The Comedy of *Esther*

Understanding the Book of *Esther* Through Affirming, Hostile and Transformative Theories of Humor

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Abstract

The book of *Esther* has widely been acknowledged as a comedy by many scholars. Yet of those who have studied the book's humor none have examined *Esther* using more than one understanding of how comedy functions. This thesis addresses that gap by applying multiple contemporary theories of humor to the book of *Esther* to elicit different interpretations of the text.

The introduction to this thesis first outlines contemporary theories of humor and organizes them into three categories that describe the relationship between the humorist and the object of humor. I have named these categories affirming humor, hostile humor and transformative humor. The first chapter identifies elements of the story that contain humorous or comic traits so as to provide context for the application of the theoretical interpretations. Each of the following chapters of the thesis then apply the three categories of humor theories to these parts of the story and explain the interpretive implications for the book as a whole. Finally, the conclusion examines the method employed in the paper so that it may be replicated and applied to other comic biblical texts.

This thesis provides a new hermeneutic of humor and demonstrates the wide range of interpretive possibilities for any single text. While some theories provide better explanations for the comedy in a text than others, the breadth of meanings elicited from the text through this hermeneutical approach create an expanding body of Torah.

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Introduction

Laughter exists as a universal human phenomenon. But why do we laugh? Do we all laugh for the same reasons? What purpose does laughter serve? The complexity underlying the function of humor led many thinkers in the 20th century to theorize answers to these questions. These scholars developed theories to explain how humor functions and why it sometimes elicits laughter and sometimes fails to do so. In each theory of humor its advocates posit a different relationship between the humorist and the object of humor and explain how that dynamic can lead to laughter. Although they understand this relationship dynamic differently humor theorists collectively provide a range of interpretations and meanings that can be made of a comic work.

A number of scholars of humor have focused their attention more specifically on understanding the function of humor in the Hebrew Bible. Existing research in this realm largely has one of two aims: either it proves the presence of humor in the sacred text *or* it analyzes a pericope within the canon according to a particular theory of humor. Yet definitive claims about the function of the humorist and the object of humor fail to capture the breadth of interpretive possibilities that elicit laughter. By unintentionally limiting the function of humor the theories of individual thinkers illuminate only a small portion of the Hebrew Bible's humorous potential. Each author explains only one way to understand the power dynamics in the story. When one applies all of these theories to a single comical work a more robust explanation of humor emerges as does a more complex understanding of the characters in the text and the meaning of the text itself.

No current research applies multiple theories of humor to a particular text to understand different hermeneutical approaches. This thesis analyzes *Esther*, a biblical text widely recognized as a comedy, through multiple theoretical lenses. In the course of my analysis, I use a broad range of theories to reveal an array of different meanings of the text. In modeling a new hermeneutic of humor, this study expands the interpretive possibilities of *Esther*.

As a committed Jew, I am invested in the concept of a living Torah that constantly reveals new insights and wisdom and can be read with innovative approaches. It is my hope that this thesis will contribute to the ever expanding body of Torah by encouraging other readers of biblical text to respond to my analysis of *Esther* with additional interpretations and to apply the method outlined in the conclusion to other sections of the Bible.

As noted above, some scholars have laid the foundation for this thesis in their work on understanding humor in the Hebrew Bible. In *The Bible and the Comic Vision*, biblical scholar William Whedbee presents exemplary texts that reveal humor rather than "attempting an exhaustive cataloguing and analysis of every conceivable comic form in the Bible."[1] In this process, he identifies comic elements within each text and analyzes them according to a theory or type of humor which he believes to be most appropriate for the particular text. Yet he also acknowledges that many different forms of humor exist throughout the Bible. Whedbee notes, "the Bible revels in a profoundly ambivalent laughter, a divine and human laughter that by turns is both mocking and joyous, subversive and celebrative, and finally, a laughter that results in an exuberant and transformative comic vision."[2] He suggests that any

[1] William Whedbee, *The Bible and the Comic Vision*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 11.
[2] Whedbee, 4.

given text within the Bible does not encompass all of these traits but that the canon as a whole contains examples of them all.

Furthering Whedbee's work in this field Hershey Friedman develops a full but not exhaustive list of incidents of biblical comedy. He organizes them according to the genre which he believes best characterizes a particular text: "sarcasm, irony, wordplay, humorous names, humorous imagery and exaggeration, and humorous situations."[3] While he provides a less in-depth analysis of each incident than Whedbee, Friedman follows Whedbee's existing model of naming for the reader how the comedy functions.

Sandra Berg writes an exhaustive analysis of humor in *Esther* in her work *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure*. She understands *Esther* to be a carnivalesque comedy which lightheartedly mocks authority and social structures. Like Whedbee and Friedman, she predetermines which understanding of humor best explains the text and presents a single interpretation to readers.

In *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, Adele Berlin provides a unique addition to these scholars by alluding to different possible forms of humor found in *Esther*. Yet she stops short of explaining the interpretive implications of these forms on the meaning of the book overall.

This thesis is indebted to Whedbee, Friedman, Berg and Berlin for their contributions to understanding and explaining the ways humor operates in biblical contexts. Building on their contributions I will show that a single narrative within the Hebrew Bible can reveal multiple possible meanings depending on the theory one applies to the text to understand it.

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[3] Hershey Friedman, "Humor in the Hebrew Bible?" *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 13.3 (2000): 258.

The cadre of scholars who articulate theories of humor are thus essential for the method employed in this thesis. Their theories provide the tools of analysis that I apply to the book of *Esther* in the coming chapters. While each thinker presents unique elements in his or her theory I believe that there are three overarching categories into which the theories can be placed. Each category incorporates those theories that articulate similar relationships between the humorist and the object of the humor. One engaging in humor may choose to affirm an object, destroy it, or do some combination of the two. The categories of humor theories that I present reflect these three potential approaches: the first raises the object, the second is hostile toward the object, the third intends to transform the object altogether. The underlying theme of power resounds through each of these relationships between the joke teller and her object. In positing different explanations for how power dynamics shift (or remain unchanged) each group of writers has a very different understanding of the role of power in humor.

Affirming Humor

Mikhail Bakhtin presents a theory in which, on a basic level, an exploration of medieval carnival traditions reveals an attack on societal hierarchies through temporary role reversals and equalizing measures that disregard social and economic status.[4] Yet these attacks ultimately do not actually intend to disrupt hierarchies. The temporary release provided by this type of humor that he identifies as carnivalesque affirms the existing social, political, and economic strata in French society. By liberating themselves from existing social constraints in controlled settings through humor participants in carnival function as the

[4] Mikhail Bakhtin examined the depiction of pre-Lenten carnival as depicted by the medieval French writer Francois Rabelais (1494-1553) in his book *Rabelais and His World* published in 1968.

main humorist; their actions illustrate an affirmation of the role that power structures have every other day in their lives.

As Bakhtin notes in his analysis, the object of the joke at which their laughter is directed often takes the form of royalty, nobility, or the Church. While these institutions experience a momentary lapse in authority during carnival their authority is actually strengthened once carnival concludes and pent up tensions or frustrations aimed at them have been alleviated through humor and they no longer pose a threat. Bakhtin explains, "This laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives."[5] Through the affirming humor of carnival people have a legitimate venue to express their angst without actually challenging any power. Carnival serves to affirm existing power dynamics between the humorist and the object of the humor.

Bakhtin's theory of carnivalesque humor also functions to make light of the human condition by deriding death and the body. Bakhtin notes that the fear of death causes deep anxieties in most people and that the fragile nature of the human body exemplifies those fears. People lack control in their lives to overcome sickness and mortality. Carnivalers defeat the existential fear of mortality and the limitations of bodily existence for a distinct period of time and release their anxieties through humor. They personify death as a defeated monster and trivialize the functions of the body. As with the temporary challenges to authority and existing social structures, overcoming death and bodily limitations releases anxiety. Carnival humor allows for a return to and affirmation of the power these byproducts of life have once the festival concludes. The defeat of mortality during carnival is fleeting.

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[5] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968) 11-12.

Dan Ben Amos presents an alternative explanation of humor that, like Bakhtin's theory, also affirms the object of the joke. Unlike Bakhtin, who claims that humor empowers the peasant class for an isolated period of time, Ben Amos posits that humor provides a means for social differentiation within a group. People in a given society or a subgroup of society use humor to draw or strengthen boundaries with other groups of people even if they are perceived by some to be of the same group. For example, mainstream Protestant denominations may appear to non-Protestants to be quite similar but jokes that highlight humorous distinctions of one denomination from another create a more diverse picture of Protestantism. According to Ben Amos' theory, this self-differentiation places no value judgment on an in-group or on an out-group but rather reveals internal segmentation. As he explains with regard to the Jewish community,

> Joke-telling is a verbal expression which manifests social differentiation. The fact that Jews tell jokes about each other demonstrates not so much self-hatred as perhaps their internal segmentation of their society. The recurrent themes of these anecdotes are indicative of areas of tension within Jewish society itself rather than the relations with outside groups.[6]

For Ben Amos, comedy affirms the unique identity of the group of the object of humor without attempting to transform roles or status in society. His theory maintains existing group structures and does not actively challenge existing power dynamics but it does attempt to draw greater attention to the nuances and tensions among and within groups of people.

Even though Ben Amos acknowledges internal group tensions he clearly articulates that the joke teller has no intention to harm or disempower the object of the joke. He roots the affirming nature of humor in biblical theology (a notion supported by the research of Hershey Friedman) in which God's chastisement in the Hebrew Bible expresses God's love

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[6] Dan Ben Amos, "The 'Myth' of Jewish Humor," *Western Folklore*. 32.2 (1978): 130.

for the Jewish people.[7] If God expresses favor toward Jews in the Bible through mocking or scolding, Jews can also express their unique status through the same means. The possibility of deprecation and affirmation in one act becomes a model for Jews to use in their humor.[8] In making light of themselves Jews imitate God's special love for them. According to Ben Amos, humor does not seek to alter any existing relationship or power dynamic; instead, it seeks to affirm the relationships and distinctions that are already present.

Hostile Humor

Other thinkers believe that the relationship between the humorist and the object of the humor lacks the affirming quality that Bakhtin and Ben Amos articulate. Instead, they posit that humor intends to demean and disempower the object of the joke. In these theories, which I categorize as "hostile humor," the humorist intends to alter existing power dynamics by asserting herself at the expense of the object.

Christie Davies responds to Ben Amos' theory by rejecting the idea of a complete absence of hostility in ethnic joke-telling. Davies claims that Ben Amos overlooks the kind of humor directed against outside groups that is not for the purpose of self-differentiation. As he explains, "Those who belong to minority or peripheral ethnic groups tell jokes both about the majority group *and* about their own group."[9] He rejects Ben Amos' argument that the motivation of the humorist is self-differentiation when the humor is directed to an external object. Additionally, Davies imbues internally directed humor with an element of hostility that Ben Amos does not believe to be present.

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[7] Friedman, 259.
[8] Ben Amos, 115.
[9] Christie Davies, "Exploring the thesis of the self-deprecating Jewish sense of humor," *Humor*. 4.2 (1991): 190.

> Individual members of minority groups can and do enjoy humor directed at *other* members of their own group, including at times superiority humor and aggressive humor, though in very different ways and under *very different* circumstances from those postulated by the upholders of the masochistic self-hatred thesis.[10]

Self-differentiation as presented by Davies acts as more hostile and less neutral than as presented by Ben Amos because of his inclusion of a sense of superiority and aggression.

As the first thinker to construct a theory of hostile humor Sigmund Freud posits an inherently aggressive relationship between the humorist and the object of her humor. The humorist intends to alter her existing relationship with the object by asserting superiority and power at the expense of the object. In order to transform power dynamics effectively Freud believes in the necessity of a witness to see and legitimate the shifting relationship dynamic. Freud believes that the most complex form of humor (which he identifies as a joke) requires the participation of three parties not two. He explains that "everything in jokes that is aimed at gaining pleasure is calculated with an eye to the third person (the witness), as though there were internal and insurmountable obstacles to it in the first person (the joke-teller)."[11] The humorist requires not only the object but also a witness to validate the assertion of power over the object. The joke provides the joke-teller power over the object of the joke through the acknowledgment of the witness.

Though he requires three parties Freud's theory of humor is flexible in its assignment of roles. The literal object of the joke may not be the actual object under threat. As Freud notes,

> the disguised aggressiveness has been directed against *people*.... But the object of the joke's attack may equally well be institutions, people in their

[10] Davies, 191.
[11] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989) 190.

