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Introduction to the Problem

Esther in Scholarship

> *No other book of the Old Testament has received such mixed reviews by good, God-fearing men as the Book of Esther.*
> —Carey A. Moore, *ESTHER*

> *Different people see the same person in different ways. This is true in both life and literature. This is also the case with literary figures. It is acutely so with Esther.*
> —Michael V. Fox, "Three Esthers"

A brief survey of literature on the book of Esther quickly reveals that scholars have subjected the title character to widely divergent interpretations.[1] On the one hand, some have seen Esther as merely a beauty queen, a woman with little else but her appearance to recommend her. Lewis B. Paton, a scholar of the early twentieth century, viewed Esther as remarkable for her looks rather than for any particular abilities.[2] Carey Moore, in his 1979 commentary on Esther,

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1. In fact, it is not only Esther as a character but also the book in general that has received mixed reviews. Carey Moore summarizes some of the negative evaluations of the book, including Martin Luther's harsh critique, in "Esther, Book of," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:633–43.

2. Lewis B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther,* International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908), 96.

stated in his introduction that Mordecai "supplied the brains while Esther simply followed his directions," a statement that seemingly affirms Paton's view.[3] On the other hand, others have seen in Esther a variety of positive possibilities. André LaCocque, for example, describes Esther as a subversive figure, thus categorizing the book of Esther as part of a genre of protest literature.[4] These dissenting viewpoints, under various guises, have continued to characterize scholarship on the book of Esther up through the present.

In recent decades, there has been an increased interest in the book of Esther.[5] One cause for the attention, among many others, is the growing body of feminist scholarship. The literature on Esther demonstrates a strong proclivity to read the book with an interest in the narrative's perspective on women. The focus on this subject is not without textual warrant. In the first place, the title character of the book is a woman. Moreover, the book of Esther highlights the issue of power in relationships between husbands and wives in the very first chapter of the book—albeit in a comical manner—demonstrating what Danna Nolan Fewell describes as the "fragility of male sovereignty" in the book.[6] Upon Vashti's refusal to answer the king's summons to attend his banquet, Ahasuerus has her deposed as queen. At the advice of his advisers, King Ahasuerus declares an edict requiring that "all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike" (1:20). It is precisely this plot element—the removal of Vashti from the throne—that occasions the scenario by which a Jewish orphan rises to the throne as queen, setting up the entire story line for the book of Esther. The plot's explicit mention of relationships between husbands and wives in the narrative has hinted to modern exegetes that the subject of male–female relationships is a subject of some significance for the plot.[7]

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3. Carey A. Moore, *Esther,* Anchor Bible 7B (New York: Doubleday, 1971), lii. This is a view about which Moore later expressed regret. See Carey Moore, "'It Takes a Village' to Produce a Commentary," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research,* ed. Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 5, 8.

4. In his introduction to *The Feminine Unconventional*, LaCocque evaluates unconventional biblical women in relationship to four texts: Susanna, Judith, Esther, and Ruth. Later, he discusses the character of Esther more explicitly. André LaCocque, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition,* Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 1, 71.

5. It was in response to this growing body of literature that a symposium on Esther was held in 2000 in Omaha, Nebraska, out of which a joint edited volume was published: Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon, eds. *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 380; London: T & T Clark International, 2003).

6. Danna Nolan Fewell, "Feminist Reading of the Hebrew Bible: Affirmation, Resistance, and Transformation," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39 (1987): 83.

Timothy Beal sees the focus on relationships between husbands and wives in chapter 1 of the MT text of Esther as providing an interpretive framework that "'*leaves the mark of erasure*,'"[8] one consequence of which is that "there are traces of that gender-based conflict and the problematics of gender politics it entails."[9] For Beal, then, the introduction in the first chapter creates a virtual palimpsest: within the narrative that follows in Esther 2–9 are elements that recur from the first chapter. Chapter 1, then, is not merely a plot device by which to set up the main action; rather, Beal argues, it influences the whole narrative and provides clues for the entire book's interpretation. His argument with regard to the chapter's influence on the whole Masoretic Text of Esther may be an overstatement; the narrative of Esther is exceptionally complex and, thus, it is difficult to identify one episode as the interpretive lens for the whole.[10] Yet Beal's observations are significant in underscoring that gender is not an incidental element of the Esther narrative; gender dynamics are important to the story. Thus, it is the text of Esther itself that offers an important impetus for investigating issues of gender and power in the story.[11]

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7. See, for example, the comment of Michael Fox, who finds that analysis of gender with regard to the book of Esther is more warranted than when this topic is addressed with other texts, stating, "In the case of the book of Esther the feminist critique seems more apropos, for the book itself addresses the issues of the status and abilities of women and the relation between the sexes." This is a perspective he underscores again later, concluding, "In truth, the author is something of a protofeminist. This book is the only one in the Bible with a conscious and sustained interest in sexual politics. The concept of sexual politics can be applied precisely and without anachronism to Memuchan's advice and the ensuing decree in 1:16–22." Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 205 and 209, respectively.

8. Timothy K. Beal, "Tracing Esther's Beginnings," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna,* ed. Athalya Brenner, Feminist Companion to the Bible 7 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 103.

9. Ibid., 107. The introduction of this theme early in the narrative of the MT suggests to Beal "the possibility of a critique of the very gender-coded order it is introducing" (89).

10. Numerous scholars have commented on the complexity of the book. For example, Jon Levenson remarks, "The book of Esther is so entertaining, so comical, and so subtle that to speak of its 'message' can be profoundly misleading. Like all great literature, it demands at least that the term be in plural: A book whose structure is amenable to many angles of vision surely has more than one message."Jon Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary,* Old Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 12. This a very similar observation to that made by Athalya Brenner, who cautions us to be careful before becoming too comfortable with any one reading of Esther, for everything within the story is couched in language of reversal, presenting to us a mirror image of reality and thus inherently distorting perceptions. Athalya Brenner, "Looking at Esther through the Looking Glass," in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna,* 71–80.

11. See also Michael Fox's comments in n. 7.

But even if male and female relationships are an important theme in Esther, this does not make interpretation of the scroll any more straightforward. When scholars have focused on the character of Esther in relationship to her gender, they have come to no consensus on how to view her, echoing the ambivalence toward Esther more generally. Zefira Gitay notes that the biblical text allows for this uncertainty, especially with regard to translating the Hebrew word תִּמְלֹךְ in chapter 2. This word, from the root מלך, has sometimes been translated as "to be queen" and other times as "to reign," depending on whether the translator saw Esther's role as more active or passive. Gitay describes the ambiguity in the text thus: "It appears, therefore, that the biblical text contains an awareness of the two possibilities: Esther being a queen in title only; and of her taking an active role in ruling the land of Ahasuerus. The story is designed to verify the nature of Esther's place in the Persian court."[12] Gitay finds evidence in both scholarship and visual representation of Esther for both interpretations, stating, "Interestingly, not only artists are puzzled with regard to Esther's role in Ahasuerus's court. Bible critics also express two diametrically opposed views concerning Esther's role. Some view her as a fully fledged queen, whereas others maintain that the crown on her head (2.17) has decorative value only."[13] It is precisely this tension about how to evaluate the narrative representation of Esther—as an object or as a woman who wields authority—that we shall take as the beginning point for analysis of the book.

COMPETING VIEWS OF ESTHER

Some interpreters have viewed Esther as a woman who conforms closely to gendered expectations, the product of a patriarchal author who has used her character as a way to reinforce a particular ideology of gender and power. Elements in the narrative suggesting to exegetes that Esther is the embodiment of patriarchal values include the fact that her beauty and obedience are highlighted in the story. Furthermore, it is only through her traditional role as a wife that Esther is able to bring about change. The fact that Esther does not transcend traditional family roles but rather finds ways to adapt to the limitations placed on her and to use them to her advantage suggests to some that Esther reinscribes traditional patriarchal values. Those who endorse this perspective view her successful attempt to save her people, and even the

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12. Zefira Gitay, "Esther and the Queen's Throne," in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna,* 141–42.

