁹ of biblical narration to film. The narrator functions as the camera eye, selectively choosing whether to shoot wide-angle or close-up, constantly moving the camera angle to capture the action from a different vantage. These

⁶ Zefira Gitay, "Esther and the Queen's Throne." In *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995): 138-148, esp. p. 146.

⁷ Gitay, "Esther and the Queen's Throne", 146.

⁸ Meir Sternberg, "Omniscience in Narrative Construction" *Poetics Today* 28, no. 4 (2007): 683-794. Cited 8 March 2013. Online: <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&AN=29733315&site=ehost-live>

⁹ Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (ed. David M. Gunn; Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983), 44.

viewpoint shifts, like the camera, carefully include or omit information by turns, providing “multi-dimensional depth—the antithesis of flatness.”¹⁰ The use of intermediaries to facilitate communication between Esther and Mordecai is a prime example of the scenic function of viewpoint, which commences from a wide-angle view. Readers are cued to the “narrative event... when the tempo slows down enough”¹¹ to reveal the shape of a particular scene, as if it were unfolding. Introductory scenes present the primary players of the literary moment: Mordecai wailing in Susa’s streets, Esther, pained in the palace, the Jewish community throughout the kingdom, bemoaning the king’s edict. Dialogue between Esther and Mordecai manifests this characteristic slowing so that the audience may deeply attend to the exchange between the two relatives. By shifting from an omniscient point of view to reveal motivations and thoughts through Esther’s and Mordecai’s own words and actions, the narrator controls the pace of the plot and the characterization of each individual. Before the narrative eye pans to the next scene, readers glean detail and nuance from this multi-dimensionality of viewpoint, highlighted as the narrator moves from external to internal point of view.¹²

From the external point of view, salient background information emerges. “No one was to enter the king’s gate clothed in sackcloth” (Esth 2:2) helps the reader understand cultural details regarding lives of the Persian nobility, besides highlighting Mordecai’s departure from such norms. “Whom the king had appointed to attend her”

¹⁰ Berlin, *Poetics*, 45.

¹¹ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 63.

¹² Harnessing Boris Uspensky’s attentiveness to “language as an indicator of point of view,” Berlin examines concepts of “external,” or objective point of view, and “internal,” or subjective point of view, to draw observations about the interplay of multiple points of view within biblical narrative that weave together to form a unified whole, noting Uspensky’s analyses having been derived primarily from Russian novels. Berlin, *Poetics*, 55-57.

(Esth 4:5) socially locates the scene's interlocutor, contextualizing Hathach as one who not only aids Esther's assimilation to the royal court, but also serves as personal messenger who bears silent witness to the truth of Esther's identity through her exchanges with Mordecai. Movement between external to internal point of view likewise unfolds when Mordecai's intent is explicated: he provides a copy of the royal edict in order to move Esther to go in to the king "to implore his favor, and to plead with him for her people" (Esth 4:8). Discerning the implications of "whose telling or showing"¹³ appears in the narrative proves pertinent to interpreting the actions and words of the characters, two primary modes of characterization in Hebrew narrative.

Noting Sternberg's distinction of the "two dimensions of textual plurality... namely, ambiguity and ambivalence," one needs acknowledge "where the text invites alternative, multiple readings of event" and posits "alternative or 'mixed' judgments of the world" simultaneously.¹⁴ Portrayal of Esther's "anguish" remains open to such multiple interpretations, as the text itself does not clarify whether Esther is a) responding to news of the king's edict authorizing slaughter of the Jewish exiles, b) responding to widespread Jewish mourning of the Jews throughout the Persian kingdom, or c) responding sympathetically to Mordecai's personal distress over the news. Rather than weakening the strength of Esther's queenly image, the complexity

¹³ Berlin, *Poetics*, 43.

¹⁴ Sternberg, "Omniscience in Narrative Construction," 465.

created by the possibility of multiple meanings enhances the importance of this single emotion.¹⁵

Symbolism: What's in a Costume, Anyway?