> capacity as vehicles of institutions, dogmas of morality or religion, views of life which enjoy so much respect that objections to them can only be made under the mask of a joke and indeed of a joke concealed by its façade.[12]

In other words, a joke's aim is hostile. Specifically regarding Jewish humor Freud believes that both non-Jewish society and Jewish culture can be the object of Jewish humor even if the named object in the joke is an individual Jew. When the literal object of the joke and the object of hostility are different, the result is a subtle attack on the latter. Applying Freud's theory to Jewish ethnic jokes, Arthur Asa Berger explains that "it's a sense of superiority, not masochism, that is the subtext of much Jewish humor."[13] Jewish jokes tend to elicit a subtle negativity toward non-Jews and non-Jewish society and thereby uplift Jewish culture and individuals. Even as humor may seem explicitly hostile and internally directed Freud argues that the hostility is subtle and externally oriented.

Terrence Des Pres presents a conception of humor in which the humorist is openly hostile to its object. He writes that "[humor] deflates or even cancels the authority of its object."[14] For Des Pres, the nature of the object does not matter. Whether its sharp-edged intent is directed at a person, a norm, or a social hierarchy humor exercises power over that object in a hostile and subversive fashion. Humor exalts the joke-teller by destroying the object. Des Pres' model needs no witnesses because the teller and the witness are the same; the teller seeks the acknowledgement of a transformed power relationship only from him or herself.

This conception of humor may seem excessively hostile to those who see the pleasure derived from laughter as the central objective of humor. Yet for Des Pres, laughter functions

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[12] Freud, 129.
[13] Arthur Asa Berger, *The Genius of the Jewish Joke.* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2006) xxii.
[14] Terrence Des Pres, "Holocaust Laughter," *Writing and the Holocaust,* ed. Berel Lang. (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1988) 220.

not to elicit pleasure but to enact revenge. "Laughter is hostile to the world it depicts and subverts the respect on which representation depends."[15] A post-Holocaust writer Des Pres described the psychic need to affirm agency and power as a response to abject powerlessness. No realistic or serious depiction of the Holocaust could explain the atrocities committed or do justice to the victims. Memoirs and non-fiction serve more to codify the power of evil by recounting its successes. For Des Pres, only humor has the power to imbue the powerless with agency. In subverting the power of Auschwitz with humor Des Pres' theory rejects the power of oppression.

Theodor Adorno also constructs a theory of humor in response to the Holocaust. He too arrives at the conclusion that humor is a hostile enterprise. In an essay related to art after Auschwitz, he argues that "humor has turned into polemical parody." [16] Yet his language hints that humor is not inherently hostile and that at some point in the past it was not polemical. He explains that humor "finds a temporary refuge as long as it remains unreconciled, taking no notice of the concept of reconciliation once allied to the concept of humor."[17] Though he reaches the same conclusion as Des Pres about the hostile nature of humor Adorno reveals also the potential for humor to have a reconciled relationship to its object. While he points to a transformation in the relationship between the humorist and the object of humor Adorno believed reconciliation between the teller and the object could have been available at one time. Yet, "because Auschwitz was possible and remains possible, lighthearted art is no longer conceivable."[18] For Adorno, the existence of Auschwitz fundamentally altered reality because of the egregious evil it proved to be feasible in the

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[15]Des Pres, 219.
[16] Theodor Adorno, "Is Art Lighthearted?" *Notes to Literature Volume 2*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann. (New York: Columbia UP, 1992) 251.
[17] Adorno, 251.
[18] *Ibid.*

world. Thus, the potential for reconciliation between the humorist and the object no longer exists. After 1945 the relationship can only find its basis in hostility.

While Adorno and Des Pres write very specifically about humor in response to National Socialism their theories of humor have the potential to speak to all situations in which those who were oppressed seek to regain authority and control over their oppressors. Both theorists look to humor as the most effective tool through which former victims can assert themselves and exercise power.

Transformative Humor

Between hostile humor that seeks to disempower the object and affirming humor which seeks to reinforce existing power dynamics rest theories of transformative humor. These approaches seek to alter the relationship between the humorist and the object of the humor but not at the expense of the object. In Henri Bergson's theory of humor, the humorist creates some discomfort for the object in order to bring about a transformation in power but that discomfort is not hostile. He writes in his study of humor that "indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion."[19] By removing emotion from the realm of humor, Bergson eliminates hostility as a motivation of the humorist. One engages in humor not to destroy the object but rather to correct it in a conscious "utilitarian aim of general improvement."[20] Stefan Horlacher explains Bergson's theory further: "In a positive sense, laughter serves to revitalize and to demechanize the individual. It is less a sign of superiority on the part of those doing the laughing than it is a

[19] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*, trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell. (Lexington: Wildside Press, 2008) 6.
[20] Bergson, 13.

reaching out, an attempt to save the individual and to reconnect him or her to life."[21] Horlacher's characterization slightly overstates the redemptive intent of Bergson's theory as the object still suffers discomfort. The laughter helps redeem the object only when the object gains self-awareness on account of the laughter and initiates a process of self-improvement. The laughter itself does not improve or redeem the individual. Instead, it causes a pain that motivates the object to transform. In Bergson's theory, there exists an underlying theme of morality. He articulates that a more just and moral society is the intended outcome of transformative humor. By transforming the object through humor, the object becomes a better participant in society and thereby has the potential to improve society overall.

Northrop Frye's theory of humor follows Bergson. Frye also claims that humor ridicules a lack of self-knowledge for a greater social good (which he identifies as social reconciliation).[22] However, Frye's formula lacks the moral intent that one may correctly read into Bergson's theory. Frye sees morality in the form of a greater responsibility to and for others as a societal constraint that oppresses the individual. He believes that humor instead offers "deliverance from moral bondage" by expanding the freedom of the individual. [23] Reconciliation between humorist and object happens through increasing acknowledgement of individual freedom not through recognition of societal responsibility.

Jefferson Chase, like Frye, acknowledges the moral neutrality of humor. As he explains in his analysis of humor in 19th century German Jewish writers, "Humor thus emerges as a political free agent, equally available for attacking or enhancing the authority of

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[21] Stefan Horlacher. "A Short Introduction to Theories of Humour, the Comic and Laughter," *Gender and Laughter: Comic Affirmation and Subversion in Traditional and Modern Media*, ed. Gaby Pailer, Andreas Böhn, Stefan Horlacher, and Ulrich Scheck. (New York: Rodopi, 2009) 31.
[22] Northrop Frye, "The Argument of Comedy," *Theories of Comedy*, ed. Paul Lauter. (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1964) 94.
[23] Frye, 94.

an existing social order."[24] The transformative power of humor for Chase is not inherently good or bad. In his analysis of a particular form of humor, the German-Jewish joke (*Judenwitz*), he understands this humor as a bid for the mastery of discourse in a fragmented German society. Those engaged in the endeavor sought not to undermine German society but rather to participate in and mold it to allow for their inclusion. The humor was agitating but not destructive. The primary intent of the humorist in Chase's theory is societal transformation, which is an expression of power but not necessarily an expression of morality.

Feminist scholar Eileen Gillooly's analysis of humor makes transformative humor appear subtle and nonthreatening to its purported object.[25] Humor retains a hostile element but does not direct it against the object explicitly in the narrative. The witness to the humor has empathy for the narrative's object and directs the aggression "outward, against 'reality,' narratively represented by externalized and internalized figures of authority and by cultural expectations."[26] The object in the narrative is not the object of humor's hostility. Instead the societal constructs themselves become the targets of hostility.

Gillooly challenges the idea that humor is intended to disempower the object as it does in what Freud names a "tendentious" joke.[27] Instead, the humor causes the reader to empathize with the powerless object in the narrative and undermine the social structures that lead to a lack of agency for the object. This moral approach ultimately leads to less harm

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[24] Jefferson Chase, *Inciting Laughter: The Development of 'Jewish Humor' in Nineteenth Century German Culture.* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1999) 10.
[25] Eileen Gillooly, *Smile of Discontent: Humor, Gender, and Nineteenth-Century British Fiction.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999) 18.
[26] Gillooly, 27.
[27] Freud, 107.

committed against the object in the narrative. It is worthwhile to quote Gillooly at length in order to understand this complicated dynamic.

> While the goal then of the tendentious joke (Freud) is the release of aggression against the other, the aim of humor is the avoidance of pain and distress for the self. Yet such avoidance, however purely defensive it may seem, has in feminine humor a combative component as well, aimed not at the Other but at the Law – the authority of the 'situation' – in relation to which one feels childlike and powerless. Rather, that is, than providing momentary release from social inhibitions as tendentious jokes do, feminine humor functions as a sustained, if diffusive, undercover assault upon the authority of the social order itself. Rather than disparaging otherness in an attempt to establish superiority over it, such humor mocks the cultural construction of femininity in order to reduce its psychological power.[28]

Gillooly's feminist theory of humor gives power to women by rebuking society's conception of femininity. This humor improves the ability of the would-be victim to function under existing circumstances and affirms her agency in spite of attacks against it. The lack of aggression does not render the approach weak or ineffective. On the contrary, Gillooly claims that her approach trumps more overtly hostile theories of humor by providing a sustained transformation for the joke-teller instead of a momentary victory. The ultimate goal of Gillooly's theory of humor is to transform the object's perception of her own power permanently.

While Gillooly and Bergson understand the potential transformation brought through humor as inherently good and moral in its ability to address wrongs in society, Frye and Chase understand humor to be morally neutral. Yet all of these thinkers agree that humor transforms the power dynamics in the relationship between the humorist and the object of humor without explicit hostility.

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[28] Gillooly, 24.

To summarize, the theories of each thinker fall into the following categories; a discussion of each of will comprise the major content of this work:

Affirming Humor	**Hostile Humor**	**Transforming Humor**
Bakhtin Ben Amos	Freud Adorno Des Pres Davies Berger	Bergson Frye Chase Gillooly

In this study, I devote a chapter to each type of humor and apply the specific nuances and intricacies of each theory to the book of *Esther*. Because some theories provide stronger explanations for the humor contained in the text than others, I also evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the theory's application. However, these evaluations are not intended to convince the reader of the merit of one perspective over another. This thesis is founded upon the notion that a multiplicity of meanings in the text is not only possible but essential. In applying modern literary theories of humor to *Esther*, I intend not only to reveal the hermeneutical import of humor on interpretation but also to provide a meaningful lens through which contemporary audiences with varying perspectives can relate to the biblical text.

The Comedy of *Esther*

ובכל מדינה ומדינה ובכל עיר ועיר מקום אשר דבר המלך ודתו מגיע שמחה וששון ליהודים משתה ויום טוב ורבים מעמי הארץ מתיהדים כי נפל פחד היהודים עליהב

And in every province and in every city, when the king's command and decree arrived, there was gladness and joy among the Jews, a feast and a holiday. And many of the people of the land professed to be Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them. (Esther 8:17)[29]

Throughout history, Jews have developed vast libraries of interpretation of the texts of the Hebrew Bible. A single verse and sometimes even a single word reveal dozens of different meanings for all texts including the book of *Esther*. Until recently, however, little research has been done to find humor in the Bible. In his book about the Bible and its comic vision, William Whedbee notes the unfortunate fact that "centuries of liturgical and theological use of the Bible have helped to obscure and largely exclude a vital role for comedy and humor in biblical literature and religion." [30] Many people, religious and secular, have perceived religiosity and solemnity as one and the same. They see humor as antithetical to religious tradition and to scripture. "As a consequence," writes Whedbee, "the rich, variegated history of the Bible's multiple roles in Western culture shows at best ambiguous encounters between the Bible and comedy."[31] Attention to the role of humor in the Bible is a relatively recent phenomenon and one that has tended to be more academically based. Even as academics have begun to explore the role of humor, the implications of such research largely have not been integrated by most readers in their biblical interpretation. The biblical book of *Esther* and the Jewish holiday of Purim that celebrates its plot with a day of festival

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[29] All translations of biblical excerpts use the translation of the 2003 *Jewish Publication Society Hebrew-English TaNaKh.*
[30] Whedbee, 2.
[31] *Ibid.*

remind us of the possibility of compatibility between religiosity and laughter. In this chapter, I will make a case for the integral nature of humor to the sacred book of *Esther*, provide examples from the text of that humor, and explain how those examples function

While distinct categories and clearly defined roles typically define Jewish legal tradition, Jews around the world disregard traditional social norms for a day of holy law-subverting celebration on Purim. People dress in costume. Some observant men violate the prohibition against dressing as a woman with the blessing of the tradition for this one exceptional day. People drink heavily as part of their religious obligation. They stomp, yell, use musical instruments, and make noise during the usually solemn public reading of scripture. To those who usually associate religious observance with notions of decorum and propriety, this picture seems contradictory. The lightheartedness of the festival celebrating the humor of Purim undermines Charles Baudelaire's claim that "Holy Books never laugh, to whatever nations they belong."[32] But Jews have forgotten to transfer the experience of humor from Purim to *Esther* itself.

