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The Book of Esther:
Seeking a Jewish Ethics of Reading and Living

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of
the requirements for Ordination

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Referee: Dr. David H. Aaron

Digest

This paper frames the tension of how we as Jews read ethically problematic biblical texts. Beginning with the proposition that reading informs how we live, this paper pursues the challenge of how we approach those texts that send negative or potentially damaging messages.

The first chapter provides a concise, chapter-by-chapter synopsis and literary analysis of the book of Esther. The question of the story's historicity, and history writing in general, is explored. The analysis places a high priority on reading for authorial intent, and looks for the literary devices the author uses to achieve his goals.

Chapter two begins with an overview of literary theory. It focuses on the opposing ends of the literary theory spectrum: Authorial Intent and Reader Response. This overview of literary theory moves to a synthesis between authorial intent and reader response: Ethical Criticism. Ethical criticism provides an approach to the text that calls for the reader to make responsible value judgments about the text.

Chapter three begins by providing a brief summary about the development of canon, helping to place religious canon and specifically the Hebrew Bible in a context. The chapter continues to provide the reader with an appreciation for the resistance that the book of Esther met before it was included into the Hebrew Bible. Finally, the chapter provides a look at, once the book of Esther is included in the canon, how the commentators dealt with the perceived problem in the text—those that were the likely causes of canonization resistance.

The fourth chapter presents ethical criticism as a reading strategy used to approach the book of Esther in a new light. After taking the critical step of identifying the carnivalesque genre, the chapter analyzes two modern commentaries on the book of Esther.

The conclusion reinforces the importance of what and how we read, and summarizes the rewards of approaching biblical texts through the lens of ethical criticism.

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Acknowledgements

This thesis, like the past five years at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, has been a journey. The one word that sums up my motivation to enter rabbinic school, that has guided me to grow during these years, and is the essence of this paper, is integrity—integrity to be true to myself and my exploration of the world; integrity to listen to a calling that says to go to that place I have never been; integrity to constantly question and be open to difficult answers. This paper is a reflection of questioning and a methodology of seeking answers. Most importantly though, is asking good questions and learning *how* to find answers. I would like to acknowledge three facets of this journey: First is the experience of scholarly immersion. Second is the interaction with my thesis advisor. Third is my community of support.

The opportunity to study a topic in-depth is a gift. Even within a five year, full-time rabbinic program, it is surprisingly rare to be able to study something in depth. I savor those many hours I have had to immerse myself in the many different aspects of this paper. There is an intimacy that comes as a result of immersion and familiarity. There is also the humbling experience of knowing, that as much time as I spent reading, thinking and writing, I have but scratched the surface. As I look forward to engaging the texts over the years of my rabbinate, I take this moment to thank God for this experience of immersion.

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I thank God daily for my life that is so full of blessings: the rich inheritance of Judaism and humanity entrusted to me, my health, my teachers, my friends, my family, and all that lies ahead.

Introduction

As a child growing up within the Jewish Reform Movement, I recall mixed feelings about the celebration of Purim. There was the joyful atmosphere of dressing up like characters from the Esther story, and playing games of chance at the Purim carnival. There were also the groggers[1] we would wildly turn in our hands in response to the mention of malevolent Haman's name, each time it was read from *Megillat Esther*. I felt the tension and contradiction between, on one hand, great joy and celebration, and on the other hand, anger and vengeance. Unfortunately, my feelings remained isolated, without anyone ever acknowledging the tension, much less helping me understand these feelings and how best to process and respond to them.

Now, many years later, as an adult and rabbinical student encountering the book of Esther and the Purim festival, the same tensions, even more pronounced, remain. The saving of the Jewish people and celebrating that victory stand in conflict with the portrayal of women as sexual objects, subservient to men, and the gleeful vengeance and slaughter of the non-Jew by the Jew. More disturbing, though, is the continued silence I experience within the liberal Jewish community to openly acknowledge and discuss these tensions. The silence was momentarily broken in a class at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion taught by Drs. David H. Aaron and Susan Einbinder. The course explored different reading strategies in which one can approach a given text. Very specifically, the approach of Ethical Criticism provided an avenue for me to

[1] Grogger: ritual noise-maker used during the reading of Megillat Esther during festival of Purim.

respond to the tensions I had been experiencing in a way that validated my right to have the feelings and provided a responsible way to channel them.

If it is true that literature exists to address the Socratic question, "How should one live,"[2] are we not obligated to ask this same question of the sacred texts of Judaism? This paper seeks to explore the tensions that exist within the texts and rituals of our tradition; the tensions perceived by our sages over the generations and their response; the response from the liberal Jewish community; and finally, an alternative model for reading and living our Jewish inheritance today.

[2] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 171.

Literary Theory and Ethical Criticism

1.1 Overview of Literary Theory

> Inquiring, learning, knowing and reasoning are forms of responsible relationship with other people and with our world. They attest to the priority of ethics even in our knowing. Facing another person my free spontaneity is called into question. I am answerable and am summoned, obliged, called into responsibility. Intelligibility itself is born through language in community, and rational discourse is about bearing responsible witness and justifying that witness before others.[1]

I begin with David Ford's quote to establish my bias up front in approaching literary theory. Not only, I believe, is it our responsibility as readers to judge the aesthetics and ethics of literature (or any art form for that matter), it is equally important *how* we arrive at such judgments. Specifically, as it relates to literature and religious canon, what is our methodology as readers of a text?

In literary theory, there are two opposing ends of the spectrum regarding our choices as readers. On one end is the desire and need to determine, as well as possible, what the author intended when he sat down to write. What did they mean to communicate to their respective, targeted group of readers? Additionally, this end of the spectrum is concerned with the historical realities that may have influenced the world-view of the author. Writers are products of their environment. Therefore, to fully understand and appreciate a particular text, the reader is obliged to locate the writers in their respective times and places, and try to imagine the possible influences that shaped their lives.

On the other end of the spectrum is the assertion that the author's intentions are not only inaccessible, but completely irrelevant. What counts, pure and simply, is the

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[1] David Ford, from Robert Eagelstone, *Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas* (Edinburgh: Scottland,Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 1.

aesthetic value of the literature. The term associated with this school of thought is New Criticism. Related to this is the literary theory of Deconstruction. This school, too, focuses on the language of a text, completely separated from the author and the context. The deconstructionists, though, are not opposed to meaning. The reader simply needs to be cognizant that language allows for an indefinite number of meanings. Also on this end of the spectrum, refuting the significance of authorial intent, but taking a different tack, is the school of Reader Response. This theory asserts that the meaning in a text is decided solely by the experience of the individual reader— regardless of the author's intent or the historical context in which he or she wrote.