13. Ibid., 138.

acceptance of the book into the canon, as possible only because she does not challenge the social system.

Conversely, some scholars have viewed Esther as a political actor who takes an active role. Thus, they have found her to be exceptional, viewing her as noteworthy because she is so different from the portrayal of other biblical women. According to this view, she stands out as a paradigm of an exceptional woman who, against all odds, defies gender stereotypes by playing a role in public affairs. One reason for this view of her is tied directly to her portrayal in the biblical text as a woman who is politically effective through the persuasiveness of her words: Esther 7:3–4 records Queen Esther's speech to King Ahasuerus in which she pleads for her own life and the life of her people. Twice previously in the narrative, personal problems have become political, escalating into national crises: first, when Vashti refuses to appear when the king requests her presence (1:13-22); and again, when Mordecai will not bow before Haman (3:6-11). Here in her speech, Esther cleverly mitigates bloodshed when she inverts the violent trend toward escalating personal problems that has been established by both the king and Haman, transforming a political crisis—the pending genocide of the Jewish people—into a very personal matter and winning her case before the king (7:3-4).

Regardless of which of the two opposing viewpoints is endorsed, scholars who have focused on the question of gender tend to frame the analysis in terms of Esther's relationship to a fixed set of gendered values: according to most descriptions of her, she is deemed to be either defiant of or in conformity with predetermined social expectations for women.[14] These two trends in scholarly appraisals of Esther can be described, in the words of Dana Nolan Fewell, as a focus on either "text-affirming" or "text-resistant" readings.[15] Each of these analyses of Esther presumes that there is a consistent way in which female roles are configured throughout biblical narratives. Evaluating Esther, then, means discussing the degree to which she conforms to or deviates from set social roles.

14. This observation has been made by others as well. See for example, Timothy Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther,* Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 165 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 6; and Susan Niditch, "Short Stories: The Book of **Esther** and the Theme of Women as a Civilizing Force," in *Old Testament Interpretation Past, Present, and Future: Essay in Honor of Gene M. Tucker,* ed. James L. Mays (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 195–209.

15. Fewell's discussion of these reading strategies is not specifically in relationship to scholarship on Esther, although she does discuss Esther in her article, but in relationship to larger trends in feminist scholarship more generally. Nevertheless, her descriptions of these two models are particularly apropos of the way scholars have assessed Esther. Fewell, "Feminist Reading of the Hebrew Bible," 81–82.

It is the purpose of this chapter to review and evaluate the scholarship on the book of Esther in relationship to her gender, as well as to explore the assumptions that bolster these perspectives. The problem with characterizing her in one of two opposite ways is that it relies on a paradigm of dichotomous gendered categories that regulate women's lives, at least in ordinary circumstances. Both the evaluations of Esther that see her as reinforcing and those that view her as defying gendered expectations are problematic, because gender cannot be evaluated in isolation from other social realities that influence societal expectations and behavior.

ESTHER AS AN EMBODIMENT OF GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

A variety of interpreters have found Esther especially lacking as a role model when compared to other characters in the story—especially the figures of Vashti and Mordecai—suggesting that she takes a more passive role. In considering Esther and Ruth together, Esther Fuchs determines that both stories, although they are named after the primary female character, are "told *by* a man's world, but also *for* a man's world. These are not stories of women, but stories of female role models determined and fostered by the strongly developed patriarchal ideology."[16] According to her evaluation of Esther's character, Esther falls short when compared both to Mordecai and to Vashti: in contrast to the positive portrayal of Mordecai, Fuchs deems Esther to be "pretty, obedient, silver-tongued, and somewhat manipulative"; in contrast to "the willful Persian wife" Vashti, Esther appears "meek and selfless."[17] Through her adherence to patriarchal norms, Esther ultimately reinforces the status quo. Fuchs states, "Ruth and Esther personify the reinstitution of patriarchal order. Only by reenacting the roles assigned to them by the patriarchal system as wives and mothers can women become national heroines."[18] For Fuchs, the book of Esther both reflects and reinforces patriarchy, portraying the male fantasy of a female heroine: Esther enacts victory for her people while conforming perfectly to male expectations of women.

Alice Laffey offers a similar estimation of Esther's character: Esther is represented in the narrative as merely a sex object, not an active figure. Like Fuchs, Laffey also contrasts Esther's behavior to Vashti's actions. Whereas Vashti defies her husband's command, thus refusing to submit herself to patriarchal

16. Esther Fuchs, "Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader,* ed. Alice Bach (New York: Routledge, 1999), 84.

17. Ibid., 81, 82.

18. Ibid., 83.

expectations, Esther represents "a stereotypical woman in a man's world."[19] Ultimately, then, Esther does nothing to subvert expectations placed on women. She conforms closely to the gender roles prescribed for her and, in so doing, reinforces patriarchal values.

Likewise, Mary Gendler would also prefer Vashti to Esther as a model woman on similar grounds to those of Fuchs and Laffey, offering a harsh critique of Esther's characterization in the story: "What about Esther do I find objectionable? In most ways she sounds like an ideal woman—beautiful, pious, obedient, courageous. And it is just this which I find objectionable. Esther is certainly the prototype—and perhaps even a stereotype—of the ideal Jewish woman, an ideal which I find restrictive and repressive."[20] Gendler's concern is not only that Esther conforms to certain limited gender roles but also that her portrayal shapes expectations for future generations of Jewish women.[21] Thus, the text does not merely represent patriarchal values but also endorses them. Fuchs, Laffey, and Gendler believe that the story of Vashti serves as a cautionary tale. The woman who defies patriarchy will not succeed; the woman who conforms to it is upheld as an exemplary woman.

Bea Wyler also evaluates Esther in terms of her conformity to patriarchy but recognizes that Esther is doubly disadvantaged because she is a Jew in a foreign empire as well as a woman. Although initially reluctant, Esther does ultimately participate in the liberation of the Jewish people, but not in the liberation of women. Thus, "What she has learned about discrimination as a Jew is apparently not applicable to her situation as a woman in a male-dominated world. Her emancipation is one-sided and thus incomplete."[22] Wyler describes the dual problems faced by Esther, racism and sexism, of which only one problem is resolved. Ultimately, then, for Wyler, Esther never escapes the confines of patriarchy, conforming perfectly to gender norms: "Queen Esther remains bound to the decrees of men, written in the script and language of her own husband the king (1.22). She has no influence to bring to bear on this state of affairs for herself or for other women, due to her blindness about her situation as a woman; at the single moment when power is concentrated in her feminine hand (8.1), she hands it all over to Mordecai (8.2)."[23] Wyler's assessment of

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19. Alice Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 216.

20. Mary Gendler, "The Restoration of Vashti," in *The Jewish Woman,* ed. Elizabeth Koltun (New York: Schocken, 1976), 242.

21. Ibid., 247.

22. Bea Wyler, "Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen," in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna,* 132.

Esther's character, then, is negative when it comes to her gender; like Laffey, Fuchs, and Gendler, Wyler finds Esther lacking as a model for female liberation.