Esther's comic integrity extends far beyond its association with the festival of Purim. Some scholars claim that the book of *Esther* primarily explains the origins of an annual celebration already in existence. As religion scholar Carey Moore notes, "the secular character of the festival [which specifies neither prayer nor sacrifice] as well as the worldly manner in which the festival could be celebrated... argue for its pagan origins."[33] According to Moore and the scholarly approach he represents, the annual festival preceded the book and the author only wrote *Esther* to place the festival within the boundaries of acceptable Jewish

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[32] As quoted in Whedbee, 1. Original: Charles Baudelaire, "On the Essence of Laughter, and in General on the Comic in the Plastic Arts," in *Comedy: Meaning and Forum*, Robert Corrigan, ed. (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965) 455.

[33] Carey A. Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther*. (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1982) xxx.

praxis. Religious authorities may not have had the power to prevent debauchery among the masses but they could channel the activity to enhance religious piety rather than diminish it. Yet the claim that the story serves simply as a festal etiology falls short. In her dissertation published by the Society for Biblical Literature Sandra Berg claims, "If the story was intended to explain and legitimate Purim, the narrator devotes a surprisingly small effort toward his task. The festival is mentioned specifically only in *Esther* 9:28-32 and alluded to only in *Esther* 3:7 and 9:24. These passages themselves may reflect secondary additions to the text."[34] While the text does dictate the celebration of a festival, the literary work appears to have existed separate us from any such associations in its early development.

While excesses and absurdities abound in the book of *Esther* they do not explain the excesses and absurdities that elicit laughter on the holiday of Purim. The book does not simply outline the details of ancient festival and invite readers to replicate the experience; it couches humorous points and characters throughout the serious plot of an attempted annihilation of the Jewish population of Persia. The text weaves the pieces intended to make us laugh so deeply and thoroughly into its literary fabric that the story itself loses layers of meaning if one does not have an understanding of its comedic function. One cannot claim laughter as the sole goal of the text but neither can one claim laughter as a superfluous layer.

We face even greater obstacles in understanding *Esther*'s sense of humor than an interpretive history lacking a focus on the function of comedy in the text. The millennia that have passed between the writing of the book of *Esther* and our present time obscure our ability to partake in the laughter inherent in the text. Sigmund Freud notes that "a great number of the jokes in circulation have a certain length of life: their life runs a course made

[34] Sandra Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure.* (Ann Arbor: Scholars Press, 1977) 3.

up of a period of flowering and a period of decay and it ends in complete oblivion."[35] The resonance of any form of comedy relies upon understanding the context in which it is told. If the audience does not share the assumptions made by the joke the meaning of the joke evades them. They may understand that the joke intends to elicit laughter but they may not find it humorous themselves. As is often true true in the case of the Bible biblical humor is so distant to the audience that they do not even recognize that a joke is being told.

To solve this problem, one must explain the context of the joke to enable the audience to understand how it functions and how humor shapes the meaning of the story. Freud would object that adding such commentary actually kills its humor.[36] Jokes do not make us laugh when the teller has to explain why the joke is funny. If Freud is right then the endeavor of understanding biblical humor appears to be futile. Readers of the text find themselves in a paradox: they cannot understand the Bible's humor without filling in the details of historical and cultural context but the humor is lost as soon as one has to explain that context.

I challenge the absolute nature of Freud's claim. I believe that a joke can still invoke laughter even after a need for explanation and even after multiple tellings. I am reminded of the 2005 movie *The Aristocrats* in which over 100 comedians tell the same joke with his or her own interpretive lens. A number of comedians throughout the film even offer an explanation of what they believe makes the joke funny but the explanation does not prevent the audience from laughing at the next rendition of the joke. Each unique comedic style and embellishment allow the audience to laugh at the same joke repeated again and again. Freud may be right that simply explaining a joke and telling it again in exactly the same way

[35] Freud. 151.
[36] *Ibid.*

inevitably diminishes the ability to incite laughter but he neglects the role that interpretation can play in revitalizing humor.

In Jewish tradition, scripture invites interpretation and, in so doing, presents a path to overcome the obstacle of the need to explain a joke. Those who read the Bible do require an explanation of the role that humor plays in scripture. But the infinite nature of opportunities for different meanings allows for a constant rejuvenation of the humor. This analytical mechanism allows the comic elements of Purim, including the recitation of the text itself, to invoke laughter year after year. The humor inherent in the book and the interpretive nature of scripture allows the community to transcend those limitations of comedy that would typically prevent a contemporary audience from experiencing the humor in an ancient literary work.

To ensure our ability as readers of the biblical text to transcend the limitations of historic context, I must first identify the comic elements of *Esther* that likely would have been humorous to an ancient audience. I find myself compelled to violate Freud's caution against explaining humor. The foundation of knowledge provided here will enable a contemporary audience to connect to the ancient humor of the text. The comedic tools of excess, absurdity and inversion used millennia ago by *Esther*'s author still have the power to invoke laughter in us today albeit with some explanation.

The book opens with a feast in the Persian royal court absurd in both its duration and extravagance (1:1-9). Several verses describe the decadence of the food, ambiance, and size of the feast which serves as an unusual focus for a story in which the core of the plot takes place outside the confines of the feast. The deliberate attention to detail invites readers to imagine merriment draped in gold and silver enhanced by unending supplies of wine and

countless attending stewards. The author's intense focus on the detail of extravagance was designed deliberately to draw the reader's attention to absurd excess. This piece of ancient text might be analogous to an opening scene of a movie featuring a shameless party complete with keg stands, blasting music, and stumbling drunks. Both settings help their respective audiences anticipate a series of thoughtless acts that will inspire laughter and set the stage for even more absurd behavior.

The characters do not disappoint the audience in providing such foolish behavior in *Esther*. The most powerful man in the kingdom – the king himself – lacks control in his marriage and transforms a minor family matter into an affair of state (1:19-21). When his wife Vashti disobeys the order for her to dance at the king's feast, a court official suggests a royal edict to prevent the queen from appearing before the king. Vashti's punishment ironically fulfills that which she initially desired: she no longer must appear before her husband. Moreover, the court proclaims the edict against Vashti throughout the king's territories with the goal of preventing wives from despising their husbands. In so doing, the edict publicizes the king's power struggles in his own marriage to all of his subjects.

The author does not just make individuals the target of laughter. Persian bureaucracy displays a comic efficiency even for insignificant matters (1:22). An assembly line of communication translates the initial royal edict into the native tongue of each province before it releases messengers to proclaim to every male subject in the kingdom that he should wield authority in his home. While the edict itself appears to be something of a non-sequitor in legislating the domestic relationships of the entire kingdom its additional line, that a man should be able to speak the language of his own people, appears even more absurd and unrelated to anything significant in the storyline (1:22). Whedbee explains that "beneath the

apparent efficiency and stability of the kingdom, a spirit of excess rules which becomes a case of comic misrule."[37] The Persian bureaucracy may prove efficient in its enactment of legislation but the private subject matter of such public legislation and the importance it is given in its dissemination invite the reader to laugh at the court.

These comic mishandlings by the Persian hierarchy early in the story set the stage for more egregious rule later in the narrative. The kingdom that allows absurd edicts eventually allows the absurdity to turn genocidal. When the king's highest official Haman becomes incensed at the refusal of the Jew Mordechai to bow before him he vows to kill all the Jews (3:6). Such a hypberbolic reaction does not seem entirely out of place after the hyperbolic response of the king to Vashti.

The absurdity of punishing an entire people for the actions of one, however, may feel less comical to the reader because its mirror in reality feels all too familiar. The notion of collective punishment unfortunately finds foundation in ancient and contemporary societies alike. We are all familiar with examples of false accusations, hatred and violence directed against particular ethnic groups. Yet when one divorces real-life tragedies that result from such faulty reasoning, one could consider the reasoning itself laughable. As noted above about feasting people tend to laugh at absurdities and excess. While deeply disturbing genocidal hated is both absurd and excessive and therefore has the features of humor even as its gravity prevents audiences from laughing.

Absurdity and excess are not the only comedic tools employed by the author. The unexpected inversions in the story have the potential to bring the audience to laughter by completely reversing the dynamics opening the story at the end. Whedbee reminds his reader that "the theme of reversal is key to the movement of the book.... [T]his thematic trajectory

[37] Whedbee, 175.

of reversal follows the U-shaped plot-line so endemic to comedies."[38] When Whedbee uses the terminology of a "U-shaped plot-line" he refers to those stories in which the opening and conclusion look remarkably the same except for the fact that the characters in the story now occupy opposite roles. Those in power at the outset find themselves powerless. Those struggling at the beginning find themselves on top at the end. The transformation in the reality within the story is intended to surprise and delight audiences. Multiple inversions drive the plot of the book of *Esther*. Haman's hope to have honors lavished on him by the king results in his leading an honored Mordechai through the streets of Shushan (6: 6-11). The very man who led him to pursue a policy of genocide becomes the person he himself must honor. Much of the humor found in the book of *Esther* moves beyond lighthearted jabs and jokes to far more serious issues. The breach in expectation in the relationship between Haman and Mordecai that harms Haman's ego finds a darker parallel later in the story. The stake that Haman intended to use to impale Mordecai becomes the mechanism of his own death (7:10).

The same literary structure of inversion exists not just between Haman and Mordecai but also between Persians and the Jews as whole nations. The Persian feasts at the beginning of the story give way to Jewish feasts at the end. Again, just as with the relationship between Mordechai and Haman, there exists a darker inversion in the relationship between Jews and Persians. The day on which the Jews were to be massacred by Persians becomes the day on which Jews massacre Persians (9:6-17). The shift in feasting from Persians to Jews provides a benign comic inversion. The redirection of genocide in the story, however, turns the comic inversion in the relationship much deeper and far more complex.

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[38] Whedbee. 172.

This trend of inversion is further exemplified in the edicts that punctuate the story. The Jewish-initiated edicts at the end of the book overshadow the Persian-initiated edicts in the opening chapters. The illustration below shows the author's attention to detail in creating a U-shaped comic plot.

A Vashti Edict (1:13-22): Queen deposed

B Haman Edict (3:11-15): Annihilation of Jews/male defense

B_1 Mordechai Edict (8:9-14): Annihilation of Persians/Jewish defense

A_1 Esther Edict (9:13-16): Queen exercises power

One might legitimately question whether the absurd and vengeful violence of the Jews toward the end of the book could be considered funny. Justifying Haman's demise may prove to be an easier task but one would be hard-pressed to find moral justification (and thus permission to laugh) in the text for the destruction of 75,000 people throughout the Persian kingdom. The text says nothing about the Persian masses' desire to follow Haman's genocidal wishes. It indicates that even if the people once presented a danger to the Jews they no longer presented any threat. "And many of the people of the land professed to be Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them" (8:17). Still, the Jews killed 75,000 of those whom they despised (שנאיהם). How does Jewish tradition look to this graphic and gratuitous brutality as a source of celebration and joy? *Does* Jewish tradition look to this graphic and gratuitous brutality as a source of celebration and joy?

These will be among the questions examined by the remainder of this thesis. Having established the humor inherent to the book of *Esther* and having detailed examples of that humor I will apply different contemporary theories of humor to the book of *Esther* to

understand the multiplicity of meanings possible in the text. Understanding that the text has the power to make us laugh does not necessarily explain the purpose behind making us laugh. Each chapter reveals an entirely different interpretation of the book and presumes different motivations of the author in writing the text. Each chapter will provide a different explication for why and how *Esther* incites laughter.

Affirming Humor

As noted in the introduction, humor has the ability to function in contradictory ways. William Whedbee explains, "Paradoxically, comedy throughout the ages has oscillated between conservative and subversive tendencies, being used both to maintain the status quo and to undercut prevailing ideologies in the name of revolutionary and utopian goals."[39] Humor can either affirm existing institutions and beliefs or challenge the authority they hold in our lives. This chapter explores how the category of affirming humor with its conservative tendencies applies to the book of *Esther* and what meaning we can deduce from such interpretations of humor.

In order to understand how *Esther* can be interpreted with a lens of affirming humor, we must first understand what affirming humor is and how it functions. This category of humor earns its name because of its primary characteristic of affirming that which it satirizes. In our contemporary society, we encounter one form of this humor when we witness a roast. This form of comedy honors an individual through a series of tributes in which he or she is the butt of numerous jokes, comedic insults, and humorous stories. Professional public speaker and roastmaster Tom Antion notes that certain conditions must be met in order for an event to qualify as a roast. As he explains,

> Being roasted is an honor, but you must be careful to honor people while you are roasting them during a public speaking engagement.... When choosing the butt of a roast joke or story, pick big targets. Never make fun of a small target (janitor, secretary, etc.). Make fun of the boss. He or she is still the boss after all the teasing and will look like a great sport for going along with it.[40]

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[39] Whedbee, 9.

[40] Tom Antion, "Public Speaking: Roast Humor and Insults," *Advanced Public Speaking Institute.* http://www.public-speaking.org/public-speaking-roast-article.htm (Accessed February 4, 2011).