This latter end of the spectrum "prioritizes language and reading over a nostalgia for the human."[2] The basic principle of New Criticism locates the meaning of a literary work not in the intention of the author or the experience of the reader, but in the "text itself."[3] This is the approach that characterized the aim of the early 20th century photographer, Alfred Stieglitz and his circle of artists: "Art for art's sake." In the case of writing, aesthetic interest in sentence construction and word choice become the central focus and are considered fundamentally distinct from the mundane, practical concerns of meaning.[4] New Criticism studies works of art as if they existed independent of the universe. Outside time and culture, as self-evident organisms.[5] It is literature for the sake of literature. Even if meaning could be established, itself a notion rejected by this school of literary theory, the deconstructionists pushed their claim that nothing can be finally de-

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[2] Eaglestone, 4
[3] Edward Quinn, *A Dictionary of Literary and Thematic Terms* (New York: Checkmark Books, 2000), 216
[4] Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 231.
[5] John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (Basic Books, 1978), 129.

termined. There is always more to be said; there is always something new or contradictory to be added.[6]

Literary scholar, George Steiner, warns us not to be taken in by 'art for art's sake as some neutral expression of the artist, or the receiver of the art. On the contrary, Steiner writes, "It is a tactical slogan, a necessary rebellion against philistine didacticism and political control. But pressed to its logical consequences, it is pure narcissism. The 'purest' work of art. . . . is a sharply political gesture, a value-statement of the most evident ethical import. We cannot touch on experiencing of art in our personal and communal lives without touching, simultaneously, on moral issues, of the most compelling and complex order."[7]

The strands of art for art's sake, reader response, and indeterminacy all share common targets around which they may coalesce: the targets of authorial intent and a limited but distinct range of meanings in a text. The confluence of these reading strategies, in our post-modern era, has resulted in the unintended consequence of ethical paralysis. If a text is thought to have either no meaning beyond it's aesthetic beauty or contains as many meanings as there are readers, the reader is powerless to take a stand. On this end of the literary theory spectrum, after all, how can one establish meaning in a given literary work that either has none beyond the text itself (New Criticism) or has so many options to choose from (Deconstruction, Reader Response) that they all become relative? Classical humanism, the assertion that there is a set of moral attitudes and be-

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[6] Gardner, 123

[7] George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 143-144.

liefs that direct us to best live our lives, is replaced by a democracy of equivocation, by the hermeneutics of "do it yourself."[8]

We turn then, to look at the opposite end of the spectrum, authorial intent and context, as an alternative strategy for a reader to understand the meaning of a text. This reading strategy is predicated on the "reader's desire to hear. . . the absent person."[9] Instead of discounting the author's intention as irrelevant or inaccessible, this literary theory places the burden on the reader to hear the voice of the absent author to whatever degree possible. Wayne Booth, in his book, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, imagines how upset the implied author would be if he thought that his writing had no impact on the lives of their readers. Would not most authors be distressed if, after reading their work, we found nothing in it that carried over into our "real" selves?[10] No serious writer, composer, painter has ever doubted, even in moments of strategic aestheticism, that his work bears on good and evil, on the enhancement or diminution of the sum of humanity in man and the city.[11]

Booth goes on to say that, "Most authors have explicitly offered their works as criticism of false views of the world, false cosmic myth. . . . Most authors we care about have explicitly allied themselves with religious, political or cultural programs. . . . Such works recommend one view of ultimate reality as against various mistaken views held by most of the characters in each story and by some, perhaps most, readers. . . . They offer themselves as what (Burke) repeatedly calls 'equipment for living', the best equipment

[8] Steiner, 126.
[9] Eaglestone, 3.
[10] Booth, 125.
[11] Booth, 145.

for the best kind of life."[12] Or as the author John Updike writes, "Surely one of the novel's habitual aims is to articulate morality, to sharpen the reader's sense of vice and virtue."[13] When Booth speaks of "the best," or Updike of "vice and virtue," they recognize that these are not prescriptions made in a black and white world, but choices made from the gray ambiguities of real life. Their point is that the author's intentions, far from being irrelevant, hold an important place in our interpretation of a text.

In concert with authorial intent, the reader enhances his understanding of a text from the perspective of Historical Criticism. This perspective takes into consideration the philosophical, ethical, political, and economic conditions of the time in which the text was produced.[14] Again, the author does not write in a vacuum. The writer reflects the realities, perceived through their unique lens, of his time and circumstance.

The problem of adhering too closely to establishing meaning in a text through authorial intent and historical criticism is, as the New Critics, deconstructionists, and reader responders would be quick to point out, there is no single, correct interpretation. As with most literature, and certainly with our religious canon, we have no way to discuss the meaning of a given text with its respective author. They are simply not around for us to talk with. Even if we had direct access to the author, personally, through a diary or memoir, there is still no way to glean a single meaning from the text. Writers themselves will change their views regarding the meaning of their own works over the course of their lives. Given this, would authors ask readers to limit their interpretations of the respective work? Or would they hope that generations into the future would continue to interpret their work in new and fresh ways?

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[12] Booth, 341.
[13] Booth, 19.
[14] Quinn, 150

As there is no way, with pure objectivity, to get inside the author's head, there is no perfect objectivity to understanding history. All history we read is an interpretation of events by the respective writer of those events.[15] Each of us observes the world around us through the unique filter of our own lives. Therefore, as important as it may be to understand the world in which an author wrote or his intentions in writing a story, the reader is limited by the reality of subjectivity and ambiguity. No one reader may categorically say, "This is it. This is what the author had in mind. This is what influenced the author. This is what the text means."

1.2 Ethical Criticism

Bridging the gap between these two distinct ends of the literary theory spectrum is a writer in a unique position to do so. Umberto Eco, the Italian author and literary critic, established his position in the literary world as an outspoken advocate for the role of the reader in producing meaning in the text (reader response theory)— an adversary of authorial intent. Over the course of Eco's life, his perspective changed. Fortunately for us, Eco has beautifully articulated his evolution of thought; the evolution and articulation provide a worthy paradigm in their own right.

Eco became increasingly uneasy with the way some of the leading strands of contemporary critical thought (new criticism, deconstruction, reader response) appeared to him to license the reader to produce a limitless, uncheckable flow of "readings." Developing this protest against what he saw as the perverse appropriation of the idea of

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[15] This idea is presented in the writings of Hayden White—such as "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," in *Critical Theory Since 1965*, edited by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (University Press of Florida, Tallahassee).

"unlimited semiosis",[16] Eco explored ways of limiting the range of admissible interpretations and hence of identifying certain readings as "overinterpretation."[17] In the process, Eco came to believe that the aim of the text was to produce the "Model Reader."

This reader would, "recognize overinterpretation of a text without necessarily being able to prove that one interpretation is the right one, or even clinging to any belief that there must be *one* right reading. The intention of the work, *intentio operas* (authorial intent), plays an important role as a source of meaning. . . which operates as a constraint upon the free play of the *intentio lectoris*, the reader's interpretation."[18] Literature is more, Eco argues, than the Russian critic Todorov's malicious suggestion that: "A text is only a picnic where the author brings the words and the reader brings the sense."[19] Eco offers a synthesis, providing his model reader a strategy that both respects the author and the reader and creates something new in the process. The alternative is not simply or solely that the only valid interpretation aims at finding the original intention of the author. Between the intention of the author and the intention of the interpreter, there is a third possibility: the *intention of the text.*[20]

Adding to Eco's thought is David H. Aaron, who wrote:

> It is undoubtedly true that a text, once written, can be related to in a fashion that altogether ignores the notion of authorial intent (or even denies its existence). But such an approach to text is a form of intellectual solipsism, one that chooses to ignore (or fails to grasp) the mechanics of human discourse. . . . Text, then, is neither an independent repository for objective meanings nor a reservoir for potentially limitless interpretations. Meaning in language does have confines, even though we can behave as if it does not. Those confines may permit us to establish reasonable limits to inter-

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[16] Semiosis/semiotics: The study of signs. Eco uses the term to specifically look at the unlimited interpretation that a reader may bring to the signs of words and language. See Quinn, 296-297.
[17] Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 8.
[18] Eco, 9-10.
[19] Eco, 24.
[20] Eco, 25.