Itumeleng Mosala evaluates the book of Esther in light of African women's struggle for freedom in South Africa. Her reading of the text finds that there are several problems with using the story as a model of liberation. In the first place, Mosala contends that although Esther is central to the plot, the true hero is Mordecai. Her struggle ultimately benefits him and thus accomplishes a patriarchal, not a liberative, outcome. Furthermore, Esther chooses national freedom over freedom for women, echoing the concern expressed by Wyler. Finally, the story does not highlight issues of class. Thus, Esther must be read with a great deal of caution, acknowledging that the text's rhetoric does not further the goals of South African women in their struggle for liberation, but rather subverts them.[24]

Carey Moore's commentary on Esther views Esther's role in the story as secondary to that of her uncle, Mordecai. He states, "In the Hebrew version it is more asserted than illustrated that Mordecai was wise and good; while beautiful and courageous, Esther nonetheless seems to be almost two-dimensional."[25] Although Moore does not explicitly employ the category of gender in making these observations, his assessment of Esther is rather similar to the feminist scholars noted earlier. The low estimation of Esther's role in the narrative is reflected in Moore's translation of Esther 2:4, which reads, "Then, let the girl who most pleases the king be queen in place of Vashti."[26] The Hebrew verb Moore translates as "to be queen," תִּמְלֹךְ , could also have been rendered in a more active way, "to reign."[27] He describes this choice as intentional, intended to reflect Esther's lack of authority, stating, "Esther was called queen, but she did not rule; even after being queen for five years (see iii 7), Esther still occupied a weak and precarious position—in her own eyes at least—for she was most uncertain about her fate and her powers over the king (see iv 11)."[28] Thus, Moore views the role that Esther occupies in passive terms. She is the wife of the king, not a woman who wields political power herself.[29]

23. Ibid.

24. Itumeleng J. Mosala, "The Implications of the Text of Esther for African Women's Struggle for Liberation in South Africa," *Semeia* 59 (1992):129–37, especially 136. **[AQ: The bibliography gives this page range as 134–41. Which is correct?] – the pages listed here are correct (129-137), which means the bibliography is incorrect.**

25. Moore, *Esther*, liv.

26. Ibid., 15.

27. Here Moore is responding to Paton's translation specifically, choosing over and against Paton's translation to use the passive rather than the active sense of the verb.

28. Moore, *Esther,* 18.

For Lillian Klein, the portrayal of Esther is closely tied to cultural views about honor and shame, values that she sees as important in the Bible and central throughout the story of Esther. She argues that honor can be achieved in ancient cultures through autonomy, something that can be accomplished only by men. Women can achieve honor only through embodying shame, that is, "they take pride in contributing to their males' honor through preservation of feminine modesty."[30] Thus, ultimately it is Mordecai whose status is well established at the story's end: "Mordecai, who depends on Esther in the crisis he himself causes by his refusal to bend his pride (and his knees) to honor Haman, is restored to his place as dominant male with all due honor. Esther, as a modest female who protects her shame when possible and is shameless when necessary, is once again subsumed in Mordecai's honor."[31] For Klein, then, the story concludes with the restoration of Mordecai's honor; and it is Esther who bolsters the image of Mordecai through embodying female shame.

For several scholars, then, Esther represents a woman who embodies powerlessness: the narrative represents her as a woman who lives within a world ordered by clear gender expectations, expectations to which her character conforms perfectly. Thus, when compared to the characters of Vashti and Mordecai, Esther is found lacking. These interpretations raise an important caution for readers of the Esther story: just because a text focuses on a female subject does not mean that it furthers women's liberation.

Those who would view Esther as an embodiment of male values cite several kinds of evidence for this interpretation. In the first place, Esther's beauty is a central aspect of her portrayal. Second, scholars have noted that she is compliant, obeying Mordecai's orders as well as conforming to social mores. Third, her actions in the narrative are closely tied to the traditional female roles, especially that of wife. There are several problems, however, with these evaluations of Esther, because they do not take into account parallel evidence for each of these categories in relationship to men, who are also described in

29. A similar view is endorsed by Michael Fox, who states, "Mordecai is the dominant figure of the book. He is introduced first (2:5) and praised last (10:2–3), and his glorification lies at the book's turning point and presages the Jews' victory. His initiative begins the rescue effort, his edict is the mechanism of deliverance, and his epistle guides the people in the establishment of the new holiday. His unalloyed success, personal and public, for himself and his people, shows that his behavior is to be taken as exemplary." Unlike Moore, Fox does allow that Esther has a significant role, but he sees it as less central than that of Mordecai. See Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 185 and 196, respectively.

30. Lillian R. Klein, "Honor and Shame in Esther," in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna,* 150–51.

31. Ibid., 174.

terms of physical beauty, obedience, and their traditional family relationships of
father and husband.

There is good reason to doubt whether the description of Esther as
beautiful positively correlates to the objectification of her as a woman. As
Athalya Brenner has demonstrated, many men and women in the bible are
described as physically beautiful, especially those who are significant actors or
have received some kind of divine favor: "The survey of basic/general terms for
human beauty reveals that, in so far as these terms are concerned, there is no
marked difference between references to female or male beauty. While female
beauty is described more often, most of the available terms serve to depict
both genders."[32] Among those who are described as having physical appeal or
stature are Saul (1 Sam. 10:23), David (1 Sam. 16:7, 12),[33] and Joseph (Gen.
39:6), to name just a few. Yet it is the character of Joseph with whom Esther
is described in nearly identical terms (Gen. 39:6; Esther 2:7). In the Masoretic
Text of Esther, we are told that she is "יְפַת־תֹּאַר וְטוֹבַת מַרְאֶה," language that is
nearly identical that used of Joseph, "יְפֵה־תֹּאַר וִיפֵה מַרְאֶה." Beginning in the
late nineteenth century, a number of scholars noticed the connections between
Esther and the Joseph story. Both stories are set in a foreign court, and both
characters work to save their people through the positions that they gain within
that context.[34] Thus, it is likely that the description of Esther as physically
attractive is intended by the author not to indicate her inferior status as a woman
but, rather, to indicate the divine favor that she, like Joseph, receives.[35] In light
of the fact that the Masoretic Text of Esther makes no reference to God, the
deliberate inclusion of this language is highly suggestive of theological interests
that are at work within the text, far more than an attempt to objectify Esther.
Esther's beauty also facilitates the plot of the story, in which Esther's appearance

32. Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and "Sexuality" in the Hebrew
Bible,* Biblical Interpretation Series 26 (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 1997), 45.

33. The portrayal of David's appearance is a little bit complicated. On the one hand, he does not seem
to represent at this stage a person of great physical stature in contrast to Saul. Thus, God cautions Samuel
not to judge individuals based on their outward appearance. David's physical attractiveness, on the other
hand, is emphasized very clearly in the narrative.

34. See, for example, Ludwig Rosenthal, "Die Josephgeschichte mit den Buchern Ester und Daniel
verglichen," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 15 (1895): 278–85; and Rosenthal, "Nochmals
der Vergleich Ester-Joseph-Daniel," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 17 (1897): 126–28.
Many other scholars have also affirmed this connection. For example, Sandra Berg sees Joseph as a model
after which the Esther story is fashioned. Sandra Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure,*
SBL Dissertation Series 44 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979).

35. The fact that both Joseph and Esther receive a mysterious favor by others in the court as an
indication of divine favor is emphasized by Levenson, *Esther*, 60.

wins the king's favor and earns her status as queen in the royal palace. Likewise, in the case of Joseph, it is his appearance that contributes to a major plot element in the narrative, when Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him. Yet in both stories, the physical description of Joseph and Esther does not merely enable the plot but also highlights the favor that each one receives.