While the humor in a roast can appear demeaning or harsh, it has the ultimate purpose of raising the status of the object of that humor. In showing his or her compliance and acceptance of the comedy, the roastee appears to the audience to be resilient and good natured rather than weak and vulnerable. He or she allows a temporary suspension of status that ultimately strengthens or increases once it is reinstated after the roast. As an example of affirming humor, the roast *affirms* the power of the roastee.

The notion of affirming humor long preceded the contemporary incarnation of the roast. Early 20th century Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin examined the carnival experience described so vividly by the medieval write Rabelais. In his analysis, Bakhtin posits that the carnival actually serves to affirm the status and authority of those people and power structures that it satirizes. In this way, it functions much like a roast does in affirming the roastee as the object of humor. In this chapter, I will apply elements of his theory to the humor in the book of *Esther*.

When we apply Bakhtin's theory to *Esther*, we find that the foundational story for the celebration of Purim reinforces contemporary existing power structures of non-Jewish authorities ruling over Jews. Jews living as vulnerable minorities in the Diaspora laugh at non-Jewish authority on Purim and experience a temporary release of their existential anxieties. This release affirms existing powers insofar as it in turn enables Jews to live under those existing structures, even if those existing structures are oppressive, by reducing tension that might otherwise be released through violence or revolt. Through the carnival of Purim, Jews suspend the authority held by others over them for a brief moment, express the angst and rage born out of a constant state of oppression, and, ultimately, return to the exact same conditions the next day.

In the theory of carnival *Esther* must be understood primarily through the celebration of the holiday of Purim. While we noted the deficiencies of this approach for its lack of recognition of the comic integrity to the book of *Esther* itself, Bakhtin's theory is essential for understanding the significance of Purim. For one day a year many Jews create a utopian reality in which they have the power and ability not only to control their own fates but also to wield power over others. As Bakhtin explains about the function of such celebration, it

> ...was a temporary suspension of the entire official system with all its prohibitions and hierarchic barriers. For a short time life came out of its usual, legalized and consecrated furrows and entered the sphere of utopian freedom. The very brevity of this freedom increased its fantastic nature and utopian radicalism.[41]

Here, we see themes of both a social release provided by the experience of laughter and also the temporary nature of that release. Like a well-timed joke that cuts through a tense situation, Purim relieves an otherwise unceasing and unbearable tension for Jews. The story of *Esther* as the foundation for Purim provides a revenge fantasy that may have seemed unimaginable to most Jews in their historical, diasporic lives.

Esther and its ceremonial reenactment in Purim enable Jews from nearly all eras and lands to cope with a fundamentally precarious position in society. The anxieties that accompany life as a vulnerable minority without political sovereignty find relevance regardless of the empire or state that rules over Jews at any given time. In a Bakhtinian interpretation Jews in every age celebrate this story of genocidal revenge to provide temporary respite from their well-founded anxieties about their own safety and security. One need not embrace a lachrymose narrative of Jewish history to understand the power of a Bakhtinian sense of humor. Jews did endure tremendous suffering on account of their lack of

[41] Bakhtin, 89.

power in the Diaspora. From the Crusades to pogroms, *dhimmi* status to exorbitant taxation, forced conscription to expulsion, blood libels to ghettos, Jewish populations throughout history were vulnerable to the whim of those under whose power they lived.[42] True, Jewish culture and creativity have thrived throughout the Diaspora and the limitation of Jewish history to its tragic highlights fails to account for such achievements. But one cannot ignore the impact of the persecutions punctuating Jewish history. Even political sovereignty in the modern state of Israel has not fully alleviated Jewish anxiety over survival.

Understanding the psychological need filled by an affirming interpretation of *Esther*, we can now explore the specific elements of humor in *Esther* and the holiday of Purim that lend themselves to humor as understood by Bakhtin.

The book of *Esther* makes light of the fragility of Jewish existence and threats to the basic safety of Jews. In the story, Jews conquer the embodiment of that terror, Haman and his descendents who represent the would-be enactors of genocide. For the subjects of Bakhtin's reflections on carnival, the peasant population of medieval Europe, terror came not in the form of persecution that led to difficulty with basic survival but in the form of extreme difficulty associated with basic survival itself. Disease and early death were fixtures of the medieval European experience. So the peasants made the body and all its functions the

[42] These examples deserve explanation for each of the events listed. Under Islamic rule, Jews (and other religious minorities) held *dhimmi* status which refers to a second-class of citizenship that included regulations about distinctive dress, restrictions on public worship spaces, and higher levels of taxation. Throughout Europe during the medieval period, Jews were expelled from multiple kingdoms including England, Spain and Portugal. The blood libel is also a phenomenon from this period in which Jews were accused by Christians of kidnapping and killing Christian children in order to use their blood in preparing matzah for the celebration of Passover. During the medieval Crusades, Jewish communities throughout Europe were attacked as Crusaders traveled to Palestine to reclaim the territory from Islamic control. Beginning in the 16th century, when Jews did live in the same cities as non-Jews, they were often relegated to an enclosed Jewish quarter known as a ghetto with restrictions on their ability to enter and leave at certain times of the day. Pogroms were a later phenomenon primarily carried out in Christian-dominated regions in which violence erupted among non-Jewish masses toward Jews that led both to destruction of Jewish property and the murder of Jews. Young male Jews living in Imperial Russia were often kidnapped and conscripted into the Czar's army. They served for multiple decades as part of a state policy intended to de-Judaize the young men and integrate them into non-Jewish society.

object of laughter on carnival. Bakhtin dedicates several chapters in his work on Rabelais to descriptions of how medieval carnival relates to bodily functions. Dung, sex and urine as the lowly byproducts of physical existence moved from the private to the public realm where they could be collectively debased and temporarily conquered. As Bakhtin argues, "Terror was turned into something gay and comic."[43] People could face that those things which caused them to be afraid more readily knowing that there would be brief glimpses of triumph over them in the form of carnival. While people could not defeat the fear itself, they could defeat its comic incarnation by asserting themselves with a demeaning laughter. When we apply this theory to Purim, we see that Jews defeat their dread of persecution by publically decrying and blotting out the name of their enemy. They turn their consistent fear of physical and political violence onto a comically inept character and ritually demean and defeat him.

Bakhtin also explains that the dining aspect of feasting is an important element of an affirming humor. This expression in medieval carnival finds its parallel in the celebration of Purim when Jews are encouraged to consume to excess. Through the act of consumption, we instrumentalize elements of the world around us by molding them to be of use to us. We obtain strength and nourishment from the death of other organic matter. As Bakhtin explains,

> In the act of eating...the confines between the body and the world are overstepped by the body; it triumphs over the world, over its enemy, celebrates its victory, grows at the world's expense.... It is the triumph of life over death.... The victorious body receives the defeated world and is renewed.[44]

[43] Bakhtin, 39.
[44] Bakhtin, 283.

The dining component of feasting exaggerates the daily experience of power that we have through eating. This exaggeration was particularly striking in the largely impoverished Jewish diasporic experience in which the simple act of eating was a rejection of the hunger that threatened daily life. The presence of feasting both in the book of *Esther* and in the celebration of Purim adds an additional layer to the temporary assertion of Jewish power. The carnival holiday allows Jews with sufficient financial means to eat and drink to excess as an expression of agency uncharacteristic to their daily lives.

Thus far, we have focused on how carnival enables the defeat of those things which cause people to fear. In his understanding of affirming humor, however, Bakhtin highlights not only the temporary defeat of fear but he also notes the importance of suspending the norms of daily existence. These norms may not be seen as such extreme threats that require defeat; nevertheless, they create enough tension among participants in carnival that appears to necessitate a release.

In the book of *Esther*, Jews not only conquer their persecutors, they also wield power over their Persian host culture which is not implicated as a threat to Jewish security in the story. In so doing, Jews release a tension inherent in a hierarchy in which they do not assert much power. The Persian king is never depicted as a villain. Yet he becomes subject to the will of Esther and Mordechai as he relinquishes much of his governing authority to their control. The Persian population never poses a direct threat to the Jewish people either but the Jewish population in the story acts out in violence against their Persian neighbors with complete impunity. This imagined exercise of power completely alters the daily reality of Diasporic Jews.

In degrading powerful non-Jews in a narrative recited once a year Persian Jews act as proxies in their triumph over existing political structures. The comical king in the book of *Esther* represents all governments exerting control over Jews. The laughter directed at the idiosyncrasies of Persian culture represents laughter directed at the idiosyncrasies of the various cultural environments in which Jews live. Because the laughter on the surface seems directed at an ancient and obsolete context, it provides no direct threat to the authority under which Jews celebrating the story actually live. The laughter has the ability to transcend its ancient Persian focus to apply to other host cultures.[45] One day a year, Jews can release their anxieties over a powerless existence – imagining a power they have not possessed – so that every other day of the year the anxieties feel less consuming and they can go on sustaining the status quo of their marginal place in society. One must be cautious to distinguish between affirming the status quo which celebrates the existing conditions and accepting the status quo which simply tolerates them. Bakhtin's theory of humor does not cultivate a greater sense of affection toward existing authorities. This humor simply builds up an ability to endure the given reality. As Bruce Jones suggests, *Esther*'s purpose is

> in the reconciliation of Jewish audiences toward their minority status among gentiles whose attitudes toward Jews varied unpredictably from honor to persecution. It was the ability of the Jews to maintain their sense of humor in the face of adversity that enabled them to survive the perilous moments of their history.[46]

Throughout most of the diasporic experience for one night of the liturgical year, Jews chose to accept the precarious state of their minority existence with laughter. They chose laughter rather than risk defeat and annihilation through rebellion as the alternative release of the

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[45] Those academics who suggest that *Esther* was written under later Greek rule rather than under the eye of the Persian empire would be well served in embracing a Bakhtinian interpretation of the book.

[46] Quoted in Sandra Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (Ann Arbor: Scholars Press, 1977), 13.

constant tensions they felt with non-Jewish society. Physical revolt would have been a suicidal option for most Jewish communities, so, they chose laughter instead.

The fact that laughter substitutes for actual rebellion helps us understand why any authority would tolerate a carnival that makes it the object of humor. In Bakhtin's understanding of carnival, secular and religious authorities tolerate and embrace extreme breaches of social norms because they understand the dual function that those breaches played. As Bakhtin asserts, "Folly is, of course, deeply ambivalent. It has the negative element of debasement and destruction...and the positive element of renewal and truth."[47] The negative element creates the potential to suspend societal norms while the positive element reinstates and reinforces them. In the medieval Christian context, the Church and king found renewal in carnival by allowing all potential challenges to their authority comically release in a controlled setting. The day after carnival everything returned to normal. The brief egalitarian utopia of a carnival reinforced the normal truth of a suffering peasant existence asserts Bakhtin. The fervor with which people engaged in carnival allowed them to find temporary satisfaction and return to their more constant (and grim) reality. The same can be said of the function of Purim.

Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of carnival paved the way for later thinkers to provide additional constructs of affirming humor that also help us better understand the humor of *Esther*. Dan Ben Amos developed a theory about the uplifting nature of contemporary Jewish humor. In his understanding of jokes created by Jews about Jews he posits that such humor has no hostile intent. Instead, the humor differentiates Jews from one another socially. He writes, "The fact that Jews tell jokes about each other demonstrates not so much

[47] Bakhtin. 260.

self-hatred as perhaps the internal segmentation of their society."[48] Jewish culture is far from homogenous with many ethnic, ideological and religious subfactions existing in any single Jewish community. Outsiders may look into the Jewish community and see a monolithic entity with no distinction among its individual members. Inwardly directed humor challenges the non-Jewish tendency to group Jews together as one. Jewish humor rejects the internalization of the stereotypes and hatred of external groups by highlighting their internal differences.

This notion that humor can be used for social differentiation can apply even when not directed internally. Because humor can serve the purpose of social differentiation within a group, it can also serve that same purpose between one group and another. For this theory to apply successfully to the book of *Esther*, there must exist a perception that those two groups have a lot of traits in common so much so that they may be confused as one singular entity. If Persians could have been mistaken for Jews and Jews for Persians, then the book of *Esther* could have the objective of creating a more significant degree of differentiation between Jews and a host culture. In so doing, the text affirms a separate Jewish identity from the host culture without insulting that host culture. The humor which appears demeaning toward Persians on the surface level actually serves subtly to acknowledge the similarities between Persians and Jews by exaggerating the differences between the groups. If Ben Amos posits an internally directed Jewish humor for the sake of differentiation that does not entail self-ridicule, then one could posit an externally directed humor with the same objective. According to this analysis, the author of *Esther* intends to distinguish between separate group identities of Persians and Jews, not to demean Persians. The text does not intend to denigrate Persians by mocking them. It seeks to make them separate from Jews.

[48] Ben Amos. 129.