> pretations, even as they may fail to establish certainty and univocality in most things said.[21]

Both Aaron and Eco, without labeling it as such, approach the text through the lens of ethical criticism. Wayne Booth has carefully articulated and advocated the case for ethical criticism, acknowledging its vulnerability along the way. He states up front that reading to establish meaning, reading to judge the "value" of a text, is a subjective enterprise.[22] Not only does Booth embrace subjectivity and multiple possibilities of meaning, he stakes out his position, unequivocally, of the power of a text to impact our lives. Thus, he relates to the British pragmatist, Matthew Arnold, who articulates the conviction that the study of literature has "civilizing values."[23]

Ethical criticism asserts the belief that (primary) literature and the interpretation (secondary) of literature have a humanistic ethical mission to repair a "fractured modern world."[24] Booth seeks to make Eco's model reader comfortable that he does not have to make a claim to objectivity in order to assert his voice; he does not have to promote a "value-free" approach to reading. Embracing ethical criticism does not rest on the illusory idea of impartiality.[25] It is, in fact, the pursuit of this illusion of impartiality that has come to characterize the multi-cultural, relativist liberal in our post-modern society. That is, those who see limitless interpretations in a text, and at the same time feel pressure from the politically correct-seeking, liberal community that paralyzes them from taking any position at all. Ironically, in the name of democracy, justice and compassion

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[21] David H. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 5-6.
[22] Booth, 11.
[23] Booth, 15
[24] Booth, 16.
[25] Booth, 24.

we abandon our right to believe, to debate and to hunt down the truth.[26]

While pluralism can be as a sign of a healthy society, allowing every man his opinion as long as the opinion does not infringe on the rights of others, it also tends to undermine man's ability to believe in true morality.[27] The position of the ethical critic is an equal opportunity critic. The fundamentalist, within the spectrum of literary theory, represents the epitome of authorial intent. In the case of religious canon, the fundamentalist claims allegiance to the ultimate author, none other than God. The fundamentalist's world is black and white. The experience of the conflict-torn liberal, recognizing a variety of meanings in a text, is nowhere on the radar screen of the fundamentalist. The irony, of course, is there is not just one representative within the fundamentalist community. There are, in fact, far more outspoken fundamentalists than liberals, claiming their franchise on *the* truth—each truth in conflict with another. As opposed to the liberal, who is open to many views, the fundamentalist is open to none other than his one, absolute truth. With those on this extreme end of the side of authorial intent, our time is not well spent trying to get them to read the text differently. Though we can expect true believers to be unshaken if we try to show them that their chosen myth is inferior to some other myth, those who are willing to engage in a genuinely critical conversation can learn from one another.[28] The fundamentalist leaves no room to hear that which might change him.

The liberal within the spectrum of literary theory identifies, broadly speaking, with the New Critic, deconstructionist and reader responder. "Today," writes Steiner, "the liberal imagination is more or less at ease with the manifold discourse of uncertain-

[26] Gardner, 42.
[27] Gardner, 135.
[28] Booth, 347.

ties. It perceives in this multiplicity and indeterminacy of possible discourses and metaphoric modellings a guarantor of tolerance. It suspects in any thirst for absolutes not only an infantile simplicity but old, cruel demons of dogma."[29] It is not liberalism that Steiner criticizes here, but cowards dressed in the loose clothing of liberalism. It is a false liberalism that fears making any judgment; believing that there is no one meaning that can be established in the text. Therefore, everything is relative, and taking a position advocating one meaning of a text, would be a slap in the face to another's different perception of meaning. To avoid such a confrontation, the false liberal takes no position, seeking the illusory shelter of neutrality.

Again, it is the synthesis expressed by Umberto Eco, which characterizes the school of ethical criticism, one that seeks to challenge the false liberal and the fundamentalist, the extreme conservative— creating something new between the strict adherence to authorial intent, and the complete open-ended interpretation produced by the reader. "Perception without responsibility is dangerously free-floating, even as duty without perception is blunt and blind."[30] Ethical criticism does not try to seek out the slip-proof slope. Reading through the lens of ethical criticism does not depend on our ability to come to consensus on one ethical appraisal or produce a single, harmonious scheme of narrative values.[31] However, it does require some "search for standards" if we are to argue that life (and the narratives that describe it) are not completely open to whatever interpretation a reader deems appropriate.[32] How one lives one's life, therefore, cannot take any form that an individual deems appropriate. The community sets a standard by

[29] Steiner, 199-200.
[30] Steiner, 41.
[31] Steiner, 207
[32] Steiner, 331.

which individuals are expected to measure up. This ethics for reading and living is one that the reasonable liberal community can embrace. Ethical criticism advocates a liberalism that takes stands, even if ambiguity can never be eliminated. The liberalism called for in ethical criticism does not seek a black and white world. But it does require setting standards that stand for goodness in opposition to that which interferes with and threatens goodness.

The challenge is that standards in one age may not be relevant or appropriate in another age, as within one culture and not another. Philosopher Martha Nussbaum agrees that there is no safe guarantee, no formula and no shortcut to establishing standards by which we live. "Yet," she writes, "this absence of formula does not mean that we have laissez-faire, or that any choice one makes is all right. There are many ways of wrecking a ship in a storm, and very few ways of sailing it well. Aristotle says, 'There are many ways of missing the target. . . and only one way of hitting it; so one is easy and one is hard.'"[33]

Nussbaum hones in on the tension that pits standards and flexibility against each other. "Aristotle insisted on the need for formal procedures and codified rules in the public sphere for a number of reasons. . . . The rule of law is defended and given a place of honor in Aristotelian politics. . . . Aristotle speaks of the flexible ruler as the virtue of a good judge. And his idea that a judge of practical wisdom, rather than being unreflectively subservient to law (fundamentalist, orthodox)[34] will apply it in accordance with his very own ethical judgment, looking attentively at history and the circumstances of his city as he does. . . . Flexible ethical judgment in institutions gives them a moral

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[33] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Loves Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 97.
[34] My parentheses.

reach and vision that it would not otherwise have."[35] This leaves the reader, the one in a position to choose, with a pluralism with limits.[36]

As we move then to the biblical text of Esther, we do so with a specific reading strategy in mind. Ethical criticism is concerned, above all, with the relationship between the reader and the implied author.[37] By no means does ethical criticism preclude formal analysis, and a study of the aesthetics of the text. The meaning and the impact of a narrative, only spring from the success of good writing—form creates meaning. Over time, and in particularly in our post-modern age, art and religion, the poet and the priest have become two separate things.[38] It will be our challenge, in moving ahead with the literature of the Hebrew Bible, to bring these pieces back together.

[35] Nussbaum, 99.
[36] Booth, 489.
[37] Booth, 233.
[38] Gardner, 167.