The fact that Esther has been described as obedient, and thus passive, is similarly problematic. It is true that Vashti's open defiance toward the king serves as a kind of narrative foil to Esther's actions. But, as Sandra Berg amply demonstrates, the motif of obedience and disobedience is a significant theme throughout the book of Esther, and the motif is not confined to the characterization of Esther alone.[36] If we look at the story a bit more closely, several figures give and take orders. Although it is true that Esther ultimately listens to Mordecai's request, she does so only by risking defiance of a royal command not to approach the king unsolicited. Regardless of whether she listens to Mordecai, she ultimately has to defy either the king or Mordecai and obey the other. There is no option to disobey (or obey) both figures at the same time. Moreover, is it Esther who commands Mordecai regarding what he should do after agreeing to approach the king, She instructs him thus: "Go gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish" (4:16). What is especially interesting about this part of the story is that we are told that Mordecai follows Esther's orders precisely (v. 17).[37] Nowhere does the story stress that female obedience is a value that is upheld unequivocally. A number of other biblical narratives give examples of men who obey commands and women who defy them. In each case, there is no evidence for specific gendered expectations regarding obedience and disobedience; rather, behavior is contingent upon specific circumstances.[38]

A third criticism of Esther's characterization has been that it is only through fulfilling traditional gender roles that she gains success. The fact that Esther's

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36. Berg, *Book of Esther*, 72–82.

37. In fact, it is this moment that Fox sees as the turning point in Esther's characterization. Once she accepts her responsibility, she becomes a commanding and authoritative figure, not merely an obedient young woman. He states, "She resolves to do her duty, and a change immediately comes upon her. She *commands* Mordecai—in the imperative, with no polite circumlocutions—to assemble the Jews in Susa for a public fast. . . . In convening such an assembly and issuing directives to the community, Esther is assuming the role of a religious and national leader, and doing so prior to Mordecai's own assumption of that role. She has taken control, giving Mordecai instructions, enjoining a fast on the Jews, and deciding to act contrary to law. Her behavior marks a woman determined to work her way through a crisis, not one cowed into obedience" (Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 199–200).

power is born out of her relationships to men, especially her access to the king in her role as his wife, has been commented upon by feminist scholars. This does not, however, relate solely to women either. For everyone in the Bible, men and women alike, power is mediated through an intricate web of relationships, especially familial ones. Women may gain power through birth, adoption, or marriage. Men also gain certain status based on both lineage and marriage. For example, David's marriages to various women are likely a deliberate political strategy to help consolidate a power base.[39] Moreover, there are instances when status may be conferred on individuals not only because of one's father but also based on the mother, especially in cases where there are multiple wives. Thus, Jacob favors the sons of Rachel, his favored wife (Gen. 37:3), and Solomon gains access to David's throne through the machinations of his mother, Bathsheba (1 Kings 2). It is important, then, to recognize the centrality of familial relationships and their impact on family dynamics as well as political life in order to better analyze the role that both men and women play in private and public ways. Family roles and relationships may constrain women at times to certain kinds of activities, yet it is also through family relationships that women also may have access to power, especially if they are born or marry into a powerful family.[40]

In viewing women's activities as separate and categorically different from those of men, there is a risk of analyzing the descriptions of women as if the social and literary conventions operating within the narrative suddenly change

38. For a few examples, Moses is reluctant but initially obeys Yahweh's command to go to Egypt (Exodus 3–4); Saul follows Samuel's commands, which leads to his anointing as the future king of Israel (1 Samuel 9–10); and Samuel listens to Eli's directives (1 Samuel 3). In addition, there are instances in which a woman disobeys orders and is rewarded, including the story of Rahab, who lies rather than obey the order of the king of Jericho to produce the spies she has hidden, instead helping them escape. For this act of defiance, she and her family members are saved (Joshua 2, 6:22-25). The narrative indicates not only human but divine sanction; she is rewarded for her actions.

39. For a good example of how marriages played a part in David's rise to power, see Jon Levenson, "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978): 11–28; see also Levenson and Baruch Halpern, "The Political Import of David's Marriages," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 99 (1980): 507–18. Levenson and Halpern conclude that David's marriages to various women were a significant part of his early political strategy, allowing him to consolidate power.

40. Titles connected to traditional male roles, such as father, often can indicate a kind of status. Yahweh, for example, is called both father and husband. There is also parallel evidence that traditional female roles might be used as titles in ways that indicate status. Thus, Deborah, prophetess and judge of Israel, is referred to as a "mother in Israel" (Judg. 5:7). Also, in 1 Samuel, a woman pleads with Joab on behalf of a city of which people "used to say in the old days, 'Let them inquire at Abel'; and so they would settle a dispute." For this reason, the city is described as a "mother in Israel," an argument that apparently has persuasive power, because Joab does not attack but spares the city (2 Sam. 20:18).

when it comes to analyzing women's experience. One problem with assessing Esther as a typical representation of patriarchal values—that is, as a powerless woman—is that in order to do this, she is evaluated by a set of social criteria different from that applied to men. Literary tropes about beauty, obedience, and family relationships may take on certain nuances unique to women within a narrative. Yet to deny the commonalities makes it impossible to recognize intertextual allusions.

ESTHER AS A MODEL OF LIBERATION

Other scholars have seen in Esther's characterization the possibility of liberation. Several positive assessments of Esther that see her as taking a more active role have focused on her relationship to the wisdom tradition. Shemaryahu Talmon was one of the first scholars to draw an explicit connection between the book of Esther and Wisdom literature. His observations about the strong connection between the canonical book of Esther and the wisdom tradition earned Esther a high estimation. Talmon categorized the book of Esther as a "historicized wisdom-tale," which he described as "an *enactment* of standard 'Wisdom' motifs."[41] He acknowledged that the book of Esther is in no way a set of wise maxims like the book of Proverbs, which functions in a more straightforward and explicitly didactic manner. Rather, Esther is an example of "applied wisdom," illustrating by example that the path of wisdom is the one that leads to success. Thus, he describes Esther as someone who "achieves proverbial success (Prov iii 4)," for it is she who "overshadows her uncle and outclasses his adversary Haman in the art of crafty planning and successful execution."[42] One of the most significant aspects of Talmon's analysis is that in connecting Esther to Wisdom literature, he also sees her portrayal as a continuation of portrayals of other biblical women who are also depicted as clever: Delilah, Jael, Michal, Rachel, Bathsheba, and the wise woman of Tekoa, to name a few.[43] In his estimation, it was not at all uncommon for biblical women to be portrayed as wise, stating, "Courageous and determined women apparently often were found in wisdom circles."[44] For Talmon, at least, Esther was a part of a larger tradition of women who might take on a more active role in a wisdom context.

Using Talmon's observations as a starting point, Bruce Jones concludes that Esther is portrayed in the narrative as "a sage, not a sex-object."[45] In his

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41. Shemaryahu Talmon, "'Wisdom' in the Book of Esther," *Vetus Testamentum* 13 (1963): 426.

42. Ibid., 449.

43. Ibid., 450–51.

44. Ibid., 451.

essay "Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther," one of his two primary tasks is to offer a rebuttal to certain "liberated women" who "have found reason to dislike Esther because of the chauvinistic view of Esther which they see in it."[46] His work is in direct conversation with earlier negative assessments of Esther by feminist scholars. In particular, Jones challenges the assessments of Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, who see the first chapter of Esther as an argument that women must be obedient to husbands.[47] For him, this view represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the text, because it overlooks the centrality of humor in Esther as a literary device.[48] Jones explicitly cites Talmon and expresses agreement with him regarding the strong connections between Esther and the wisdom tradition. Yet despite Talmon's determination that women were often depicted as wise, Jones suggests that the role of sage "is uncommon for a woman" but that nevertheless Esther "fills it, surpassing even Mordecai."[49] Both see her as embodying wisdom ideals, and thus she is a more public figure. For Talmon, this places her in a larger wisdom tradition, whereas for Jones this represents a kind of anomaly.[50]

Likewise, Kevin McGeough connects Esther to wisdom; however, he contends that although Esther conforms to wisdom expectations in the beginning of the story, she ultimately moves beyond them. McGeough argues that Wisdom literature focused on the strategies for everyday life that would enable success. These, however, must be abandoned when they threatened normal, everyday circumstances: "Wisdom, then reflects normative and ideal behavior for everyday life. When conditions are normal or stable, wisdom

45. Bruce W. Jones, "Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1977): 177.

46. Ibid., 171. Jones's other task is to respond to objections that the book of Esther is problematic because of the "cruelty and nationalism" some saw in it (171).

47. Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation* (Waco: Word, 1974), 93, cited in ibid., 172n5.

48. Jones, "Two Misconceptions," 171.

49. Ibid., 177.

50. Although many scholars have followed Talmon's suggestion that Esther has strong connections to Wisdom literature, others have questioned this evaluation. James Crenshaw, for example, has serious doubts about relating the book of Esther too closely to Wisdom literature. In his article "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon 'Historical' Literature," he examines the methods of several scholars who have emphasized the role that Wisdom literature has played in impacting other books. His concern is for the establishment of formal criteria for the genre of Wisdom literature. He contends that wisdom cannot be too broadly construed or it no longer constitutes a genre, arguing, "The multiplicity of wisdom's representatives and answers must not force one into a definition that is so comprehensive that it becomes unusable." James Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon 'Historical' Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 88 (1969): 131.

provides good guidelines for behavior. When the normative construct is threatened, these behaviors are insufficient. Here is where a hero must step in. So the story of Esther, although reflecting wisdom values, must provide a character that supersedes those values as savior."[51] In this way, Esther does serve as a role model for the values that she demonstrates, but she is not a character that ordinary people would emulate, because her actions are exceptional, brought on by extreme necessity rather than everyday situations. McGeough concludes, "Thus, although the story of Esther fulfills liberative fantasies, it is still inherently conservative."[52] McGeough does not stress the fact of Esther's gender but does assess her specifically in relationship to whether or not she offers a model of liberation from social expectations. Ultimately, McGeough finds that Esther does not subvert the status quo but, rather, acts in an exceptional way in response to the particularity of her specific circumstances. Her behavior is not likely to be replicated by others: heroes are people who are admired but not imitated in everyday life.

LaCocque's book *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition* assesses Esther as a character who subverts the gendered expectations placed on women. According to LaCocque, Esther is anything but the embodiment of patriarchal stereotypes. Rather, the book of Esther was written as a response to the gender imbalance that had developed during the postexilic period; it looked back to an earlier time of gender equity during the premonarchic era.[53] He sees the book of Esther as a "subversive piece of literature."[54] Along with Susanna, Judith, and Ruth, Esther stands out in the biblical tradition; they are exemplars of women who "break the stereotypes of femininity, not by becoming masculine, but by transcending the male–female polarity while remaining the feminine 'females' that they are."[55] According to this viewpoint, there were very negative stereotypes about women prevalent in the postexilic period, but the author of Esther does not endorse them. Instead, he imagines through the narrative another possibility for how to view women.

The scholars we have surveyed here, then, focus on Esther's ability to act in a powerful way to enact changes. Most of those who view Esther's character with an eye toward liberative possibilities view her behavior as exceptional, an aberration from normal female behavior. This approach highlights the fact that

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51. Kevin McGeough, "Esther the Hero: Going Beyond 'Wisdom' in Heroic Narratives," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70 (2008): 65.

52. Ibid.

53. LaCocque, *Feminine Unconventional*, 1–6.

54. Ibid., 71.

55. Ibid., 117.

Esther's life as portrayed in the story likely does not reflect the experiences of everyday women. The story is more likely a fantasy about life under foreign rule than one that reflects common and ordinary experiences for women. But if Esther is an exception, her status and behavior are unusual not only for women but for men as well. It is very unlikely that either a man or a woman in a similar situation would represent the mundane experiences of life.

The problem with portraying Esther's political activities as unusual for a woman, however, ignores the fact that a number of biblical women are portrayed as politically effective and wielding a great deal of authority. Thus, characterizing Esther as extremely persuasive, especially in preventing violence, places her in a literary tradition along with many other biblical women before her.

In Esther 7, the queen pleads with the king on behalf of her people. The easy verbal interchange between personal and political matters in Esther's speech portrays her as a woman who is both familiar with and adept at using the language of diplomacy and negotiation that was common throughout the ancient Near East.[56] Both the dramatic and the comical political failures of the king and Haman, as well as the manner in which Esther's words evoke other women in biblical literature who are skilled in the art of negotiation, serve to highlight the portrayal of Esther as a skilled royal counselor.[57] In advising the king against violence, Esther participates in a tradition with other wise women who appear in biblical narratives,[58] with the personification of Wisdom,[59] and with stories about successful courtiers in foreign courts.[60] The view that Esther is exceptional fails to account for connections to both biblical literature and ancient Near Eastern diplomacy language.[61]

ESTHER'S POWERLESSNESS AS A LENS ON ETHNIC IDENTITY

Mediating between these poles—one that views Esther as passive and one that sees her as an agent of change—several scholars have suggested that Esther's

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56. Levenson describes Esther's speech to the king as "masterful" on the grounds that she has used her own relationship to the king as leverage: "She is pleading for her own life but also implying, without being so tactless as to say it directly, that the king is about to lose the person dearest to him and most intimate with him." Levenson compares this speech to the one in which Moses pleads with God on the people's behalf in Exodus 33, likewise enlisting "his own personal favor in the eyes of the LORD (vv. 12 and 13 [twice]). . . . Like Esther, Moses is the sovereign's darling, and like her, he pleads not simply for himself but for his people, boldly risking the favor that he has won in hopes of having it extended to the entire nation of Israel. And in each case the gamble succeeds" (*Esther,* 101).

57. This is a topic that will be taken up in a later in chapter 5 at more length.**[AQ: Specify chapter number?]**

powerlessness offers a lens on ethnic identity. Thus, portraying women as powerless is not a perspective that the author of Esther employs simply as an endorsement of patriarchy. Rather, gender becomes a vehicle through which to evaluate the precarious position experienced by Jews living under foreign rule. Viewed in this light, Esther is less a representation of women's position vis-à-vis men and more a representation of the diasporic Jewish community as a whole. This scholarship builds on insights about the way that the scroll addresses theological and social tensions experienced by the community living in Diaspora.

58. 1 Samuel 25, 2 Sam. 14:2-21, and 2 Sam. 20:14-22 are all examples of wise women who offer counsel to a king (or king's representative), which has the effect of preventing violence. See Claudia Camp, "The Wise Women of 2 Samuel: A Role Model for Women in Early Israel?" Catholic Biblical Quarterly 43 (1981): 14–29; Camp, "The Female Sage in Ancient Israel and in the Biblical Wisdom Literature," in The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East, ed. John G. Gammie and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 185–203; and Silvia Schroer, "Wise and Counseling Women in Ancient Israel: Literary and Historical Ideals of the Personified ḥokmâ," in A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 67–84. Camp argues that several of these figures indicate a social reality behind the portrayal of Wisdom in Proverbs. Schroer expands on Camp's arguments, broadening the corpus to include other women in biblical literature. Neither one clearly connects these women to Esther, but there are many verbal and thematic parallels that make this move a possibility that will be expanded on in the course of this study.

59. Shemaryahu Talmon, "'Wisdom' in the Book of Esther," 419–55. Talmon was the first to argue for a connection between the book of Esther and the wisdom tradition, arguing that the characters in Esther embody common types in Wisdom literature. Although he does not explicitly cite this example, Proverbs 8 depicts wisdom as a woman who acts in some ways similar to Esther. See, for example, Prov. 8:15-16: "By me kings reign, and rulers decree what is just; / by me rulers rule, and nobles, all who govern rightly."