The opening scene's ironic summation of Vashti's egregious 'wardrobe misstep,' in flashing defiance of Ahasuerus' inebriated command to display her renowned beauty before his banquet guests (Esth 1:10-12), contrasts sharply with the enshrouded secrecy that bedecks Esther's natural beauty of form and face (Esth 2:7). By chapter four, Esther's transition from adopted orphan to regal queen is complete. Esther compassionately reaches out to provide for her foster father in his moment of distress, as any capable benefactress might do. Echoing symbolism from Joseph's narrative in Genesis,¹⁶ garment imagery in the Book of Esther reprises one of the book's intricate motifs, concealment, through literary refrain that sparkles with variety and playfulness, toying with matters hidden and revealed.

Here, Esther sends princely garments to replace Mordecai's sackcloth (Esth 4:4) as a way of protest against the spectacle of his mourning, unseemly for someone of his societal stature, a Benjamite of Saulide royalty (Esth 2:5) who models successful exilic assimilation with dignity.¹⁷ Esther's actions show her aptitude as familial provider, attending to her Mordecai's well-being in his moment of need, not

¹⁵ Esther's anguish as a symbol of strength will be elucidated in later sections on imagery and characterization.

¹⁶ Sandra Berg explores linguistic, stylistic, and structural similarities between Esther and Joseph narratives in *Book of Esther*, esp. p. 123-42. Her analysis, which deals primarily with text outside Esther 4, is referenced to situate this paper within scholarly context.

¹⁷ Mordecai perhaps best embodies Jeremiah's model for exile (Jer 29:5-7), in settling down and seeking the peace and prosperity of his captors, for he does indeed give his 'daughter' in marriage and thwarts a murder attempt on Ahasuerus's life.

unlike Joseph's generous magnanimity,¹⁸ when he provides clothes and food for each of his brothers and sends them to bring their father Jacob, so they may all live comfortably in Egypt.¹⁹ Peering through the lens of narrative tradition, Joseph's patriarchal heft lends weight to Esther's authority and status in Susa. She already exercises her powers of advocacy within royal Persian circles, demonstrated when she highlights Mordecai's discovery of a treasonous plot on the king's life (Esth 2:22-23). Mordecai resists what Esther here offers, retaining his sackcloth and the distance it creates between them.²⁰

Mordecai's sackcloth and ashes displace customary courtly attire. He pairs these symbolic clothes with dramatic action, weeping and wailing in the streets and in the city square (Esth 4:1-2). His intentional departure from normative behavior and dress intensifies the mood within the narrative, even as it emphasizes the motif of reversal. Conjuring cultural associations of grief, mourning, repentance, and even prophetic tradition,²¹ Mordecai aligns himself with the Jewish people throughout the Persian kingdom (Esth 4:3), as they express their fear and dread of the fateful month of Adar (Esth 3:7). Esther's sympathetic anguish remains private (Esth 4:4), similar to

¹⁸ Berg and other scholars who examine similarities between the Joseph narrative and the Book of Esther do so chiefly based on structure, motif, word choice, setting, and heroic problems. Few concur on the precise nature of interrelation among the two. While comprehensive structural analysis of the Book of Esther proves impractical for the scope of this project, this analysis resists traditional assertions of Mordecai as the stronger of the two characters in Esther's story and argues instead that her heroic strength and agency are expressed in Esther 4 in a subtle subversion of the patriarchal structures in which she operates.

¹⁹ Just as Joseph sends for his father and provides for his family to live in Goshen, Esther promotes Mordecai's interests in the Persian court. She catalyzes Mordecai's improved social standing by alerting the king to Mordecai's discovery of the treasonous plan against Ahasuerus (Esth 2:22), emphasizing her role as a 'provider' figure.

²⁰ Ironically, he will not withstand the sway of the king's wishes, later in the narrative, when Mordecai is enrobed in the king's own garments and placed upon the king's own horse, as an exemplar of a man the king wishes to honor (Esth 6:10-11).