The Book of Esther

2.1 Synopsis of Book of Esther[1]

As Jon Levenson begins his translation and commentary on the book of Esther, he is quick to note that the story is not reducible to viewing from one angle:

> It is for example, a tale of intrigue at court, a story of lethal danger to the Jews narrowly averted by heroic rescue. It is also a tale of ascent of an orphan in exile to the rank of the most powerful woman – and perhaps even the most powerful person – in the empire and, arguably, the world. The book of Esther is the story of how a humiliated and endangered minority, the Jews of the eastern Diaspora after Babylonian exile, came to be respected and feared by the Gentile majority and to see one of their own honored by appointment to the second highest post in the empire. It is the comic story of a pompous fool who does himself in and the chilling tale of the narrow escape from death of a despised and ever-vulnerable minority. It is all these things and more. . .[2]

Before analyzing the overall design of the book and how the author communicates his multiple messages, a synopsis of the story is in order.

Three Royal Banquets (1:1-9)

The narrative of the book of Esther takes place in the time of the Persian Empire, in the city of Susa, under the rule of King Ahasuerus. In the third year of the king's reign, he throws a lavish banquet for the upper echelon of his empire. The banquet lasts for a hundred and eighty days. Following this six-month banquet, the kings throws another banquet, described in great detail with copious quantities of wine consumed.

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[1] Verse divisions follow: Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 42-134.

[2] Levenson, 1.

This banquet lasts for thirty days, and all the men of the empire, high and low alike are invited. Not to be left out, Queen Vashti throws a separate banquet of her own in the royal palace, for the women of the empire.

Vashti's Refusal (1:10-12)

During the second banquet, after seven days of drinking, the king orders seven of his eunuchs to bring Queen Vashti over to the men's banquet. The king's intent is to show off his queen's great beauty, and requests that she is displayed wearing only her royal crown. Queen Vashti refuses the king's command and sends the eunuchs back empty-handed. This rejection makes the king burn with rage.

The Cabinet Meets in Emergency Session (1:13-22)

The king calls the equivalent of an emergency cabinet session[3] to figure out how to deal with the queen's intransigence. One of his seven key advisors suggests to the king that a royal decree be sent throughout the kingdom, making it clear that, "all wives shall treat their husbands with honor, from the highest to the lowest." The king is pleased with this advice and sees that it is enacted throughout his empire.

The Search for Miss Persia and Media Commences (2:1-4)

After the embarrassment of the king's rejection is handled by this new decree, and the king's anger subsides, he is ready to move on. Seeing this, one of the king's servants suggests that all of the beautiful young virgins of the empire be brought to the king. The

[3]Levenson, 49.

one virgin that most pleases the king will be selected as the new queen, in the place of Vashti. The king is pleased with this advice, and he acts upon it.

A Jewish Exile and His Comely Cousin (2:5-7)

The two protagonists are now introduced. First we meet a Jew by the name of Mordecai. His genealogy is given in detail, and his condition of exile is stressed. He is the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been exiled from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. Mordecai's adopted daughter is introduced by her Hebrew name, Haddasah, her Persian name, Esther. Additionally, her great beauty is highlighted.

Esther Wins the Beauty Contest (2:8-20)

Esther, being one amongst many beautiful virgins, is brought to the royal palace, and taken into the custody of Hegai, the harem-keeper. Esther wins Hegai's good favor, and he gives her a position of advantage within the harem. Esther does not disclose her Jewish roots, and Mordecai keeps close to the harem's courtyard to keep tabs on Esther. Each of the virgins goes through twelve months of extensive beauty treatments in preparation of their opportunity with the king.

Esther, whom we now additionally know as the daughter of Abihail, closely follows the advice of Hegai before being brought before the king. When Esther is finally brought before King Ahasuerus, now in the seventh year of his reign, she wins the king's favor more than all the other virgins. The king indicates her selection as queen by placing the royal crown on her head. The king throws a banquet in Esther's honor, gives

tax breaks, and distributes gifts throughout his provinces. Mordecai, behind the scenes, forbids Esther from revealing her identity as a Jew, and Esther continues to do as Mordecai instructs.

Mordecai and Esther Saves the King's Life (2:21-23)

During those days, Mordecai, sitting in the palace gate, overhears two of the king's eunuchs plotting to harm the king. Mordecai passes on this valuable information to Esther, who, in Mordecai's name, tips off the king. When the report is verified, the eunuchs are hanged and the matter is recorded in the book of annals before the king.

Mordecai's Refusal (3:1-6)

King Ahasuerus now promotes to a position second only to the king a man we soon come to know as the antagonist of the story: Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite. Haman comes to know Mordecai as the only one at the king's gate who refuses to bow to him. When Haman hears who Mordecai's people are, he decides the best way to exact punishment on Mordecai for his disrespect is to destroy all the Jews in the Persian empire (which effectively encompasses the entire world population, and all the Jews at this time).

Haman Hatches His Plot (3:7-11)

Now in the twelfth year of Ahasuerus's reign, Haman draws a *pur*, a lot, to determine the exact date, the 13th of Adar, on which he intends to annihilate the Jews. Haman easily convinces the king of the threat of an unnamed people in his empire: "a

certain people scattered and unassimilated. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws." When Haman comes through with an additional incentive of 10,000 silver talents, the king gives Haman the go ahead to do with these people as he sees fit.

The Edict of Genocide Is Issued (3:12-15)

Instructions are sent out to officials across the empire to "destroy, slay, and annihilate all the Jews—young and old, women and children—on a single day, the thirteenth. . . of Adar, and to take their property as plunder." In celebration of the distribution of the king's new decree, the king and Haman sit down to drink (yet another banquet), while the city of Susa is thrown into confusion.

Esther's Ignorance and Resistance (4:1-11)

When Mordecai hears of the king-sanctioned plans to annihilate the Jews, he follows the Jewish mourning rituals of tearing his garments, putting on sackcloth and ashes, and goes wailing through the city. Jews throughout the empire, upon hearing the king's decree follow the same mourning rituals, including fasting. Esther, upon hearing of Mordecai's behavior, is greatly agitated and sends him a new set off cloths, so that he would remove his sackcloth. When Mordecai refuses to put on the cloths, Esther sends the eunuch Hatach to find out what is bothering Mordecai. Mordecai in turn sends Hatach back to Esther with a copy of the king's new decree against the Jews, with the hope that Esther would seek the king's mercy, on behalf of her people. Esther in turn,

sends Hatach back to Mordecai, rejecting the mission, for fear of her own death if she approaches the king without being summoned.

Esther Accepts Her Providential Role (4:12-17)

Upon hearing Esther's rejection, Mordecai sends a message back to Esther making it clear that "relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another quarter" should Esther decide not to intervene. Additionally, Esther and her father's family would perish due to her silence. Perhaps, Mordecai suggests to Esther, it is for just such an occasion that Esther ascended to the royal throne. Mordecai's latest tack is enough to move Esther to action. She sends a message back to Mordecai ordering all Jews in Susa to fast for three days, and she would do the same. Esther vows to approach the king, even at the risk of her life.

The King Grants Her Request (5:1-8)

On the third day of her fast, dressed in royal robes, Esther approaches the king's inner courtyard without being summoned. Immediately upon seeing her, the king extends an invitation to enter. With no idea of what's bothering Esther and what she wishes to request, Ahasuerus displays his love by offering Esther half the wealth of his kingdom. Esther simply invites the king to a banquet that she has prepared. The king immediately summons his second-in-command Haman to join the feast Esther had prepared.

Now at the banquet, the king again assures Esther that whatever her request, it will be granted, "up to half the empire—it shall be fulfilled!" Esther responds by simply

inviting the king and Haman to a banquet the following day that she wishes to prepare for them.