60. Several scholars have noted connections between Esther and the story of Joseph. See for example, Arndt Meinhold, "Die Gattung der Josephgeschichte und des Estherbuches: Diasporanovelle," part 1, Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 87 (1975): 306–24, and part 2, Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 88 (1976): 72–93; and Moshe Gan, "Megillat "Esther Be'asparqlariyat Qorot Yoseph Be'misrayim" Tarbiz 31 (1961–62): 144–49. Others—such as Ludwig Rosenthal, "Die Josephgeschichte,"; and W. Lee Humphreys, "A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel," Journal of Biblical Literature 92 (1973): 211–23—have seen connections between Esther and Daniel. Finally, see also Susan Niditch and Robert Doran, "The Success Story of the Wise Courtier: A Formal Approach," Journal of Biblical Literature 96 (1977): 179–93. In this article, they examine thematic elements connecting Esther to tales of courtiers in foreign courts including Daniel, Ahiqar, and Joseph.

61. There are also theoretical problems with employing the description of "exceptional" to women. Julie Asher-Greve states, "Feminist historians consider the idea of an exceptional woman a phenomenon of 'andro-normative' historiography," describing how this problematic approach has impacted representations of the figure of Semiramis in both scholarship and culture. Julie Asher-Greve, "'Semiramis of Babylon' to 'Semiramis of Hammersmith,'" in Orientalism, Assyriology, and the Bible, ed. Steven W. Holloway, Hebrew Bible Monographs 10 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 324.

Take, for example, the thesis of W. Lee Humphreys, in which he suggests that Esther and Daniel "are tales of a particular type, which, along with their considerable entertainment value, develop a particular theological emphasis addressed to the emerging Jewish communities of the Persian and Hellenistic diaspora. They suggest and illustrate a certain style of life for the Jew in his foreign environment."[62] This argument is echoed by Levenson, who contends that the book of Esther neither highlights nor ignores nationalism but "speaks . . . of a newly-defined Israel. It tells how 'Judeans' became 'Jews.'"[63] Both Humphreys and Levenson highlight the importance of identity politics—which have both an ethnic and religious component—that are at work in the book of Esther.

It is in this vein that Sidnie White Crawford develops her analysis of Esther as a character. She both confirms the view that Esther represents a traditional woman and offers a far more sympathetic portrayal of her. She argues that Esther serves as a role model for diasporic living. She sees Esther as "the epitome of a cooperative courtier," a character who achieves success by working "within the system."[64] For Crawford, Esther serves a symbolic value in modeling the sense of disenfranchisement felt by diasporan Jews; her characterization suggests that adaptability is a necessary element for life under foreign rule.[65] This view presumes that women are symbols of powerlessness, a presumption that the author recognizes but does not authorize. Rather, the author uses the most powerless image possible—a woman, an orphan, and a resident alien—as a metonym for the vulnerabilities experienced by Jews living in a foreign empire.

In a later article, Crawford notes that both Esther and Judith play a role in the subversion of patriarchal norms in their defeat of two men, Haman and Holofernes, respectively. The portrayal of women in the postexilic period as heroes against foreign powers gives narrative shape to sociopolitical realities. Crawford says, "The women, in addition to being women and therefore of secondary status in society, are also representative of the Jews. . . . The Jews in the post-exilic period were dominated by foreign powers and thus politically in the cultural position of women; the Gentile male's defeat by the Jewish woman thus resonated along political as well as gender lines."[66] In contrasting the two women, she follows the work of Fuchs, Laffey, and Gendler in critiquing the

62. Humphreys, "Life-Style for Diaspora," 211.

63. Jon Levenson, "The Scroll of Esther in Ecumenical Perspective," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 13 (1976): 451.

64. Sidnie Ann White, "Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel,* ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 173.

65. Ibid, 166–67.

characterization of Esther as an embodiment of patriarchal values,[67] suggesting that this is one possible reason that Esther was ultimately accepted into the canon while Judith was not: "It is Esther's essential adherence to this norm that makes her sometimes suspect conduct acceptable to her mostly male audience, and may have played some role in the book's eventual canonization."[68] According to Crawford, Esther conforms to patriarchal values because of her married status, her beauty, and her obedience.[69] In Crawford's estimation, Esther adapts to gender expectations, working within the privacy of home and never exercising any kind of public authority.[70] Crawford is balanced between the tensions in scholarship over Esther's characterization: she views Esther as a typical woman in relationship to gender but also recognizes that gender may signify larger political realities of powerlessness. Thus, from her perspective, one cannot evaluate the degree to which Esther conforms to gendered expectations without recognizing how this impacts and reflects the Jewish community's sense of disenfranchisement.

Michael Fox's commentary on the book of Esther focuses a great deal on characterization. Although he views Mordecai as the more exemplary character, he notes that it is Esther alone whom the author portrays as dynamic: "The distinctive feature in the portrayal of Esther is change. Esther alone undergoes growth and surprises the reader by unpredictable developments."[71] He sees Esther as having undergone a three-part growth process: from passivity to activity, and from activity to authority.[72] Esther's process of growth, as well as the absence of miracles in the story, places the emphasis in the narrative on "human resources—intellectual as well as spiritual—even of people not naturally leaders."[73] In this way, Fox seems to draw on the work of Crawford, concluding that although Esther's actions are not typical, they speak specifically to a postexilic Diaspora context. Fox views Esther as a role model for the Jewish community; her behavior highlights the importance of "human character" in achieving salvation rather than hoping for divine intervention.[74]

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66. Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther and Judith: Contrasts in Character," in Crawford and Greenspoon, *Book of Esther in Modern Research,* 65.

67. Ibid., 71.

68. Ibid.

69. Ibid., 73.

70. Ibid., 72.

71. Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology,* 196.

72. Ibid.

73. Ibid., 205.

74. Ibid.

In the second edition of his commentary, Fox includes an excursus titled "The Image of Woman in the Book of Esther."[75] Fox recognizes that the critique of feminist scholars about the status of women is relevant to the book Esther, which introduces the theme of relationships between men and women. He examines the critique of Fuchs and Laffey in particular and finds their critiques to be unwarranted. Rather than uphold and idealize stereotypes of women, he suggests that the book "teaches that *even* a stereotypical woman in a world of laughably stereotypical males is capable of facing the ultimate national crisis and diverting the royal power to her own ends."[76] Like Jones, he is aware of the role that humor plays in the narrative and thus describes the book as a "satire on the *masculine* ego."[77] This is meant less as a critique of constructs of masculinity in the abstract and more as a direct attack on the portrayal of "male dominance as manifested in the Persian court."[78] Like Crawford, Fox seeks to balance between the two opposing positions. On the one hand, he disagrees with LaCocque and Jones in their view of Esther as an exceptional woman who refutes gender stereotypes. On the other hand, he believes the author of Esther to be sympathetic to her because of the way that exaggerated stereotypes allow for an ironic critique of the Persian Empire.[79]

Timothy Beal suggests that Esther highlights the complex problems of identity politics rather than offering a straightforward model to emulate. He views Esther as a "literary farce that highlights the impossibilities of locating and fixing the not-self, or other (specifically the woman as other and the Jew as other) over against 'us.'"[80] For Beal, Esther is not a projection of a particular image but rather "the *aggregation* of many identity convergences, shifting alignments, ambivalences, and margin locations."[81] Beal sees social identity as a complex phenomenon that includes, but is not limited to, gender.