²¹ Notable examples include Jeremiah's prophetic speech acts featuring wooden yoke, (Jer 27:2) and soiled loincloth (Jer 13:4). Ezekiel steamed his bread over human dung (Ezek 4:9-12) and lay on his side for 390 days (Ezek 4:4-5) to communicate God's prophetic message.

Joseph's own masking of personal grief over his reunion with his brothers. Stronger than Joseph's emotion, depicted in Genesis by the Hebrew word *qara*,²² to cry out loudly, Esther's anguish is portrayed by the Hebrew word *khul*,²³ to writhe. This all-encompassing grief summons the agony of Eve's own body, wracked by labor pains (Gen 3:16). As any birthing mother, Esther grapples with the weight of these 'contractions' and embraces the personal agony she will bear in her role in the dangerous 'delivery' of her people. Her vow to fast from food and drink for three days (Esth 4:16) reveals a woman willing to let down her guard publicly, to identify with her people by refraining from the typical feasting of the Persian court.²⁴ Her outward departure from courtly convention to undertake such a fast, much like Mordecai's eye-catching garments, builds suspense in the mind of the reader. Garment imagery, with its richly layered allusions, hereby builds poetic tension in this narrative segment and positions the audience within a cliff-hanging moment, waiting and watching to learn whether Esther's creative vision will align with God's plan, allowing her bi-cultural prowess to prevail, or fail.

Esther's and Mordecai's abstention is held in sharp relief against a backdrop of powerful Persian decadence. The "exact amount of money" Haman promises to pay into royal treasuries for exercising his option to destroy the Jews (Esth 4:7) and the absolute power of life and death symbolized in the king's glittering scepter (Esth 4:11) highlight this stark contrast. Esther's sole hope of escaping the edict that bound any who approached the king's inner court without invitation to certain death, the golden scepter amplifies the exquisite vulnerability of the Jewish exiles in

²²Michael S. Bushell and Michael D. Tan, *BibleWorks 8.0.020c.2* (BibleWorks, LLC, 2009-2010).

²³Bushell and Tan, *BibleWorks 8.0.020c.2*.

²⁴Berg, *Poetics*, 31.

Ahasuerus's kingdom. Persian royal edicts stand irrevocable. Even the king who signs them into law with his signet ring cannot undo them (Esth 8:8). Later, Persian power and wealth is satirically inverted, as the narrator portrays Ahasuerus' scribes scrambling to pit new edict against old (Esth 8:9-14), scribbling into legitimacy the Jews' ability to defend themselves, to destroy, kill and annihilate any who might attack them under provision of the prior edict, authored by the scheming Haman (Esth 3:12-15). At the close of this pericope, Mordecai departs to do all that Esther has commanded. Their common vulnerability, susceptibility to death, lingers in the air. Esther's impending unsolicited entrance to the king's inner court symbolizes her refusal to wait, her readiness to approach the king in her own wily act of negotiation. She purposes to transgress courtly customs of life as the king's consort, embarking on what might even be seen as a Mosaic mission, to bargain with a king for the lives of her people.²⁵

Repetition: Theme and Variation

Classic biblical narrative, chapter four of the Book of Esther harnesses progressive intensification and elaboration to develop key themes within her story. Introductory ideas develop through interplay and repetition, in a cascade of parallelism²⁶ and motif that Alter poetically terms *leitwort*.²⁷ As illustrated in prior

²⁵ Without stretching the argument too far, I suspect historical audiences would appreciate the emblematic irony in this narrative, where a seemingly meek individual goes forth to meet the mighty. Esther's resolution carries the powerful simplicity of David's going out to face Goliath, though making a case for literary connection remains outside the scope of this paper.