Haman's Joy Turns to Rage Again (5:9-14)

Haman's joy at being included in the company of the royal couple, for two consecutive days, quickly turns to rage as he is again snubbed by Mordecai's refusal to bow before him. Sharing with his wife and friends both his good fortune at being included in the good graces of king and queen and the slap in the face from Mordecai, Haman receives some advice from his wife Zeresh. She suggests that Haman erect a stake fifty cubits high on which to impale Mordecai the following morning. The advice pleases Haman, and he acts to have the stake set up.

A Patriot is Honored and an Egomaniac is Disgraced (6:1-14)

That night, the king has problems falling asleep. It occurs to the king that having the book of records read to him might help him fall asleep. The very part that is read is the record of Mordecai's information that foiled the plans to harm the king. The king then learns that Mordecai is never honored or promoted for this good deed.

Who should happen by to help advise the king as to how to honor such a man, but Haman. The king, in seeking such advice, does not mention Mordecai by name. Haman assumes that the king is looking for a way to honor Haman himself. Haman, therefore advises the king based on his own fantasy of how he would wish to be honored: "The man whom the king desires to honor. . . . Let the royal garb be brought that the king

has worn and a horse on which the king has ridden and on whose head a royal crown has been set. And let the horse be delivered into the care of one of the king's noble officials, and let the man whom the king desires to honor be attired and led through the city square mounted on the horse, while they call out before him: 'This is what is done for the man whom the king wishes to honor.'"

The king thinks Haman's advice is great and immediately assigns Haman the job of the noble official to honor Mordecai. Haman follows through with his plan, as the king commands, omitting nothing.

After this great debacle, Haman returns home in mourning, covering his head. Upon relaying his humiliation to his wife and friends, they proceed to tell him, if Mordecai is Jewish, "you will never overcome him. You shall collapse altogether before him." In the middle of this exchange, Haman is rushed off by the king's eunuchs to the banquet Esther had prepared.

The Climactic Banquet (7:1-10)

Once again the king asks Esther of her request, now for the third time, again promising to grant her, "up to half the empire." Esther finally requests that her life, and the lives of her people (not explicitly mentioned) be saved from being "destroyed, slain and annihilated." Esther qualifies her request, stating that if they were sold into slavery, she would make no such request of the king. The king demands to know what man would have the nerve to do such a thing and Esther dramatically indicts Haman.

At this moment the king leaves in a rage. Sensing this as the opportune moment, Haman, in utter desperation, pleads with Esther for his life. In doing so Haman

stumbles upon the couch in which Esther is reclined, at the very moment that the king re-enters the room. Finding Haman in this compromising position with his wife, and already in a rage, he asks Haman if he intends to rape the queen in his own palace. The king's eunuch, Harbona brings to the kings attention the stake that Haman had constructed in order to impale Mordecai. The king follows the eunuch's implicit advice and commands that Haman be impaled on the very stake set up for Mordecai.

The Queen Persuades Ahasuerus to Act (8:1-8)

On this very day, King Ahasuerus gives Esther Haman's estate and elevates Mordecai's position among his top advisors. The king's signet ring, which had previously been given to Haman, is now given to Mordecai. Esther, still aware of the edict that calls for ordering the annihilation of the Jews, requests that the king rescind it. The king tells Esther and Mordecai that such a decree may not be withdrawn, but empowers them to write an opposing decree.

A New Edict is Issued (8:9-15)

Mordecai is in charge of dictating and distributing the new decree granting the Jews "in every city the right to assemble and to fight for their lives—to destroy, slay, and annihilate the armed forces of any people or province that might attack them, women and children as well, and to take their property as plunder, throughout all of King Ahasuerus's provinces on a single day, the thirteenth. . . of Adar."

The Exaltation of Mordecai and the Happiness of the Jews (8:15-17)

The language of the new decree is promptly distributed throughout every province. When Mordecai emerges from the king's presence in royal cloths and wearing an enormous golden crown, the city of Susa cries out in joy. Throughout the empire, there is joy, happiness, feasting and a holiday among the Jews, and many people "identified themselves with the Jews because the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them."

Battle is Joined—and Renewed (9:1-19)

On the fateful day, the thirteenth of Adar, the Jews successfully defended themselves against those bent on annihilating them. "The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, slaying and annihilating; they did as they pleased with those who hated them." They proceed to kill five hundred men in the fortified compound of Susa, and slay Haman's ten sons. It is noted that the Jews do not lay a hand on the spoil.

When this news reaches the king, he relays it to Esther, and asks if there is any further request that the queen wishes to make. Esther requests that their decree be extended for another day—allowing the killing to continue— and that Haman's ten slain sons be publicly impaled on the stake. Ahasuerus grants the queen's request. Haman's sons are impaled, three hundred additional men are slain in Susa, and it is noted that the Jews do not lay a hand on the spoil. Outside Susa, in the other provinces, the Jews slay "seventy-five thousand of those who hated them. But they do not lay a hand on the spoil."

The chapter continues with some confusing verses over which days the Jews should celebrate with "banqueting and merrymaking." It seems that for those Jews in

walled cities, like Susa, they would celebrate on the fifteenth of Adar. For those Jews living in un-walled towns, they would "keep the fourteenth of the month of Adar in merrymaking and banqueting and as a holiday, sending presents and food to each other."

Purim Instituted, Confirmed, and Reconfirmed (9:20-32

Mordecai then goes on to specifically record that "all Jews, near and far" are to keep the fourteenth and the fifteenth of Adar, "every year as the days on which the Jews obtained relief from their enemies and the month that had been transformed for them from a time of grief to joy, from an occasion of mourning to a holiday. These were to be days of "banqueting and joy, sending presents of food to each other and gifts to the poor." The author then reminds the readers of Haman's evil plot, and his drawing of the *pur* indicating the day on which the Jews were to be annihilated. Instead the plot is foiled, and the reverse fate, for Haman and his sons is realized. Therefore, these days were called Purim, after the word *pur*.

The Jews accept the responsibility that they and their descendents would observe these two days "in the prescribed manner and at their appointed time every year."

The chapter continues with Queen Esther, "daughter of Abihail" and Mordecai "the Jew" recording a second letter about Purim. Finally, the chapter ends with Esther exercising her authority, confirming the "rules for Purim. . . in writing."

The Greatness of Ahasuerus and Mordecai (10:1-3)

The book of Esther ends reminding the reader of King Ahasuerus's authority over his entire empire. With this authority, the king sees that Mordecai's promotion, as

second in command is duly noted in the Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia. The final verse of the story reinforces for the reader the high level of power and respect that Mordecai achieved within the Persian Empire.

2.2 Literary Analysis of Book of Esther[4]

The literary form is not separable from philosophic content, but is itself, part of the content—an integral part then of the search for and the statement of truth.[5] The following analysis begins the process of demonstrating a reading strategy that follows Eco's "model reader." The literary form of a book, the very aesthetics created by the author is the vehicle used to transmit meaning to the text. It is precisely the author's ability to engage the reader with his mastery of form that which determines the impact a story may have in influencing the lives of its readers.

(1:1-9) The first three verses in the book of Esther draw out two of the key questions we will be trying to answer throughout the analysis of the text: 1) What choices did the author have in writing this story? And 2) how are we, as readers, to evaluate these choices and make sense of the story?