In a somewhat different vein from the work of Crawford, liberation theologians have also celebrated Esther as a character who is a paradigm, valuable for the emancipatory possibility that she presents for other ethnic

75. Ibid., 205–11.

76. Ibid., 207.

77. Ibid., 209.

78. Ibid.

79. For a similar view of ways that women function narratively to display the inadequacy of foreign rulers, see Athalya Brenner, "Who's Afraid of Feminist Criticism? Who's Afraid of Biblical Humour? The Case of the Obtuse Foreign Ruler in the Hebrew Bible," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 63 (1994): 38–55.

80. Timothy Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997), ix.

81. Ibid.

communities. Whereas Crawford sees Esther as a model of how to work within the system, several theologians have seen her as an example of liberation. The work of Asian American theologian Roy Sano focuses on the story of Esther as a model for the way in which stories can allow ethnic minorities to speak about their own histories of oppression.[82] Building on Sano's work, Orlando Costas argues that the book of Esther not only offers language through which minorities in the United States may articulate their own experiences but also offers possibilities for "any theological discourse that seeks to be liberating."[83] Thus, Costas finds the book of Esther to represent a significant challenge to the societal norms: "The story of Esther offers a paradigm of liberating theological reflection. Its central episode represents a radical questioning of the status quo. It does not accept a negative event as fate or an accident of history. Rather, it identifies it as a wicked historical deed and challenges it in the name of justice. It sees history as open to change for the better because it is led by a providential and liberating God who stands behind the powerless and oppressed."[84] Sano and Costas focus less on the specific question of gender. Costas's evaluation of Esther, however, stresses that she embodies "a radical questioning of the status quo" and thus can be seen very clearly as a subversion of societal norms and expectations.[85]

The views expressed here do, at times, recognize that there are patriarchal expectations placed on women, but they also suggest that gender may signify other social realities. Esther is viewed a symbol of powerlessness; but her low position, and ultimately her ability to succeed despite it, offers a positive model for those who are feeling disenfranchised. When the author of Esther uses stereotypes about female roles as a literary device, it is not employed as an endorsement of patriarchy.[86] There is significant textual warrant for this perspective. In the first place, the two major political crises described in the text are the result of parallel situations in which a woman and a Jew come to figure their entire gender and people, respectively. There are quite obvious literary parallels between the two scenarios. In the first, Vashti's disobedience to the king's order is followed by her subsequent deposition as queen and the edict commanding all women to obey their husbands. The second also

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82. Roy Sano, "Ethnic Liberation Theology: Neo-Orthodoxy Reshaped or Replaced?" in *Christianity and Crisis* 35 (1975): 258–64.

83. Orlando E. Costas, "The Subversiveness of Faith: Esther as a Paradigm for Liberating Theology," *Ecumenical Review* 40 (1988): 66.

84. Ibid., 67.

85. For another perspective on Esther as a character who demonstrates liberation and also serves to liberate others, see John F. Craghan, "Esther: A Fully Liberated Woman," *Bible Today* 24 (1986): 6–11.

follows a refusal, this time by Mordecai, who will not bow to Haman. Once again, the personal exchange results in an edict, ordering political action that implicates a much larger group, not only the individual involved. Furthermore, the recognition that women in texts may figure symbolically rather than offer specific information about women's lives is an important caution in reading texts. Yet this discourse, although striving for a middle ground between the two opposite approaches to Esther's characterization, often still works within the same framework that we have already seen in relationship to a gender analysis. Esther is still evaluated within a set of fixed expectations for women. The scholars I have described find her to live up to stereotypes about female behavior and roles.

The Role of the Public/Private Discourse in Assessing Esther

The first part of this chapter examined some of the ways in which scholars have assessed Esther in describing her to be either defiant or paradigmatic of patriarchal gender expectations, to be either active or passive. This tendency often assumes a model of dichotomous and gendered spaces. Regardless of whether scholarly assessments of Esther's role are positive or negative, both often employ the same paradigm of separate spheres for making determinations about a woman's power. The ensuing discussion of scholarship will demonstrate the centrality of this paradigm within scholarship about Esther's gender. In this section, I will review some of the scholarship already examined and identify both implicit and explicit reliance on the public/private framework for evaluating Esther.

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86. The idea that the representation of women symbolizes the people of Israel rather than describing concrete gender dynamics in the ancient world has been suggested in relationship to other biblical and apocryphal texts as well. For example, Tikvah Frymer-Kensky says, "The Bible's view of women became central to Israel's thinking, for it provided a paradigm for understanding powerlessness and subordination without recourse to prejudicial ideas. Israel was subject to the power and authority of others on an international level just as women were subordinate within Israelite society, and the Bible's own image of women enabled its thinkers to accept this powerlessness without translating it into a sense of inferiority or worthlessness. In this way, the Bible's image of women was an essential element in its self-image and its understanding of Israel's destiny." Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002), xvii. Likewise, Amy-Jill Levine suggests a similar way that women's bodies symbolize the Jewish community in Hellenistic texts, describing the symbolic function thus: "Women's bodies, like the community itself, become the surface upon which are inscribed the struggles between the adorned and the stripped, the safe and the endangered, the inviolate and the penetrated." Amy-Jill Levine, "'Hemmed in on Every Side': Jews and Women in the Book of Susanna," in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna,* 309.

Lillian Klein's work on the categories of honor and shame operative in Esther takes this viewpoint; her description of Esther explicitly draws on the public/private discourse. She contends that a man's honor is protected through constraining his wife to private spaces: "To protect his honor and social reputation from his wife's shameful behavior, a husband has socially recognized strategies: segregation of his women, insisting that they remain veiled in public, and restricting their social behavior to 'women's spaces.'"[87] Thus, Klein is somewhat circumspect about viewing Esther positively, because her "actions in the masculine world" are masked by the "*appearance* of feminine shame."[88] She also thinks the text offers a message for diasporan Jews who also cannot achieve full autonomy and thus must conform to outward expectations of submission to the dominant political authority while exerting freedom to subvert expectations in an inconspicuous way. But the text has implications also for women as a whole: "Female spaces and female things are centered around the family residence . . . and all things remaining within the home are identified with the female; those taken from the inside to the outside—the male 'space'—are identified with the male. . . . Accordingly, women are excluded from male social assemblies."[89] The most important aspect, then, of the public/private dichotomy, according to Klein's analysis, is the external and visible maintenance of the system in order to preserve male honor.[90] Her analysis does allow for some permeability between public and private domains, but the appearance of a clear separation between male and female spaces must be maintained.

Sidnie White Crawford also underscores the role of the public/private divide for constraining women's behavior in contrasting Esther with Judith. According to Crawford, Esther "fulfills gender stereotypes by her actions," in that "she does not take power publicly." Her lack of public power indicates that she "upholds the patriarchal social order" and, in Crawford's opinion, likely contributes to the book's acceptance in the canon, in contrast to the book of Judith.[91] This presumes not only that women were normally relegated to private spaces but also that violation of this norm could have negative consequences, a value that continued to be upheld by future interpreters of the book.[92]

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87. Klein, "Honor and Shame in Esther," 151.