Several parts in the book of *Esther* indicate that little distinction existed between Jews and Persians and support the affirming theory of humor articulated by Ben Amos. For instance, one could not identify Esther as a Jew by appearance alone. "Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had told her not to reveal it" (2:10). Mordechai was also able to pass as Persian. When he refuses to bow to Haman, his Jewish identity is not immediately known. Haman has to be informed of Mordecai's heritage in order to identify him correctly as a Jew. "Haman was filled with rage. But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone *having been told* who Mordecai's people were, Haman plotted to do away with the Jews" (3:5-6).[49] Persians could also "pass" as Jews. When the violence shifted against the Persians many "passed" as Jews as 8:17 notes "many of the people of the land professed to be Jews."

Haman reinforces how integrated Jews are into larger Persian society when he tells the king, "[t]here is a certain people, scattered and dispersed among the other peoples in all the provinces of your realm" (3:8). While he claims that this people have different laws and do not obey the king's law, he provides no concrete examples. Jews may have had different laws but the text does not reveal anything that prevented them from dispersing invisibly among Persians.

The possibility of intermarriage between Persian and Jew reveals another indicator of a lack of social distance. The author of the book passes no judgment on Esther for marrying the Persian king nor on Mordecai for encouraging the union. Moreover, the public reaction to the decree to massacre the Jews indicates a closeness or at least a tolerance among Persians for Jews. "The courier went out posthaste on the royal mission, and the decree was proclaimed in the fortress of Shushan. The king and Haman sat down to feast, but the city of

[49] Emphasis mine.

Shushan was dumbfounded (נבוכה)" (3:15). The text indicates that Persians did not understand why their Jewish neighbors were the target of the violent decree.

Using Ben Amos' theory of humor, I suggest that one significant motivation of the author may have been to differentiate between Jew and Persian. If one endeavor in the Diaspora is to continue to exist as a distinct Jewish entity while still interacting economically, politically and socially with the non-Jewish host culture, then Jews need to retain some form of distinct identity. Humor offers one means of affirming a distinct Jewish identity. As Ben Amos notes, "Joke-telling is a verbal expression which manifests social differentiation."[50] In satirizing Persian culture and characters, the book of *Esther* distinguishes Persians from Jews to reinforce group boundaries.

Through the reenactment of this narrative on Purim, this interpretation would thus serve as a reminder to Jews living in the Diaspora that even if they feel little differentiation from their non-Jewish neighbor, distinction exists and ought to be remembered. The objective is not to demean the host culture and its people. Instead, the humor affirms the unique identity of the Jewish people.

Ben Amos goes to great lengths to remove any traces of hostility from his theory of humor. He reacts against an academic trend to understand Jewish humor as a masochistic form of self-denigration.[51] He claims that "the proverbial social cohesion of Jewish family and society generates a great deal of internal friction and reciprocal criticism, much of which is expressed through humor."[52] For Ben Amos, that friction and criticism does not equate to hostility; they are expected aspects of loving relationships. Jewish humor is not hostile

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[50] Ben Amos, 130.
[51] This trend of interpreting Jewish humor as masochistic became common among some psycho-analyst disciples of Freud who interpret the self-deprecating nature of much of Jewish humor to be hostile. See Avner Ziv, *Jewish Humor* (Tel Aviv: Papyrus Publishing House, 1998) 7.
[52] Ben Amos, 130.

toward Jews or even to non-Jews. Yet even when applied in that original context his theory forcefully explains away hostility in a way that is not entirely convincing.

In the book of *Esther* a plausible argument exists that Jews needed to cultivate more differentiation with their Persian neighbors. However, it is difficult to accept that this differentiation comes without any value judgment. One might plausibly accept the satirizing of Persian parties and the jabs at Persian bureaucracy as playful and lighthearted. But this interpretation would also require readers to view the megalomaniacal tendencies of Haman and the utter incompetence of the king as neutral means of differentiation as well as dismiss the murderous impulses of both groups as benign forms of humor. This neutral reading would have the unfortunate byproduct of diminishing any moral message that the book may contain.

Both Bakhtin and Ben Amos posit theories of humor that ultimately "affirm" something when applied to the book of *Esther*. Bakhtin's theory affirms existing social structures. Ben Amos' theory affirms the separateness of Jewish identity. But the similarity between these two theories ends there. Whereas Ben Amos obscures potential hostility, Bakhtin acknowledges it. The book of *Esther* does exhibit negativity toward Persian culture and people. Bakhtin's theory of humor allows for momentarily hostile actions acting out of hostility that ultimately create the space for Jews to accept the yoke of Persian rule and affirm the status quo of their minority status. Ben Amos' theory of humor ignores the hostile impulse toward Persians in a book that ultimately culminates with Jewish-initiated genocide of the Persian population.

When applied to the book of *Esther*, theories of affirming humor provide strong explanations for the carnival of Purim and why Jews have celebrated the plotline of the book

for millennia, but these theories fall short in providing a strong analysis of the text of *Esther* as anything other than a justification for celebrating Purim. To find an interpretation of humor that better respects the integrity of the humor found in the text itself, we will need to explore other categories of interpretive humor. In the next chapter, we will explore *Esther* through a lens of hostile humor.

Hostile Humor

Understanding the humor of *Esther* as affirming provides just one interpretive option. Applying theories that posit a more hostile form of humor to *Esther* suggests an entirely different meaning for the book. Affirming humor makes possible a reading in which the humorist and the object of humor can reconcile in their coexistence. Anxieties and tensions in their relationship find relief in the comedy. Hostile humor, however, has an entirely different objective. It seeks to exacerbate the tensions between the teller and the object. The teller attempts to strip the object of authority permanently to create a new reality with altered power dynamics. If the object of the joke holds more power than the joke teller the comic act aims to raise the status of the joke teller over the object. If the object already functions as subordinate to the joke teller the comic act aims to further diminish his or her status. As Sigmund Freud claims, when discussing various forms of humor, they "can be used to serve hostile and aggressive purposes. One can make a person comic in order to make him contemptible, to deprive him of his claim to dignity and authority."[53] When we as religious Jews interpret *Esther* with a lens of hostile humor, we will discover the disempowered minority Jewish community asserting power over and against those who hold authority over them.

A contemporary example of hostile humor is useful in explaining how such an approach functions before we examine the more culturally distant humor of *Esther*. In the 1969 trial of the Chicago Seven, the defendants perceived the charges against them of conspiring to incite riots during the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago to be unjust and fraudulent. Rather than arguing the merits of their case to the court, many of the defendants

[53] Freud, 234.

chose to undermine the legitimacy of the process because they believed that they would not receive a fair trial from the existing power structure. They mocked the court, the judge, and the entire proceedings. Professor of law and expert on the Chicago Seven trial Douglas Linder offers one account of the event: "Defendants relaxed in blue jeans and sweatshirts, often with their feet up on chairs or the table itself.... The defendants passed trial hours munching jelly beans, cracking jokes, offering editorial comments, making faces, reading newspapers, and sleeping."[54] In not taking the judicial proceedings seriously, they diminished the authority of a court that they perceived to be unjust. As one of the defendants Tom Hayden noted in his final statement of the proceedings: "we would hardly have been notorious characters if they left us alone on the streets of Chicago...[but instead] we became the architects, the masterminds, and the geniuses of a conspiracy to overthrow the government-- we were invented."[55] Hayden believed that the use of hostile humor in the trial not only undermined the authority of the court it also enhanced the power and recognition of the defendants.

Community organizing leader Saul Alinksy claims that such hostile humor intended to demean or diminish the object has the ability to shift power dynamics in uniquely potent way. As he writes in his book *Rules for Radicals*, "It should be remembered that you can threaten the enemy and get away with it. You can insult and annoy him, but the one thing that is unforgivable and that is certain to get him to react is to laugh at him."[56] In the case of the Chicago Seven, the defendants stripped the court of the decorum and honor that it typically receives as a civic, judicial institution. Hostile humor moves the competition

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[54] Douglas Linder. "The Chicago Seven Conspiracy Trial." www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/Chicago7/Account.html (September 25, 2010)
[55] *Ibid.*
[56] Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals.* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971) 137-138.

between enemies from the realm of the logical and the rational in which each side argues that merit of his or her position to the entirely emotional realm of dignity, recognition and status.

The subversive humor of the Chicago Seven trial helps illuminate how the humor found in *Esther* can function in a hostile way with the intent to subvert authority held over Jews. Through the barrage of jokes directed against the Persians and their leadership structure throughout the book, the author uses humor to shift the power dynamics found in the story. Just as the Chicago Seven defendants undermine the stateliness of the court with laughter, so, too, Jews in the book of *Esther* undermine the stateliness of an empire so grand that it stretched from India to Greece. Over the course of the narrative, the once powerful Persians become the object of laughter.

Unlike an interpretation based on affirming humor, a theory of hostile humor does not deliver a revenge fantasy that victims imagine one day and discard the next to help them tolerate a miserable existence. The power-shifting implications of hostile humor intend to be more lasting. Yet hostile humor does not necessarily decrease the power of the object of that humor directly and immediately. This category of humor functions in two ways: it changes the joke teller's perception of the object's power and it changes the perception of those witnessing that power. When these parties view the object as having less power, the object may then perceive him or herself to have less power as well.

Freud believes that the greatest potential of hostile humor is in its ability to transform the perception of a third party who is neither object nor teller of the joke. This witness to the joke gives the joke teller her initial power for his theory requires that the diminishment of the object be acknowledged by someone. As Freud claims, "Everything in jokes that is aimed at gaining pleasure is calculated with an eye to the third person, as though there were internal

and insurmountable obstacles to it in the [joke teller]."[57] The witness empowers the joke teller to change power dynamics that he or she is not able to do on her own.

In the book of *Esther*, the Jew commemorating the festival of Purim who ritually reads the text functions as the third party witness. The author of the book functions as the joke teller and the entity represented by the Persian hierarchy functions as the object of the joke. The witnessing participant in Purim diminishes Persian power through laughter. The book itself acknowledges the importance of Purim by incorporating its festival celebration as one of the Jewish initiated edicts.

This third party in the form of the Jew celebrating Purim has little motivation, however, to continuing functioning in that role if the object of humor were limited to the Persian characters in the book. Contemporary Jewish audiences have little interest in serving as a third party to diminish the power of an entity that no longer exists. There must exist a non-literal understanding of the object of humor in order for the story and the humor to remain relevant.

In positing a more flexible understanding of the object, Freud ensures a continuing relevance to the hostile humor. He enables contemporary audiences to interpret the Persian object in the story as a different, more relevant entity of power. As Freud claims, "The disguised aggressiveness has been directed against people...but the object of the joke's attack may equally well be institutions, people in their capacity as vehicles of institutions, dogmas of morality or religion...."[58] The expansive breadth of interpretive options of what the comedic object represents allows for a continuing relevance of the story of *Esther* in spite of its focus on a particular historic setting.

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[57] Freud, 190.
[58] Freud, 129.

The flexibility with which Freud treats the object of humor appears similar to Bakhtin's affirming theory of humor that allows for the physical object of humor to represent a larger idea or institution. But Freud's brand of humor is still decidedly hostile. The object of humor may be different from what it appears to be on the surface but the humor still intends to disempower whatever it is that the object represents. The humor defeats past oppressors in Jewish history to create the possibility of defeating present and future tormentors and to imagine a reality without any such violence at all. In refusing to give authority and respect to oppressors the reader rejects the power that they hold. In attacking not just past oppressors but also all current and future potential oppressors as well, Purim becomes a vehicle for overcoming enemies of the Jews in every age by metaphorically demeaning them and their authority.

Readers understand the need for the Jewish characters to fight back against the oppression beginning in chapter three when the story relies on more hostile comic inversions for humorous content. Haman is mortified when he is forced to parade an honored Mordechai in the city square (6:11-12). Haman is impaled on the stake intended for Mordechai (7:10). Jews kill Persians on the day they were supposed to be executed (9:1). These humiliating and violent comic inversions appear categorically different than the humor of excess and comic bureaucratic efficiency in the opening chapters of the book.

While Freud was the first thinker to articulate a theory of hostile humor, other thinkers who followed developed their own approaches. Post Holocaust thinker Terrence Des Pres focuses less on the role that comedy plays in transforming power dynamics for a third-party witness and more on the role that this aggressive humor plays for the way in which a victim of oppression can diminish the power of his or her oppressor. For Des Pres,

comedy is the only feasible response for a victim who experiences oppression. He writes, "Tragic seriousness, with its endorsement of terror and pity, accepts the terrible weight of what happens."[59] Approaching oppression with solemnity provides the oppressor with the awe, fear, and respect he needs to carry out the oppression while simultaneously reinforcing the victim's status of helplessness. But treating the oppressor with a contemptuous laughter revolts against his authority. Even if the terror has already been carried out, as it was for the victims of the Holocaust about whom Des Pres writes, the hostile humor still transforms the victim's perception of his oppressor's power. Through humor, the victim of oppression rejects the powerlessness he or she felt and begins to construct a new reality in which he or she has agency. The oppression of the past becomes relegated to the past and a future of empowerment becomes the new reality. Des Pres notes the power such humor can have for Holocaust victims without diminishing their experience of oppression.