The omniscient narrator has provided us with very specific pieces of information. The story takes place in the days of a king whose name is Ahasuerus. This king reigns from India to Nubia, a territory encompassing a hundred twenty-seven provinces. The king's throne is located in the fortress of Susa. The story takes place in the third year of the king's reign, as he invites his officers from Persia and Media to a banquet. What, a reader might ask, is the purpose of all this information?

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[4] Following the verse division from Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*.
[5] Eaglestone, 37.

Some biblical commentators would argue, based in part on the setting, that this story represents a true historical account. Ahasuerus (as is popularly accepted) is the Hebrew name for the Persian King Xerxes, who reigned (485-465 B.C.E.) over a territory that indeed ranged from India to Nubia. There are extra-biblical witnesses to attest to this, and archeological evidence that confirms a fortress in the ancient city of Susa. The author has a reason to use verifiable historical information. But, can we comfortably say that all of the information presented by the narrator is "historically accurate?" The answer is no, and there are instances throughout the story that back up this claim. For one, the number of provinces (127) is in conflict with the most reliable historical information available.[6] It is possible that the author simply made a mistake in his reporting. He may have intended to give an accurate account of the number of provinces, but just got it wrong. Or perhaps the author intentionally misrepresents the number.

Modern commentator Jon Levenson suggests the latter as an alternative way to look at the author's use of this number. "It has been suggested that it might be symbolic, perhaps derived from the product of twelve for the tribes of Israel, and ten as a common expression of completeness, with seven added on to express perfection. Twelve, ten, and seven are all indeed significant numbers in the Bible, and one can fruitfully compare the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces with the one hundred and twenty years of maximum longevity in Genesis :3 (also the lifespan of Moses in Deut. 34:7) as well as the many sets of seven in the Bible, including the seven years (e.g., Exod. 21:2 and Lev. 25:8). In this respect, it is interesting to note that Gen. 23:1 gives the same figure for Sarah's years of life as the book of Esther gives for the number of provinces under Ahasuerus's control, one hundred twenty-seven."

[6] Levenson, 43.

Whether one is attracted to Levenson's specific hypothesis or not, it is offered as an example arguing for the breakdown in the strict historicity of the story. This is one of many such examples running throughout the book. Levenson warns the biblical readers that, "Esther is seriously misinterpreted if it is taken as literal historical reportage." Literary theorist, Hayden White, in writing of the nature of the historical account, adds support to Levenson's claim, and adds to our understanding of historical writing: "One of the marks of a good professional historian is the consistency with which he reminds his readers of the purely provisional nature of his characterizations of events, agents, and agencies found in the always incomplete historical record." Historical narratives, White continues, "are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences."[7] White dramatically reframes the commonly held notion that history is an objective narrative telling us *what happened.*

Bursting the historicity bubble, dispelling its mystique as a purveyor of objective truth, does not diminish the truth that a narrative has to offer. "This honest recognition," Levenson writes, "need imply no impairment of the religious or literary worth of the book."[8] Biblical scholar, Katrina Larkin, picks up this point and alerts us to the fallacious notion that, by removing a text from that of "pure history," the content and meaning of the story become benign.[9] The simple division between non-fiction and fiction is not as black and white as is commonly believed. The choice of an author to write in a fiction genre does not relegate that text to a second-class status regarding the

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[7] Hayden White, Edited by Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, *Critical Theory Since 1965* (Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 1986), 396.
[8] Levenson, 43.
[9] Katrina J.A. Larkin, *Ruth and Esther* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 64.

truths that a text can convey. On the contrary, fiction has the potential to communicate profound truths in a far less encumbered way than non-fiction.

This then, brings us back to the question of why the author may have chosen to integrate verifiable historical background, with other information simply dressed up to appear historical. I would argue that the author is, with great mastery, using just enough detail from the period of the Persian Empire to lend the story an air of historicity. At the same time, the author intentionally bends the historical data in order to signal to his designated readers that this is a coded document. The story was not meant as a historical document, but a work of historical-fiction, loaded with "truths" for a particular community in need of receiving these "truths." Esther's author, like the biblical "chronicler" used the air of historicity to give legitimacy to their works of fiction. The biblical authors had important observations to make and messages to convey regarding the times in which they lived. They were not going to let the limitations of historical record, itself a subjective account, restrict their voices.

If, as it has been argued, this story is written during the time of Greek rule in the land of Israel (pre-Hasmonean), the Jews were challenged with surviving as a national identity under a foreign power. Responding to this situation, the author devices a narrative sleight-of-hand, the surface of which posed no threat to the Greek power structure. Below the surface, however, is a text written with the particular speech community of the Jews in mind. In order to accomplish this, the author chooses a setting, ands a kingdom from the past so as to not threaten the Greeks, yet imbeds his messages within a language and experience only familiar to the Jews—the language of the Bible and the experience of being a Jew, living under a foreign power. Whether the foreign

power is the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, or any other conquering host culture, ancient or modern, there has been and continues to be a need for such a Jewish Diaspora story. The story of the Jewish people has been, by in large, that of a people living in exile, under the control of a foreign power. This condition increased the need for the Jews to have a literature that can speak to them through the safety of their own speech community. It was this goal, to communicate to the Diaspora Jews of his time that informed the choices of Esther's author.

One of the tropes holding together the book of Esther is that of the *mishtei*, the banquet. There are ten banquets strategically placed throughout the story that set up the author's use of irony and reversal. Whatever the intended course of those "in power," the readers comes to expect the opposite to happen.

The opening two banquets (1:1-8) serve to accentuate, if not exaggerate, Ahasuerus' wealth and power and the king's need to flaunt it. Again, although the author uses descriptive language that gives credence to his knowledge of what these Persian extravaganzas looked like, historicity, as has been pointed out, is not the author's goal. The language serves the function of creating a buffer to protect him and his contemporary Jewish brethren from the foreign power under which they had to live. The selective use of the historical serves not only as this buffer, but also helps create the author's desired satirical impact.

Beautifully illustrating this satirical perspective is 1:8. The verse seems to suggest that "the law" was that there should in fact be no law: everyone could drink as much (or as little) as they wanted. As Michael Fox nicely puts it, "this king tends to let people do as they want." The same permissiveness and lack of standards will be evident

when the king approves Haman's petition to annihilate the Jews, handing him his signet ring without so much as a word of interrogation or a moment of deliberation. Although the principled nature of the king's law is laughable, its potential impact on the Jews is no laughing matter. The author stresses the overwhelming wealth, power and status of the Persian king, for these are what the Jews, soon to be condemned to genocide, will have to overcome.[10]

Providing another instance is 1:9, where the reader who focuses too much on historical verisimilitude misses the impact of the author's intent. Why Queen Vashti is motivated to give a banquet (the third of the story, 1:9) for women only is a bit puzzling. Elsewhere in the book and in Herodotus there is precedent for women partying with men at Persian banquets.[11] Whatever the historical unlikelihood may be, Esther 1:9 fills an important function in the narrative. This is the set-up the author creates so that Vashti is called by the king. Vashti must be called by the king in order for her to refuse the king's summons.