²⁶ While a detailed exploration of the lexical and semantic aspects of parallelism within this literary unit of Esther presents difficulties, when using an English translation, I have attempted to embrace concepts of parallelism described by Adele Berlin in *Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, revised ed. (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008), by Robert Alter, in *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, (New York: Basic Books, 2011), as well as repetition, expounded by Alter, in *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

²⁷ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 95.

exploration of garment imagery, paired sets of words depict and heighten the emotional force of the narrative. “Mourning and fasting” intensify through concretization into “weeping and wailing,” dual emotional responses evoked by outward symbols of sadness, “sackcloth and ashes” (Esth 4:3). The author amplifies the sense of doom through further intimations and iterations of inevitable destruction and death. Jewish exiles tremble throughout the story, both those ‘known’ like Mordecai and those ‘hidden’ like Esther. Ahasuerus’s edict, here the “command and decree of the king” (Esth 4:3) published throughout the provinces, evokes despair in the heart of any exilic hearer. Deadly serious in his communications with Esther, Mordecai provides proof positive in the copy of the edict that he sends for her perusal. Mordecai means to show, inform, and even order Esther to implore and plead with the king (Esth 4:8). A self-contained queen, Esther summarily points to the royal law signifying certain death for all people who approach the king without being summoned.

She knows Mordecai’s history as one who thwarted a plot on the king’s life and here countervails his eagerness, hinting that his idea stands the greatest chance of killing their chances of escaping Haman’s wicked designs. Savvy Esther is no fool. She admits her own Achilles heel, her absence from the king these last thirty days. Earlier in the narrative, she summons her royal attendant, Hathach, to serve as her interlocutor with Mordecai (Esth 4:5), while she herself awaits royal summons from the king. Gambling on the king’s grace to extend his golden scepter, Esther invites danger, if not death itself (Esth 4:11). Juxtaposing her silence, itself even a subtle metaphor for death, with “relief and deliverance” arising from another place (Esth

4:14), Mordecai highlights her personal royal stake, implying Esther's obligation to her people at "such a time as this." (Esth 4:14).

Refusing victimization, Esther reprises the fasting motif introduced at the start of this literary unit (Esth 4:3). Like warriors preparing for battle,²⁸ Esther and her maidens pledge to keep a holy fast (Esth 4:16), to petition God for favor or possibly to mourn an untimely death, should the king fail to welcome her. This austerity unleashes a creative re-envisioning of fate—Esther's excuse to see Ahasuerus will be to invite him to a private banquet with Haman. Fattening up the enemy in this parody of Persian feasting,²⁹ beguiling Esther devises yet another reversal and serves it with a smile. Symmetrical pairs dance throughout this scene, recapitulated throughout the narrative. Such *leitworts* in Esther artistically illuminate the intricate interplay between power and agency, death and life, fasting and feasting, tragedy and comedy within exilic existence. Elaborate repetition hereby contributes to narrative crescendo and propels the reader toward confrontation between Mordecai and Esther, whose response reveals a commanding woman who marshals resources for royal risk-taking.

Characterization: More Than Beauty Queen

Hebrew narrative utilizes subtle shifts in characterization to focus the reader on salient details that heighten suspense, elucidate themes, and develop the story. Chapter four opens with Mordecai, a Benjamite exile from Jerusalem, descended from Saulide royalty (Esth 2:5), who confronts the reader with an ash-streaked and rag-bedecked presence, evoking the dramatic aspect of prophetic literary tradition.

²⁸ The best exemplar is Jehoshaphat, who proclaims a fast throughout Judah, to seek God's favor as the Judean army prepared to meet the Moabite, Ammonite and Meunite armies in battle (2 Chr 20:3). Samuel also prepares the Israelites to militarily engage the Philistines by declaring a fast (1 Sam 7:6).

²⁹ Sandra Berg elaborates on a key motif of feasting in the Book of Esther, with its auxiliary fasting motif, at greater length in *Book of Esther*, esp. p. 31-58.