> Our knowledge of history is not denied but displaced and we discover the capacity to go forward again, so to speak, with a foot in both worlds. A margin of self-possession is thereby gained, a small priceless liberty, urging us to take heart.[60]

The agency gained through hostile humor creates the possibility for a reality not characterized by oppression. It does not change the fact that the oppression happened or even that it could happen again, but this newfound ability to act does change the oppressor's power after the fact and the victim's acquiescence to it. In functioning on an emotional rather than a rational level, this humor can have deep psychological implications of strength and empowerment for the one-time victims. Hostile humor undermines the previously accepted power dynamic between oppressor and victim that originally enabled the violence.

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[59] Des Pres, 220.
[60] Des Pres, 221.

When we apply Des Pres' theory of hostile humor to *Esther*, we find that the book serves a redemptive function for the joke-telling story teller. It moves the narrator from oppression to empowerment. In understanding *Esther* in this way, the book closely parallels the story of the Israelite exodus from Egypt as told in the Hebrew Bible. Both texts tell a story of redeeming Jews from a stark existence to a transformed future reality. Gillis Gillerman explains that *Esther* contains

> ...all of the essential features of Exodus 1-12, including the setting in a foreign court, the mortal danger to the Jews, the acts of deliverance and revenge, the triumph of the Jews over their foes, and the establishment of a festival. The influence of the Exodus story extends to even minute details of the [*Esther*] narrative.[61]

Accordingly, one can posit the book of *Esther* as a comic Exodus. While Gillerman does not say so explicitly, it appears that both narratives also suggest that the empowerment of the Israelites/Jews requires the fall of those who rule over them. In the story of the Exodus, God drowns the Egyptian army that pursues the Israelites. In *Esther*, the Jews massacre their Persian neighbors. The freeing act in both narratives precedes the act of hostility which seems to render the latter as superfluous. However, the presence of such hatred toward the other in both texts suggests that the defeat of the former oppressor is psychologically or emotionally necessary for the act of redemption to seem complete.

From this perspective, even lighthearted jabs at Persian bureaucracy and culture in the book of *Esther* ought to be considered as strategic tactics aimed at diminishing any claim to respect and authority. Whereas a lens of affirming humor would interpret the jabs at the excess and efficiency of the Persian government as expressions of inconsequential cultural idiosyncrasies or as a means of social differentiation between Jews and Persians, a lens of

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[61] As quoted in Sandra Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (Ann Arbor: Scholars Press, 1977) 6.

hostile humor questions the competency of Persian governance on account of the excess that it allows both in indulgence and in bureaucratic procedure.

In order to diminish the power of the oppressor through the lens of hostile humor, much of the humor remains pointed at the most identifiable villain in the story but not all. A number of comic inversions are aimed directly at Haman in the story. The honor that Haman wanted bestowed upon him went to Mordechai and the means of execution that he wanted to carry out against Mordechai became his own. Yet the story does not find resolution in Haman's impalement. Three full chapters follow this seeming resolution in which the Jews in the story kill Haman's sons and thousands of Persian bystanders in multiple waves of violence. When we read with the same hostile lens as the other comic inversions in the story, the inversion of power of the regular Persian people indicates that the author's hostile feelings extended beyond Haman to the larger non-Jewish population.

Through the narrative, the author accuses Persians of a kind of collective culpability in the wrongs committed against Jews. When the first edict ordering the massacre of the Jews went out, the Persian people did nothing. They stood, נבוכה, dumbfounded (3:15). The morality of (or at least the justification for) the edict seemed confusing and perplexing to these Persians but they did not act against it in defense of their Jewish neighbors. When interpreted with a hostile lens, the author intends for readers to know that Persians understood the edict to be morally problematic yet did nothing to resist it actively.

A more modern example of such hostile humor exists in 20th century Jewish comedic literature in response to the Holocaust. We find a parallel in what Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus*. The graphic novel depicts all Germans as cats and all Jews as mice implying a natural predatory relationship between Germans and Jews. If Spiegelman held only the

National Socialists culpable, one would expect them to be depicted as predatory animals and the remainder of Germans to be depicted as a different species. However, he depicts both Germans and National Socialists as cats. Whether or not an individual German partook in the persecution of Jews Spiegelman implies that some level of culpability was innate among all non-Jewish Germans. The book of *Esther* makes the same statement in allowing for Jews to attack Persian civilians. The Jewish massacre of 800 people in Shushan and 75,000 people in the rest of the empire is recast as morally justifiable retribution against a society complacent with persecution. These massacres elicit laughter from us as readers instead of horror because they are morally justified.

Des Pres' theory of humor applied to *Esther* parallels the theory of Theodor Adorno with one significant distinction. While Des Pres interprets all humor as hostile, Adorno acknowledges that the possibility that non-hostile humor once existed while arguing that it can exist no longer. Like Des Pres, Adorno writes in response to the tragedy of the Holocaust and the viability of humor in its wake. In his article "Is Art Lightheated," he writes "Because Auschwitz was possible and remains possible for the foreseeable future, lighthearted art is no longer conceivable."[62] Adorno argues that the possibility for reconciliation between enemies, that is, between the teller of the joke and the object *no longer* exists. Yet before genocide and annihilation were conceivable, reconciliation was possible. The relationship changed based on the actions of one of the partners in the dynamic and is not inherently predatory.

When we take this slight adjustment to Des Pres' theory it becomes clear that not all of the humor in the book of *Esther* has to be hostile. Before genocide enters into the storyline, it is possible to interpret the humor as lighthearted. The opening chapters provide

[62] Adorno, 251.

no indication of a tense relationship between Jews and Persians. There appear to be no restrictions on where Jews are able to live under Persian rule as the text indicates that Jews are scattered throughout the kingdom (3:8) and that Jews are able to live within the capital fortress (2:5). As we saw in the chapter on affirming humor, interaction among Persians and Jews is extensive enough that there exist no external physical indications of dress or behavior to differentiate the two peoples from one another on a daily basis. We also see evidence of a positive relationship between the two peoples in the characters of Esther and Mordechai when they defend the Persian king by preventing a planned assassination attempt (2:21-23). These reflections of a positive relationship suggest that at least some of the humor found in the book of Esther may be affirming even if it becomes hostile.

The humor of chapters one and two does have a much more lighthearted feel than the rest of the book when the comic events turn much darker. The descriptions of lavish feasts and efficient but absurd edicts reflect a well-intentioned and affirming jesting among Jews toward the Persian hierarchy. They do not challenge or undermine the existing power structure. According to Adorno's theory, humor transforms the character of that relationship once genocide becomes possible in chapter three. Harmless feasts and edicts no longer supply the humor. The potential for genocide Haman evokes when he vows revenge against Mordechai and his people (3:6) represents the turning point when lighthearted reconciliation is no longer the goal of laughter. While Adorno's theory posits a different opening for the biblical work, it requires that the ending be read the same as in the case of Des Pres' theory. An irreconcilable hostile inversion becomes the only possible outcome of the story's humor.

The theories of Des Pres and Adorno are limited, however, by their sole focus on the humorist and the object in the story. Their claims of inviolable hostility in their theories

resonate only for the generations close to the trauma. When they describe the world's relationship to humor as fundamentally transformed by the Holocaust they claim that the victims (and those who know them) are fundamentally transformed by the experience. But an historical epoch in which the Holocaust does not carry the same emotional resonance will exist in the future. At that point, the hostile objective of the humor will be largely lost; there will no longer be a need for the Jewish victim to assert power and authority over the National Socialist. This reality of the diminished emotional resonance of a hostile humor focused on the victim's perception of the oppressor leaves us as readers of the past persecution in *Esther* with the question of why the book of *Esther* remains central to the Jewish narrative when Persian oppression has long ceased to threaten Jews. A victim-focused hostile humor will fail to resonate with audiences who do not have a close connection to the victim.

Des Pres would likely counter with the idea that the resonance of such hostile humor remains indefinitely because a world that allowed the Holocaust to happen at one point remains a world in which the Holocaust will always be possible. This same logic could be extended to *Esther*: a world that allowed Haman to rise to power remains a world in which another Haman could always rise to power.

But Adorno acknowledges that the resonance of hostile humor is bound by time. As he articulates, "Because Auschwitz was possible and remains possible *for the foreseeable future*, lighthearted art is no longer conceivable."[63] Should the Holocaust become a distant and unemotional collective memory, the lighthearted again becomes possible not because evil is impossible, but because that particular evil may not *feel* as possible. As we have already noted, hostile humor depends on emotionality, not rationality. Future generations may continue to understand rationally the breach represented by the Holocaust but they will

[63] Adorno, 151. Emphasis mine.

lack the emotionality of connection to Holocaust victims. Thus, the hostile objective of the humor lacks long-term resonance when one limits its function to the dynamic between victim and oppressor alone.

Des Pres and Adorno's theories of humor may explain why the book of *Esther* was written. They do not explain, however, why later Jewish tradition included the book in the sacred canon and incorporated it into annual ritual practice that still elicits laughter today. Persian oppression is no longer relevant to Jews so asserting power over Persians makes no sense. Yet Purim as a commemoration of the story of *Esther* remains deeply compelling to contemporary Jews.

To explain the continuing resonance of a lens of hostile humor as applied to the book of *Esther*, we are better served by Freud's focus on the third party witness. Freud acknowledges the limitations of historically-bound humor. These jokes

> ...contain allusions to people and events which at the time were 'topical' which had arouse general interest and still kept it alive. When this interest has ceased and the business in question has been settled, these jokes too lost a part of their pleasurable effect and indeed a very considerable part.[64]

In order for humor to retain its function, it must have relevance to the audience. Of the humor theories that purport hostile motivations, Freud's theory explains the book of *Esther* and its continuing role in Jewish praxis in the most satisfactory way. His focus on the third party allows the humor to transcend the limited relationship between the two entities struggling for power in the text and to evolve to fit any historic context. Yet all hostile interpretations of the book of *Esther* have their limitations.

Hostile humor in the context of the Diaspora seems schizophrenic. On the one hand, Jews may understandably resent playing the role of the vulnerable minority in non-Jewish

[64] Freud, 150.

societies. Such resentment could very easily lead to an active hostility. However, that hostility did not surface throughout the vast majority of the Jewish Diaspora experience because the welfare of the Jewish community was often tied to the welfare of the greater non-Jewish society. If the society in which they lived was floundering the Jewish community floundered too. Thus, the objective of Jewish humor aimed against non-Jews could not be entirely hostile with the intention of complete subversion of existing power structures.

Also, in *Esther* the aim of the humor does not appear to be a replacement of non-Jewish authority with Jewish authority. The Persian royal court retains its authority at the end of the book and becomes the vehicle through which the Jews carry out their agenda. This relationship implies some level of reconciliation between Jew and Persian. In this way, an affirming theory of humor, when applied to the book of *Esther*, seems to provide a stronger, more encompassing explanation to the book. There did not appear to be an intention in the book of *Esther* itself or in how *Esther* has been used in subsequent Jewish tradition actually to undermine the authority and legitimacy of the other. There still remains one overarching category of humor that we have yet to apply to the book of *Esther* that of transformative humor.

Transformative Humor

This chapter explores how the third and final category of transformative humor applies to the book of *Esther*. When I examined *Esther* using the affirming theories of Bakhtin and Ben Amos, my interpretation of the book revealed a laughter that temporarily relieved its audience of anxiety. With this lens, both the Jewish characters in the story and the generations of Jews celebrating Purim see the story of *Esther* as a comedic escape from their fear of persecution. However, this affirming approach to humor ultimately upholds the institutions of oppression by encouraging the temporarily triumphant victim of persecution to return to his normal vulnerable status. When I examined *Esther* using the hostile theories of Freud, Des Pres, and Adorno, my interpretation of the book revealed a laughter intended to demean its victim permanently. No reconciliation between Jew and non-Jew could be expected using this lens. It is an attempt to alter existing power structures and prop up the Jew over the non-Jew permanently.

Alternatives that apply transformative theories of humor to *Esther* will expose a middle ground between the extremes of affirming and hostile humor. Transformative humor seeks not to demean nor affirm the object of humor. Instead, as its name suggests, it transforms the object of humor to transform society itself. As with hostile theories of humor, it intends to alter a relationship dynamic permanently. Yet it does not intend to crush the object. As with affirming theories of humor, it has the ultimate goal of reconciliation between the joke teller and the object. Yet it simultaneously demands that they not return fully to the pre-existing dynamic.

Many thinkers have noted a pattern of Jewish self-critique that exists in the Tanakh, especially in the Prophets that could encourage behavioral modification. The critique in the Prophets is clearly intended to inspire and facilitate change in its Jewish audience both past and present. Yet few have looked to the comedy in the Bible as a possible source for that self-critique and urge toward revision. The transformative theories of humor presented in this chapter invite us as readers of scripture to expand our notion of what texts can change readers. The humor of *Esther* offers us a more subtle invitation to self-reflection and adjustment.