It is within the next three verses (1:10-12) that we can begin to appreciate the author's masterful use of other narrative as a way to exclusively communicate with his Jewish readers. This transcript becomes "hidden" to all those unfamiliar with the Jewish stories. It, therefore, assumes that his targeted readers, fellow Jews, were closely connected to the biblical stories, in whatever form they existed at that time. The author consciously makes allusion to other biblical texts.

Jon Levenson, through a combination of his own intimate knowledge of the biblical texts, and diligent spadework, has helped us connect with the texts that resonate

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[10] Levenson, 45, 46.
[11] Herodotus: 5th century B.C.E. Greek historian of the Persian period.

most closely with the king's summons. This is all keeping in mind his drunken state and Vashti's refusal to be paraded naked before the king's stag party. Look at the texts, for example, that underscore the connection between intoxication and impending doom: "Nabel was in a merry mood and very drunk" just before his wife, Abigail, tells him of her solicitude for David.[12] God strikes him dead and David marries his widow. Amnon is "merry with wine" when he is struck dead at Absolom's command.[13] Similar language (though without direct reference to liquor) occurs in Esther 5:9, when "Haman went out [from the queen's wine feast] that day joyful and merry" only to become enraged at the sight of Mordecai, who will soon be his downfall.[14]

Most of the irony and peripety we experience through the book is in favor of the protagonists at the expense of the antagonists. Not so with Vashti's seemingly principled refusal to humiliate herself in front of a banquet filled with drunken men. Queen Vashti's absolute and uncompromising refusal to comply with her husband renders her powerless and ineffective and ultimately sweeps her from the scene. The positive antipode to Vashti is Esther. Although the reader is not told of any of the vulgar requests we see of Vashti, Esther does maintain relations (in both sexual and general terms) with Ahasuerus, and is thereby able to gain power and achieve goals higher than the maintenance of her own dignity—the preservation of her people and herself.[15]

(1:13-22) The author proceeds to draw a satirical picture of a king who is unaware of the law of his own kingdom. Ahasuerus sets himself up to accept whatever advice is given to him. The author's use of exaggeration accentuates the satirical impact. The

[12] 1 Samuel 25:36.
[13] 2 Samuel 13:28.
[14] Levenson, 47.
[15] Levenson, 48.

decree being dawn up for the king's approval promises that, "*all* wives will treat their husbands with honor." Ahasuerus, indicating no process of deliberation, is pleased with the proposed decree, and moves immediately to enact it. The author not only draws our attention to the thoughtlessness of the king's actions, but the irony of the decree itself. After all, the king's own wife, Vashti, did not hold him with the honor in which he now wishes to impose upon all the other wives in the empire regarding their husbands. The claim that the law is irrevocable also goes against the grain of historicity, but adds to the rhetoric of exaggeration that runs throughout the story, and sets up the counter decree later in the story. The king, who seems completely out of touch with reality, reflects a culture out of touch with reality, and foreshadows Haman's catastrophic lack of a sense of reality as he hatches his genocidal plot.[16]

The author also plants the seed that Ahasuerus will appoint a new queen who is worthier than Vashti. This not only helps to ease the king's mind that Vashti was in fact, not worthy of being the queen, it gives the king hope that he will find a worthier replacement. The author draws on a similar biblical text to give his readers an analogous situation. In 1 Samuel 15:28 we read of Samuel's remark to Saul that, "the Lord has this day torn the kingship over Israel from you and has given it to another who is worthier than you." As Levenson observes, this sets up an analogy between Vashti and Saul, the two monarchs deposed in favor of successors enveloped by a mysterious grace, David and Esther.[17]

(2:1-4) Despite this attempt to ease the king's mind, chapter two seems to begin with a sense that Ahasuerus may be experiencing regret over his angry reaction towards

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[16] Levenson, 51.
[17] Levenson, 52.

Vashti's snubbing. We know nothing else, explicitly, of Vashti's fate, but the author leaves us to assume that her defiance sentences her to never again appear before the king. The king's servants know their boss well enough to come up with the remedy for his remorse over Vashti. Bring on the virgins! The satirical text continues as the men assigned to be "in charge" of the virgin women to be brought to satisfy the king's sexual appetite are the sexually impotent eunuchs.

Just as the complete coverage of the king's edict sent to *all* the women illustrates exaggeration, so does the wishful thinking that *all* the beautiful virgins are to be brought to the king and *kol v'chomare*[18], the unlikelihood that, out of all of the beautiful virgins in the empire, a Jewess should be the chosen one. This only adds to the unlikely historicity giving way to the rhetorical choices made by the author. The use of time, as well, adds to the feeling of exaggeration and the carnivalesque in the story. The king's first banquet lasted a hundred and eighty days and now there is four years between Vashti's removal and Esther's ascension to the throne.

(2:5-7) It is the author's literary choices that create the meaning in the text. Mordecai, for example, to whom we are introduced in chapter two, is not given a Hebrew name. This accentuates Mordecai's status as an exile, one cut off from his Israelite roots. The biographical information that the author provides the reader concerning Mordecai clearly indicates that he was exiled from Jerusalem. Those looking for handles of historical verification within the texts, again run into problems. If Mordecai had only been one year old in 587 BCE (the date of King Jeconiah's deportation from Jerusalem to Babylon), he would have been about 115 years old in the third year of Xerxes reign, and

[18] "All the more so."

about 119 years old when Esther becomes a queen.[19] It is likely that the mention of Jeconiah and the exile as information about Mordecai, is intended to give the book of Esther a "biblical" connection and to set its narrative into the larger framework of the history of Israel's redemption.

(2:8-20) As Esther prepares to meet the king for the first time, the literary device of exaggeration is again employed. The prescribed beauty treatment for each woman as she primes herself in anticipation of meeting the king, is a full twelve months: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and cosmetics.[20] Extensive spa treatments are not simply the new fad in our times.

The issue of Esther's identity is central to these verses. This pericopy is bracketed with the information that Esther concealed the identity of her people and her family at Mordecai's bidding. Both before her elevation to the throne, and after, the narrator lets us know that Esther is conscious of her Jewish roots. Even if there is no explicit reference to Esther's concern for Jewish ritual and observance, she does have a sense of her national identity as a Jew. Perhaps it is Mordecai's job to ensure she does not forget. The role of the Jew who passes for a gentile, which is certainly the case in the book of Esther, has strong biblical resonance. Again, the author provides his Jewish readership a context within their own national story: in the Joseph story (Gen. 41:39-4; 42:7), and in the Exodus story with Moses (2:11-22, especially verse 19).[21]

An author's need to create events in the narrative, episodes that function to bring about a designated outcome, may at times be the very source of problems in the text. The author needs Esther to hide her identity for different reasons. If she comes clean with her

[19] Levenson, 26.
[20] Levenson, 59.
[21] Levenson, 61.

identity from the start, it is likely that this disclosure could jeopardize her ascension. Practical considerations, though, are not the author's only concern. The author wants to create a narrative that holds the readers interest. The omniscient narrator has given us the inside information that Esther is a Jew. The longer Esther hides her identity, the greater the tension is built within the story. The ultimate moment of declaration is far more dramatic given the build-up in the story. At the same time, her hidden identity raises a problem with the story. It is reasonable to expect that someone, if not the highly pliable Ahasuerus, would be curious as to where and by whom the new queen has been raised.[22] Despite the fact that there was not the rigorous confirmation process such as we see today in the U.S. Senate, one would still expect a little background check on the one granted the most intimate contact with the king. Perhaps this is another satirical jab at the foreign power under whom the Jews had to live.