This same Mordecai, who protectively paced the grounds surrounding the court of the virgins, inquiring daily after Esther's well-being during her induction to Ahasuerus' harem (Esth 2:11), now accosts eyes and ears of his literary audience as much as residents of Susa, signaling the significance of the scene. Leading to this critical junction in the narrative, the author emphasizes an unexpected chasm of communication thrust between Mordecai and Esther as the Persian political climate simmers to a boiling point. Mordecai, stationed in his spot at the king's gate, where he had earlier uncovered a plot on the king's life (Esth 2:21), will soon defer to Esther's eminence, in an unexpected reversal of gender roles, as she takes command of the situation (Esth 4:16-17).

Esther's royal messenger, Hathach, whose name derives from *tawek*, the Hebrew word for "midst,"³⁰ symbolically brokers conversation between Mordecai and the queen, at her explicit request. His characterization emphasizes the mounting tension. Dramatized like an official political council, Esther and Mordecai's communication commences with painstaking formality. The jarring refashioning of noble Mordecai and the elaborate message-relaying function of Hathach points readers toward the pivotal moment of Esther's mobilization. As if on cue, Hathach's name vanishes from the scene, as dialogue between Esther and Mordecai takes on increasing weight and secrecy (Esth 4:11-16).

Queen Esther comports herself with regal calm. She reveals only one explicit emotion, *anguish*, when news of Mordecai's and Susa's turmoil reaches her within the palace (Esth 4:4). Throughout the remainder of this literary unit, and indeed the rest of the story, Esther exercises executive prerogative with calm collectedness. She

³⁰ Bushell and Tan, *BibleWorks* 8.0.020c.2.

summons messengers, delivers orders, and commissions investigations (Esth 4:5). Even when showing her tender side toward family members, sending provisions of garments (Esth 4:4) or parleying with Mordecai over his suggestion that she use feminine wiles “to implore and to plead” with the king on behalf of her people (Esth 4:8), Esther retains unwavering command of herself and the tense conversation. It is no mistake that she has final say in this dialogue. At the end of their exchange, Esther dismisses Mordecai to join the ranks of Jewish exiles in the kingdom with a string of imperatives, “go,” “assemble,” “fast,” “do not eat or drink.” (Esth 4:16) Her parting words convey her steely courage, the self-directed confidence with which her gaze is set on the path of law-breaking necessity, “I will go in to the king... and if I perish, I perish.” (Esth 4:16). Esther dares to risk death in verbal active voice, expressing poised conviction in the power of God, who alone will determine her fate.³¹ Youth and beauty may prove weapons of her stately power, but in the gravity of this, her decisive moment, Esther’s majestic self-possession and unwavering focus reveal her as fierce heroine.

Demythologizing Esther: Heroic Nonpareil

Casting Esther’s subdued feminism as a foil to Vashti’s brazen womanhood, certain readers constrain her to a legacy as teenage beauty-queen whose “incomplete emancipation”³² relegates her to a mere supporting role, subsumed into the picture of virtuous Jew embodied by the male protagonist, Mordecai. Esther, however, reveals

³¹ Angel Manuel Rodriguez sees Esther’s determination in direct opposition to Haman’s understanding of the divine, epitomized by his casting of lots in 3:7. She ties this theological statement of God’s omnipotence to the narrative thrust of not only Esther’s story but also the broader corpus of Hebrew narrative. See Rodriguez, *Esther: A Theological Approach* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1995), 27.

³² Bea Wyler, “Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen” in *In A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 111.

herself as beguiling nonpareil within the fourth chapter of her story, unveiled through the biblical writer's stunning use of literary structure, point of view, repetition, symbolism and characterization. She calmly claims her noble lineage, drawing herself up to full queenly stature to assert dynamic agency in responding to the urgent threat against her people. Ranking among powerful maternal ancestors like Jael and Deborah, who likewise subverted patriarchy in their day, Esther also integrates heroic traits of Joseph in the way she marries cultural acumen with creativity, cunning, and undeniable courage to save her people from perishing. Esther captivates countless hearts, not only in the world of her story but across cultural and literary audiences. Even where her wily feminine power remains suspect, she subtly wields her charms to subvert and to resist. Practically and emphatically, Purim's legendary story enshrines her in the memory of generations of loyal and dubious readers alike.

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