In *Esther*, the Jewish author draws in a Jewish audience by first encouraging ridicule of the Persian other and presumptive connection with the Jewish characters. The lack of identification between the Jewish audience and the Persian object of the humor allows for a hostile laughter toward an entirely foreign object. Moreover, the Persian objects seem to deserve ridicule on account of the immoral actions they carry out or permit. Yet when Jewish violence at the end of the book resembles the despised actions of Persians at the beginning, the surprised audience finds itself obligated to question the Jewish actors in the story. The book reveals an underlying problem in the societal structure that requires transformation rather than focusing attention on any specific person or entity. In bringing this issue to light through humor, the author creates the possibility to transform the reality.

Before examining how transformative humor functions in *Esther* itself, it is worthwhile to examine a contemporary example. Examples of hostile and affirming humor are much more pervasive in our contemporary context than transformative humor. Even without the academic theories presented in this thesis, the majority of people could have named the ability of humor to deliver an affirming release or a hostile attack. The notion that

humor has the ability to transform society, however, feels like a grandiose claim that requires more substantiation and proof.

Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* provides us with a contemporary example of how successful transformative humor functions. He often addresses significant social issues by directing his humor at an object whose actions are harmful with the intention of raising that object's awareness of the harm that it causes. When successful, the object acknowledges that such actions are problematic and transforms its behavior and thereby transforms how it functions in and relates to society. One example of Stewart's successful use of transformative humor occurred in March 2009 in the midst of a national financial crisis in which the failure of financial and insurance companies AIG, Bear Sterns, and Lehman Brothers threatened the collapse the entire American economy. Stewart began a series of critiques of the financial news channel CNBC for irresponsible financial predicting and reporting with the intent of preventing such behavior from continuing. Jim Cramer, host of CNBC's *Mad Money*, took Stewart's assault on CNBC personally and went on the offensive insulting Stewart. In response, Stewart's critique focused on Cramer himself with the claim that he exemplified a culture of misleading the public and that he knew of the prevalence of reckless behavior that occurred daily on Wall Street before the crisis. The two cable television show hosts began a week-long humorous but biting public feud. At one point, Cramer punched a pile of bread dough on the Martha Stewart show pretending it was Stewart. At another, Stewart mocked Cramer's NBC media blitz on other affiliated channels to restore his reputation. After a number of days, Cramer accepted an invitation to appear on *The Daily Show*.[65]

[65] The three part March 12th interview of Jim Cramer by Jon Stewart can be found at the following URL's: http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-march-12-2009/jim-cramer-pt--1

Stewart made the non-hostile intent behind his humor very clear throughout the interview. He continuously noted that Cramer himself was not the focus of his anger but instead said that Cramer represented a larger problem with public financial news analysts and services that display no sense of responsibility to the public. "You now have become the face of this and that is incredibly unfortunate." Stewart said to Cramer. "It would be a great service to the American public if there was [a news] organization out there... and we could start getting back to the fundamentals [of sound reporting on the financial sector] and I could get back to making fart noises and funny faces."[66] Stewart's intent in mocking Cramer was not to destroy or humiliate Cramer but rather to bring about transformation in Cramer's actions and those of the news source he represented. Stewart exemplified transformative humor by neither crushing the object of his joke nor allowing a full return to the pre-existing dynamic that enabled CNBC to misinform the public.

Punctuated with jests and jokes to fit the setting of a political comedy show Stewart's interview of Cramer used humor to broach significant social issues. Throughout the interview Cramer made claims of his attempt to reveal corruption on Wall Street to the public only to be contradicted by Stewart rolling video clips of Cramer from years past that demonstrated Cramer's complacency and participation in the culture he condemned. In each clip, Cramer revealed knowledge of high-risk financial practices and advocated their use. It became impossible for Cramer to deny culpability. As a news article on the *Huffington Post* reported, "At one point, Cramer sounded the reformed sinner, responding to Stewart's plea

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http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-march-12-2009/jim-cramer-pt--2
http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-march-12-2009/jim-cramer-pt--3.

[66] Jon Stewart Interview of Jim Cramer, *The Daily* Show. March 12, 2009. www.thedailyshow.com/watch/thu-march-12-2009/jim-cramer-extended-interview-pt--3. (Accessed November 13, 2010).

for more levelheaded, honest commentary: 'How about I try that?' said Cramer."[67] The self-reflection made possible by the humorous interview forced Cramer to alter his behavior and he committed to some of Stewart's concrete suggestions for adjusting his behavior by the end of the interview.[68] The final alteration of reality was really quite small as one would expect for a type of humor that is not intended to overturn existing power structures fundamentally.

Stewart created the opportunity for modification of the object of humor with the larger purpose of changing society. This societal shift is the central purpose of transformative humor. Those thinkers who posit theories of transformative humor all have the ultimate goal of adjusting society albeit for different reasons. In the introduction of her book, *Smile of Discontent: Humor, Gender, and Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*, Eileen Gillooly understands humor as a way to address societal inequalities. She distinguishes explicitly her approach from Freud's more actively hostile understanding of humor. Her theory focuses on the experience of women in the 19th century.

> Rather...than providing momentary release from social inhibitions as [Freudian] tendentious[69] jokes do, feminine humor functions as a sustained, if diffusive, undercover assault upon the authority of the social order itself. Rather than disparaging otherness in an attempt to establish superiority over it, such humor mocks the cultural construction of femininity in order to reduce its psychological power.[70]

For Gillooly, the reality of the oppression of women exists at the beginning of a story and remains unchanged at the end. A woman's station in society is not altered by a feminine humor. But the female characters who function in that reality are fundamentally transformed by a humor that empowers them to change their perceptions of their surroundings and of the

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[67] *Ibid.*
[68] *Ibid.*
[69] The term "tendentious joke" was first used by Freud to describe the hostile humor he outlines in his theory. See Freud, 107.
[70] Gillooly, 24.

authorities in that reality. By rejecting the theoretical validity of the construction of femininity in a patriarchal society with the aid of humor women psychologically overpower their problematic reality.

Their empowerment results from the unique relationship that Gillooly posits among the joke teller, the object of the joke, and the witness to it. Instead of relying upon Freud's model in which the humorist uses the third party to validate the object's humiliation, she explains that she sees the humorist as establishing an alliance with the victim that the third party then witnesses. "Bonding occurs in feminine humor, not between humorist and auditor (i.e., the third party) but between humorist and victim with the auditor participating vicariously in their relationship."[71] The entire dynamic is intended to elicit a supportive empathy for the victim not humiliation.

When Gillooly's theory is applied to the book of *Esther* the reader sees that the storyline is driven by a plot inversion in which once powerless Jews assert authority over their former Persian oppressors. Yet the reality at the end of the story is not entirely different from the reality at the beginning. The people exercising power may have changed but the type of power being exercised is essentially the same. Absurd royal decrees that allow for the slaughter of innocents are as common at the end as they are at the beginning of the story. The manipulation of the king by Haman is replaced only with the manipulation of the king by Esther (and by extension, Mordechai). Persian violence is replaced by Jewish violence. Ultimately, a reality that allows for such a gross lack of societal morality remains entirely unaltered.

This stagnant depiction of reality might lead us as readers to question the applicability of transformational humor since we expect that *some* aspect of reality shifts even if the

[71] Gillooly, 27.

transformation is relatively small. Yet it is possible to interpret the book of *Esther* with Gillooly's transformational lens when the reading audience is made into the author's object of humor. The author of *Esther* critiques not the specific agents who commit the wrongs in the plot but the entire society that allows such egregious actions. Through raising the audience's awareness of these wrongs, the author intends to transform them in how they think about that society and their participation in it. If all characters in the story are capable of immoral actions, the reader is then forced to ask herself what the implications are for her. The once obvious heroes of the story at the outset (Jews) with whom the author invites the reader to identify become villains in the end. By extension, the reader feels the potential for villainous actions herself. Through this subtle process, the author makes the reading audience the ultimate object of the story's humor.

This dynamic is not intuitive at the beginning of *Esther*. As noted above, the opening of the book makes the Persian leadership the victim of the humor. The kingdom's excess, the king's incompetence, and the bureaucracy's absurdity all bring the audience to laughter. The audience finds itself caught up in a fairly straight-forward humor intended to demean the Persian other.

But as the plot evolves, the Persian characters are not the ultimate butt of the joke. As the story line moves forward one notices that a fundamental restructuring of reality has occurred which would make the book a more appropriate candidate for either a hostile or affirming interpretation of the humor. The king transforms his thinking toward the Jews. The bureaucracy that initially sanctioned violence against the Jews results in their protection. By the end of the eighth chapter Haman has been killed and Jews have been saved. Jews have royal permission to defend themselves against any attackers; Mordechai and Esther

have elevated their high status. Yet if the intent of the story were to demean the Persian authority and assert superiority over it the story would have found its resolution here.

Only after this apparent resolution does Jewish excess fueled by the same structural problems that allowed for the near massacre of Jews begin. It is at this point that the object of the humor in the book ceases to be the Persian other and begins to focus on Jews. Esther and Mordechai's manipulation of royalty allows Jews to kill 500 in the fortress of Shushan and the 10 sons of Haman before they kill another 300 in Shushan and 75,000 in greater Persia. The Persian bureaucracy may have averted Jewish massacre (as the audience is relieved to know) but it still sanctioned an equally unjustifiable violence against Persian civilians. The audience experiences a sense of horror at this display of gratuitous revenge.

When Jews act with the same dark but humorous excess as their Persian counterparts, it becomes clear that the critique is aimed at the social structure that allows for the abuse of power. The natural sympathy of the Jewish audience toward the Jewish characters transfers at the end of the story to the Persians who initially provoked hostile feelings. Throughout the narrative the author of the book consistently sympathized with the Persian object of humor; the author set up his audience to believe wrongly that Persians were the ultimate villains. Only at the end of the book does the author invite the audience to feel sympathy with Persians. Even though the Jewish characters of the book act villainously at the end, the audience does not transfer its ridicule to them. When Persians look like Jews and Jews look like Persians and both are capable of being victim and oppressor the audience cannot have one simplistic emotional reaction to them. Neither complete hostility nor complete sympathy make sense. Instead, the audience becomes aware of a larger pattern of the potential for

violence and turns its reflection towards that potential and their own ability (or inability) to act it out.

Another biblical narrative models this powerful technique of capturing and surprising the audience of a story albeit without any element of humor. In II Samuel 12:1-6, the prophet Nathan tells King David the story of a rich man who stole the only lamb of a poor man. David was outraged at the injustice until Nathan explained that the story was a parable for the king's actions in stealing the wife of a soldier before sending the soldier to his death on the front lines of battle. When Nathan proclaimed, "you are that man," the king immediately repented. The king was only able to see the wrong of his actions when they were transposed on someone else. This instruction by parable inviting self-reflection is used in *Esther* by employing the guise of humor.

Stan Goldman, author of the article "Narrative and Ethical Ironies in *Esther*," is one of the few contemporary scholars to interpret the book as intending to transform the audience of the parable, namely, Jewish readers:

> The narrative of the Jewish attack on the Persians is an example of Jewish self-criticism, a bold questioning of the Jewish self-image... in this case a negative portrayal of the Jews for a positive purpose. Irony here produces a leveling effect: Jews behave like Persians and Persians behave like Jews. Jews and Persians transform themselves into versions of one another, cancelling, ironically, the differences between them.... Who is a Jew? Who is a Persian? The irony of a Jewish writer raising such questions is itself an ethical act.[72]

Goldman's interpretation is not intended to inspire condemnation but rather self- reflection. The conflation of Persian and Jew inspires a moment of self-awareness in the audience. The

[72] Stan Goldman, "Narrative and Ethical Ironies in Esther" *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47 (1990): 24.

disarmed audience ready to condemn the immorality of the other realizes that they too have the capacity to be guilty of the same immorality.

Historically, Jews lacked the ability to exercise the type of physical and political power depicted at the end of the book of *Esther* throughout nearly all of the Diaspora experience. Thus I believe that the author was not writing with the intent of condemning any concrete historical action or Jewish exercise of power. Instead, in applying a lens of transformational humor, the author intends the book to be a cautionary tale of the corrupting potential of political power. As anxiety provoking as the Diaspora experience may have been for Jews the author suggests that it at least preserved their moral integrity. Without the ability to wield power over non-Jews Jews were largely protected from the opportunity to commit gross political misconduct toward the Other. Today, with the reintroduction of Jewish political sovereignty in Israel and the ability to use physical coercion and force, the book of *Esther* has a potentially prophetic message as well. The caution of misusing power no longer functions as a theoretical warning. It becomes practical moral advice.

The shift that takes place in the book of *Esther* from a Persian to a Jewish object of humor is thus essential for a transformational interpretation. To direct humor only against the Persian would fail to inspire any form of transformation in the Jewish audience. Thus, the author intentionally directs the humor toward his own people at the end of the book to make his critique of the social power structure.