88. Ibid., 175.

89. Ibid.

90. A similar understanding of gender roles is expressed in a later book by Klein, in which she sees male dominance as a reality that led to women's need to capitulate and develop strategies to work within that control. See Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

In her analysis of Esther, Bea Wyler likewise bases her analysis on the view that women are ordinarily limited to the private sphere. Esther's story poses a dilemma for contemporary Jewish women, she says: "As Jews, we have good reasons to celebrate Purim. . . . As women, we have no reasons to celebrate, for following 1.22, our subjugation still stands. We are still struggling for our rights as human beings and our place in public life."[93] What is striking about her analysis is that she sees women's current exclusion from public spaces as rooted in a history of such dichotomous thinking.[94]

In a similar vein to Wyler, Nicole Duran describes Esther's life in the Persian court in terms of the physical divisions of spaces between men and women, a separation that had consequences for women's roles: "As far as we know, the king's court is entirely the realm of men, the women being kept, in a sort of cabinet to be taken out individually when desired. The boundary between the women's space and the men's space is navigated only by eunuchs, who being neither male nor female may have authority over the women within the women's place and also may move freely into the men's court, to bring in what women are requested."[95] The discussion of women and private spaces, then, has often been understood both as a conceptual and a physical reality; that is, scholars have viewed the gender-based paradigm of public and private as limiting women both to certain activities and to specific physical spaces, both of which are traditionally associated with domestic life.[96]

91. Crawford, "Esther and Judith," 72–73. Other scholars have also concluded that the portrayal of Judith as a subversive female character caused her to be excluded from the canon. See, for example, Carey Moore's view that the "pro-feminist stance of the text" was too subversive and thus led to its exclusion. Carey Moore, "Why Wasn't the Book of Judith Included in the Hebrew Bible?," in *"No One Spoke Ill of Her": Essays on Judith,* ed. James C. VanderKam, Early Judaism and Its Literature (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), 65.

92. There is some reason to doubt that the primary concern of early interpreters of Esther was to uphold her as a paradigm, for the specific reason that she had confined herself to private spaces (as opposed to figures such as Judith, who had not). As Leila Bronner notes, rabbinic interpretation included Esther, along with Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, and Hulda, as one of the seven prophetesses of Israel, an interpretation that (implicitly, at least) describes her in a more public capacity. In addition, in a midrash on the prayer for Benjamin in Gen. 49:27, Esther is listed (along with Ehud and Saul) as one of the potential candidates, as a descendant of the tribe, to fulfill the prophecy. For a discussion of rabbinic interpretations of Esther, see Leila Bronner, "Esther Revisited: An Aggadic Approach," in Brenner, *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna,* 192–95.

93. Wyler, "Incomplete Emancipation," 134.

94. One of the main arguments advanced in this work is that the public/private divide is a particularly modern conception, one that was not applicable to the world that produced Esther but is, rather, a retrojection of modern categories onto ancient societies. This is a matter that will be taken up in the next chapter.

André LaCocque's analysis of Esther as an "unconventional" woman employs a similar logic. In comparing Mordecai to Esther, he says, "But his heroism, if it can be called thus, is strongly qualified and overshadowed by the female character who, eventually will brand her name on the book. This is the story of Esther, not Mordecai, which is certainly another most important aspect of the tale. For, to a story already politically subversive is added another dimension of subversion."[97] LaCocque's language does not explicitly employ the terms *public* and *private*, but his analysis is predicated upon a very clear set of social roles for men and women, which are only rarely transgressed. The gendered norm is that the heroic role is most often filled by men, an expectation that is overturned in this story, thus rendering Esther a "subversive" tale. LaCocque describes the way that this happens in the narrative, stating that "'heroism' passes from Mordecai to Esther, from warrior to the martyr."[98] Esther is able to subvert traditional roles and become a hero, claiming center stage in the drama. When she does so, however, it is as a "martyr," suggesting that even a woman behaving subversively in the Bible does so in a more passive way.

The perspective on gendered spaces has also impacted analysis of Esther for scholars of fields outside of biblical scholarship. Susan Zaeske, a scholar whose work focuses on the intersections of rhetoric, politics, and gender, examines the book of Esther as a model for a rhetoric that is not based on a "unitary, male-dominated history of rhetorical theory." Although the book of Esther does not explicitly claim to be rhetorical, Zaeske argues that it has operated as such throughout history for a number of oppressed and marginalized groups, including Jews, women, African Americans, and lesbians.[99] In the book of Esther, she finds evidence for a "rhetoric of exile and empowerment."[100] Her

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95. Nicole Duran, "Who Wants to Marry a Persian King? Gender Games and Wars in the Book of Esther," in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible,* ed. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, SBL Semeia Studies 44 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 77. In fact, we do not actually know that men and women were separated in the king's court. It seems that Duran here is basing her idea of separate spaces on an idea of harem life that is likely drawn from analogy to the Ottoman Empire. A discussion of royal Persian women's life will be investigated later. There are, however, a number of reasons to doubt that *harem* is even an appropriate word to use in relationship to Persian royal women. For a description of this, see Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire,* trans. Peter T. Daniels (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 280–86, esp. 285.

96. See also Nicole Duran, "Having Men for Dinner: Deadly Banquets and Biblical Women," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 35 (2005): 117–24, for a discussion of the way in which Esther works within prescribed gender roles to bring about violence, comparing her to Jael, Judith, and Herodias, who likewise use feasting for a deadly purpose.

97. André LaCocque, "The Different Versions of Esther," *Biblical Interpretation* 7 (1999): 307.

98. Ibid.

essay "Unveiling Esther as Pragmatic Radical Rhetoric" analyzes the story of Esther in relationship to its interpretive history, specifically as it has been used as a paradigm of emancipation for a variety of women, including Christine de Pizan and Sojourner Truth. In analyzing Esther as a type of pragmatic rhetoric, Zaeske focuses on the way that space contributes to this rhetoric: "Quite the opposite of Vashti, Esther is not called to male space, though she desperately desires access to it in order to petition for her people. Esther must decide whether to remain in the feminine space of the harem, which is seemingly devoid of the potential for political rhetoric, or to transgress the male space of the palace courtyard, where rhetoric is regulated by strict laws. In the end, Esther not only defies gender prescriptions, but also breaks the law by crossing into male space."[101] Zaeske views Esther as a model of liberation because she transgresses the public/private divide, entering into "male" space. Zaeske does not specifically call this space public but does describe it as the arena in which political rhetoric can occur effectively, as distinct from "female" space, where there is no access to political power.

Conclusion

The portrayal of Esther has relied on this central question: To what extent is this representation typical of women's experience, and to what extent is it exceptional? As we have seen, much of the discussion about Israelite women's role has relied on the dichotomous categories of public and private.[102] The consequence of employing this language has to been to presume that these are separate categories—both physically and conceptually—and that these domains are gendered. This kind of thinking ordinarily designates public spaces as those inhabited by males, whereas women occupy spaces that are private. Thus, scholars who have focused on Esther's beauty, obedience, and traditional

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99. Susan Zaeske, "Unveiling Esther as a Pragmatic Radical Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 33 (2000): 193–2000, at 194.

100. Ibid.

101. Ibid., 201.

102. The matter of how the categories of public and private are at work in biblical analysis has been briefly examined here but will be taken up at more length in the next chapter. An example of language that is very explicit about this dichotomy is Naomi Steinberg's statement that "role behavior for men is localized primarily in the public sphere; where the interests of the public and private sphere overlap, men are the chief actors. Women's role behavior is confined to the private sphere of society." Naomi Steinberg, "Gender Roles in the Rebekah Cycle," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 39 (1984): 185. See also Michael Patrick O'Connor, "The Women in the Book of Judges," *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986): 279, for another example of this view.

domestic roles have concluded that Esther is a typical woman, an embodiment of patriarchal norms. In some instances, such as Crawford's analysis, we found that Esther is typical but that this is not necessarily a view with which the author sympathizes. Yet some scholars have found Esther to be exceptional, one who is able to defy the expectations and act in the public sphere, violating gender norms. The argument that we shall pursue here is that either one of these poles is inherently problematic, because both are grounded in the faulty assumption that there were separate and gendered spaces to which men and women were ordinarily restricted. Rather, this work will pursue the thesis that social expectations, including the way that gender is configured, are fluid and far more subtle than this paradigm implies.