Northrope Frye presents a theory of transformative humor that shares much in common with Eileen Gillooly's theory. Both writers believe that a transformation in the self-awareness of the object is the ultimate goal of such humor. Unlike Gillooly, however, Frye completely divorces the intent of comedy from any larger moral purpose. Gillooly finds the

potential in humor to transform some form of moral corruption in society. She focuses on the oppression of women but her theory also allows for *Esther* to critique social structures that support indiscriminate violence.

Frye believes humor ought to be entirely void of such moralizing. He believes that humor offers "deliverance from moral bondage"[73] rather than a vision for a more moral society. He is not alone. Other theorists such as Jefferson Chase understand comedy to be morally neutral. As Chase claims, humor "emerges as a political free agent, equally available for attacking or enhancing the authority of an existing social order."[74] For Chase, humor controls the political discourse and can be used by anybody to that end regardless of the merit of his or her stance. Frye offers a slightly more directed understanding of the function of comedy that still avoids moralizing. He writes, "Comedy is not designed to condemn evil, but to ridicule a lack of self-knowledge."[75] For Frye, moralizing ought to be reserved for the genre of tragedy in which the devastating effects of moral wrongs can be lamented. Comedy is indiscriminate in its object of humor; excess in virtue and vice can both move an audience to laughter. The freedom from moralizing invited by Frye's theory of transformative humor still serves a greater purpose, which he describes as

> The essential comic resolution. [It] is an individual release which is also a social reconciliation. The normal individual is freed from the bonds of a humorous society, and a normal society is freed from the bonds imposed on it by humorous individuals.[76]

This freedom brought on by comedy releases tensions in society and allows for maximum reconciliation among its citizens.

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[73] Frye, 94.
[74] Chase, 194.
[75] Frye, 94.
[76] *Ibid.*

When applied to the book of *Esther* Frye's theory provides an alternate explanation as to why both Persians and Jews are the objects of humor. The transformation is not a critique of social structure brought on by the self-reflection of the Jewish audience. By widening the targets of humor Frye believes that the author releases more tensions in society and creates the best opportunity for all members to reconcile with one another. Whether Jewish or not, the reader of *Esther* will have the same epiphany of self-reflection since all characters in the book exhibit actions of excess. As Frye notes, "The freer the society, the greater the variety of individuals it can tolerate."[77] The fewer social constraints a society places on its citizens, the wider variety of people a society can incorporate. By extension, this freedom facilitates relationships among a wide array of persons. Frye's notion of societal reconciliation is much closer to Bakhtinian carnival in which people at all levels of society find release in the humor. Yet unlike the temporary festival, awareness brought by the humorous excesses of individuals, whether in morality or vice, remains with the audience and creates a permanent transformation in a society's degree of freedom. Frye's theory of transformative humor allows for the equal opportunity for laughter directed at Persians and at Jews in the book of *Esther* because both suffer from the same absurdities and excesses. For the Jewish audience it offers an instructive model for bringing social reconciliation between Jew and non-Jew today. Neither humor directed against the self nor humor directed against the other is sufficient alone. Both must be combined to invite all members of society to participate and lessen existing social tensions.

Yet the lack of moralizing made possible by Frye's theory fails to account for the moral consequences of the comic rigidity. Were the book of *Esther* to attack excesses in virtuous behavior Frye's theory would be a better hermeneutic lens than hostile or

[77] Frye, 95

affirmative theories. All of the examples of rigidity in the text, however, are vices that elicit the condemnation of the reader: they are unjust law, excessive display of wealth, and narcissistic leadership. Because of their excessive illustration in the text, the book of *Esther* does appear to pursue a moral agenda.

Henri Bergson also proposes a theory of transformative humor in which laughter "pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement."[78] Unlike both Gillooly and Frye, Bergson believes that laughter is only possible when the audience feels no sense of connection or empathy to the objects of humor. He discards the presumption of connection that the reader feels toward the Jewish characters. As he explains, "Indifference is [laughter's] natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion."[79] The humorist functions as an unemotional publicist of societal ills. His main objective is still to bring self-awareness to the object of humor but for the sake of society and not for the sake of the object himself. In Bergson's words, "a humorist is a moralist disguised as a scientist... [who] dissects evil without emotion with the sole object of filling us with disgust."[80] Bergson's humorist is transformative insofar as she seeks to improve society. Yet this humorist removes the potential for self critique by not identifying with the object of humor.

In applying Bergson's theory to *Esther*, it does not matter who the author or the audience is. There exists an objectively comic rigidity in the social structures and systems of rule that he feels compelled to reveal. Applying his theory to *Esther* leads to a criticism of the law system's self-worship because it renders itself incapable of responding to new realities. When *Esther* reveals herself to the king as a Jew the king is powerless to reverse his own earlier decree declaring the massacre of the Jews; instead, he has to devise a

[78] Bergson, 13.
[79] Bergson, 6.
[80] Bergson, 62.

loophole which enables the Jews to defend themselves from the attack legally. The rigidity of such legal formalism and the absurdities that develop in its wake are unacceptable to the author. As a humorist, he is obligated to identify structural issues in society regardless of his vantage point within that society.

With ancient Persia as his backdrop the author also comically emphasizes the consequences of excessive pride in leadership. The king's pride leads to the aggrandizement of his authority through excessive feasts. The bruising of his pride by Vashti's refusal to dance leads to a ludicrous state declaration of men exercising authority in their own homes over women. Haman's prideful motivations lead him to murderous aspirations. And Jewish pride expressed at the end of the book through the numerous decrees sanctions both feasts and massacres. While actions based on pride reach absurd levels in *Esther*, Bergson is suspicious of all displays of self-reverence. Bergson notes that "society will therefore be suspicious of all inelasticity of character, of mind and even of body."[81] In his critique of the excessive role of pride in Persian rule the author of *Esther* reveals an overarching suspicion of individual leaders who are susceptible to arrogant motivations. The setting of ancient Persia may be specific but the message is timeless for any civilization. When pride goes unchecked in leaders the consequences to society are disastrous. Pride must be balanced by a greater concern for societal well-being.

Applying Bergson's theory to the book of *Esther* may provide a societal critique that transcends the historic setting of the book of *Esther* but it fails to explain the particularistic Jewish significance of the story. The ongoing celebration of Purim makes little sense when built around a text intended to be a dispassionate societal critique. Regardless of the author's intent the reader must create some emotional connection to the characters in the story for it to

[81] Bergson, 13.

become a ritualized focal point. Bergson's theory cannot address what is Jewish about *Esther* because it removes the assumed connection between religious Jewish readers and the characters of the story. Religious Jewish readers thus find better explanations for the transformative comedy of Esther in those theories that presume or rely upon an emotional connection between the reader and the characters in the story.

Transformative theories of humor have demonstrated the widest range of possible interpretations for *Esther* among the categories of humor examined in this thesis. Gillooly's theory leads to a conclusion of Jewish self-critique. Frye's theory leads to enhanced social integration of all parties. Bergson's theory leads to a critique of societal rigidity. Of these theories, I prefer Gillooly's transformative theory as the best fit for the book of *Esther*. Its emphasis on the moral impulse of the book accounts for the consistent condemnation of vices better than Frye's morally neutral theory. And the intentional emotional journey that the author carries the reader reflects an emotionally invested author not possible in Bergson's theory. Gillooly's theory helps us as religious Jewish readers understand the moral message of Esther directed at us: Jews are not immune from committing the wrongs that have been committed against us.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have presented a unique hermeneutical approach to the humor in and of the book of *Esther*. In utilizing multiple lenses to understand the text, these methods have led to the possibility of numerous meanings for a single narrative. The book of *Esther* has revealed itself to be a coping mechanism that releases tension for Jews living as minorities in the Diaspora, a means for gaining power over enemies, and an invitation for reflection and self-transformation among Jewish audiences reading the text. Different readers may favor different interpretations depending on their own personal preference and situations in life. Multiple meanings help ensure that the book of *Esther* maintains its relevance to contemporary audiences by providing a variety of points of access to the text.

In this conclusion, I will deconstruct the method used in this thesis on *Esther* with the hope that it may be applied to other biblical texts that contain comic elements. In so doing, I show how the method can reinvigorate additional biblical texts with new meanings for contemporary audiences. There are three central steps in this hermeneutical approach: a) identifying comic elements in a text; b) applying multiple theories of humor to account for these comic elements, and c) analyzing the strength of the theory as applied to the text.

In order to identify comic elements in a text one must first decide which pericope to analyze. This thesis examined an entire biblical book but it is certainly plausible and appropriate to analyze smaller portions of a text. One must be careful, however, not to isolate pieces of a larger story for analysis arbitrarily. Doing so may prevent understanding a full story arc and limit one's ability to identify comic inversions in the plot. For instance, examining only the portion of *Jonah* in which the prophet is engulfed by the big fish (*Jonah*

2:1-11) ignores the comic inversions and absurdities throughout the narrative. If one chooses to analyze a text that is not its own self-contained narrative, it is worthwhile to map the plotline of the entire story so as not to make claims that overlook the larger context. In the case of Jonah, mapping the story will reveal the excerpt about the belly of the fish to be the lowest point in a larger U-shaped plot. Analysis of the narrative leading down to this point and up from it is essential for retaining the integrity of the comedy of *Jonah*. However, other narratives within the Bible do not require the analysis of an entire book as is the case in which Tamar seduces her father-in-law Judah (*Genesis* 38:1-30). This story does not require a study of the entire book of *Genesis*.

Because scholarship already exists that identifies humor in the Bible it is important to survey the field to build on the work of other scholars who may have noted the presence of comedy in the chosen text. This kind of research survey will prevent one from replicating existing work and give a foundation from which to start. Additionally, one should always do his or her own analysis of the text to discover comic elements that may have been overlooked by other writers. In this phase, look for seemingly absurd or exaggerated imagery and speech as well as plot inversions. It is likely that one will be able to identify sections in which characters exchange roles, status, or actions without the assistance of any external resources. The elements of exaggeration and absurdity, however, may require additional information to understand the text in its historic context. Understanding when and where the text was composed will help readers distinguish whether a suspected comedic event was actually quite normative for the time and therefore not intended to evoke laughter or whether it was an anomaly designed to draw the attention of the reader.

Once the comic elements have been named apply the theories of comedy to the text. Use the synopsis of each theory to explain what shifts occur in the narrative and what those shifts imply for the meaning of the text overall. The types of theories described and utilized in this thesis (affirming, hostile and transformative) will help pinpoint subtle nuances in power relations and biblical personality characteristics.

With each theory, identify which characters play the roles of humorist, object of humor and witness to the humor (if required by the theory). Remember that the characters may include those not mentioned in the text itself such as the author or the audience. For instance, in the story of the tower of Babel (*Genesis* 11:1-9), possible characters include not only God, the people of Babel, Babylonian society and the heavenly court but also and the reader of the text. The roles that these parties play may shift according to which theory is applied. Using a hostile lens, the heavenly court may serve as the third party witness to validate God's assertion of power over the people of Babel. Using a transformative lens, God's actions serve to alter the problematic behavior of the people without causing them harm.

Once all theories have been applied to the text, one comes to the most subjective aspect of this hermeneutical method. Not every theory will be able to account for every detail within the text. In order to replicate my method one must assess the strengths and weaknesses of each interpretation. Here, one notes elements of the story that remain unaccounted for when a particular lens is applied. Is there a negative tone or violence that the theory cannot explain? For instance, Ben Amos' theory of group differentiation lacks a satisfactory explanation for the negative tone of the story in which Lot's daughters begin the genealogical line of the Moabites and Ammonites through incest with their father (*Genesis*

19: 30-38). Or maybe there is a reconciliation among characters that seems out of place. Freud's hostile approach would fail to explain Joseph's repaired relationship with his brothers (*Genesis* 45:1-28). If an outlying element appears minor or insignificant to the overall understanding of the text, one can simply dismiss it and move on. If, however, the misfit appears more significant because a theory fails to account for multiple important aspects of a narrative, one ought to comment on the lack of compatibility between the theory and the text. For example, it seems inappropriate to apply an affirming approach of humor to the story of Balaam and his donkey in which the narrative is explicitly hostile to the foreign prophet (*Numbers* 22:21-35). Ultimately, some theories will provide better explanations of some texts than others.

In using this hermeneutical approach to draw out multiple meanings from a single text, one expands one's understanding of and relationship to a living Torah. Its usage also creates the possibility for the interpretation to be shared with and inspire the larger community. As the ancient rabbinic sage Ben Bag Bag states at the closing of *Mishnah Avot*:

הפוך בה והפך בה, דכולא בה

Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it.[82]

[82] "פרקי אבות פרק ה כו" *Pirkei Avos: Ethics of the Fathers* 5:26. (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd. 1984) 52.

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