(2:21-23) After Mordecai uncovers the plot to kill the king, "the matter was recorded in the book of annals in the presence of the king." This is, first and foremost, a device employed to set up the answer to the king's insomnia later in the story.[23] Additionally, it may be read as the author's cynicism toward the writing of history itself, which he ironically manipulates as a device to lend "credibility" to his otherwise unreal, farcical story.

The incident of Mordecai overhearing the plot to kill the king also brings to light the device of coincidence that runs throughout the story. Of all the people in a position to overhear the plot, how propitious for Mordecai to be in the right place at the right time.

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[22] Levenson, 61.
[23] Levenson, 64.

The rabbis of the Talmud will come to appropriate this wave of coincidence that flows through the story.

Additionally, these verses serve to illustrate the author's use of the Joseph story as prime biblical text in which to connect with his Jewish readership. In this case, the good deeds of Joseph and Mordecai go unnoticed and unregarded until one night their respective kings find themselves unable to sleep (Gen. 41:1-8; Esth. 6:1).[24]

(3:1-15) The satirical picture of the kingdom continues to be drawn as the reader meets Haman promoted to a high position for no apparent reason. This sets up the contrast between the unrewarded merit of Mordecai and Haman's unmerited rewards.[25]

There is much speculation generated in the commentary regarding Mordecai's unwillingness to bow down before Haman. Some have speculated that Haman claimed divine honors (as Nebuchadnezzar does in Judith 3:8) and thus Mordecai refuses to bow down out of traditional Jewish resistance to idolatry.[26] More importantly, Mordecai's refusal sets up the author's need to create a conflict between the two men. Any other speculation is secondary to this function.

As there are parallels between Esther and other biblical texts, so are there beautiful literary parallels within the Esther story. Notice, for example, the symmetry between Vashti's refusal and its result, and Mordecai's refusal and its result. Each results in the king issuing a new decree. After the Vashti snub, all the wives in the kingdom hear of their obligation to treat their husbands with honor. After the Mordecai snub, all the Jews in the kingdom hear of their impending death sentence. The resonance between Esther and Joseph is evident here. The language with which the king's courtiers are said

[24] Levenson, 65.
[25] Levenson, 66.
[26] Levenson, 66.

to have inquired about Mordecai's reason for snubbing Haman is strikingly close to language found in the Joseph story. This is the verse in which Potiphar's wife is said to have persisted in her attempt to seduce Joseph. "When they had spoken to him day after day, and he did not heed them. . . " (Esth. 3:4) is similar to "When she spoke to Joseph day after day, and he did not heed her" (Gen. 39:10). The author consciously utilizes a biblical trope to strengthen his connection with his Israelite readers.

Haman expresses his rage over Mordecai's irreverence by hatching a plot to kill all the Jews in the kingdom (ostensibly, all the Jews in the world at this time). Ahasuerus remains consistent, meeting the satirical expectations set by the author: a king who is influenced by those around him, while demonstrating no reflection and evaluation of the advise received. "So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammadatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. The king said to Haman, 'The money is yours and so are the people, to do with as you see fit.'" (Esth. 3:10-11). The narrator makes the readers aware that the people to be annihilated are the Jews, but the king does not even ask Haman what people it is that he intends to annihilate. This lack of knowledge does serve to provide a loophole later in the story for the king to claim ignorance regarding Haman's plan to kill Queen Esther's people.

These verses also ring with resonance to the Joseph story. In Genesis 41:39-43 we witness Pharaoh elevating Joseph to second-in-command within his kingdom. As a sign of bestowing this status upon Joseph, Pharaoh removes his signet ring and places it on Joseph's hand, has him dressed in the finest of royal clothes, and had him paraded about town in a royal chariot. The foreign king entrusts his empire to a Jew—Joseph. In Esther, King Ahasuerus initially appoints one of his own, Haman and gives him the

signet ring as a symbol of Haman's new status. The missing parallel to the Joseph text is complete only when the king's confidante is led through the street on a horse (close to a chariot). The parallel is complete only upon a reversal of fortune for the Jews, when it is Mordecai and not Haman, elevated to a high position.

3:7 is significant in that it may reflect a gloss put in place to adapt the story of Esther and Mordecai to the holiday of Purim: "In the first month (that is, the month of Nisan) in King Ahasuerus's twelfth year, *pur* (which means "the lot") was cast in the presence of Haman concerning each day and each month. The lot (determining what day to annihilate the Jews[27]) fell on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month (that is, in the month of Adar). As Levenson, points out, this adds support to the theory that chapters 9 and 10 were added to the story as a way to create an etiology for the festival of Purim.[28]

Levenson observes that the day on which the genocide royal order is issued (3:12) is precisely eleven months before the day on which it is to be carried out (8:12; 9:1,17). This date is full of irony, as this is the day before Passover (Ex. 12:6; Lev. 23.5), the festival that celebrates the triumph of the Jews over their oppressors.[29] On Passover, that day of deliverance, the first-born was to be slaughtered. Just as Pharaoh decreed death, so did Haman (with the king's approval) decree death. Both decrees resulted in deliverance and the death of the villains. The edict's encouragement "to take [the Jews'] property as plunder (Esth. 3:13) will become more significant in chapters 9 and 10, as the Jews are in the position of the aggressor.

As "the king and Haman sat down to drink. . . ." after sealing the ill-fated future of the Jews, we again are brought back to the Joseph story. We recall, immediately after

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[27] This is my insertion.
[28] Levenson, 69.
[29] Levenson, 73.

the brothers have thrown Joseph into the pit, never expecting to see him again, that they are so emotionally removed as to sit down to eat a meal (Gen. 37:25).

(4:1-11) The introduction of this chapter contains the closest the book of Esther comes to an explicit reference to traditional religious practice: the mourning rituals of tearing clothes, donning sackcloth, putting on ashes and wailing publicly. Ironically, as much as Mordecai's behavior is a manifestation of religious practice, it is the function of this act that is the primary design of the author. It is this ritual that triggers a reaction from Esther and begins the dialogue, first through an intermediary and then directly, that leads to Esther's bold decision to approach the king on behalf of the Jewish people.

Esther's call to approach the king with the goal of saving her people and her response is closely related to Moses in the book of Exodus (Ex. 7:1-2). Esther, like Moses (Ex. 3:11; 4:10,13; 6:12,30; 10:28) hesitates to heed the call. The twist the Esther's author adds to the parallel text, is the source of the call. In Exodus, it is God that calls upon Moses to go back into Egypt to liberate his brethren. It is a divine call. In the book of Esther, the call to Esther is from her uncle, Mordecai. The presence of God in the text is an issue to be dealt with in "Problems-Solutions," later in this paper. At this point we are left, as readers, to try and figure out what the author intended, if one is convinced it was intentional at all, by drawing from the Exodus text but changing the Esther parallel in a dramatic way. The former explicitly mentions God, the latter does not.

3:11 is another illustration of the use of near-historical material to give the story an air of historicity. Upon deeper reading, though, one may see the fracture in the history, as the creative narrative rises through the crack. The rule that one enters the

Persian king's presence unsummoned only upon pain of death is attested in the records of the historian Herodotus, though with the important proviso that individuals could request an audience. Why Esther does not immediately request such an audience–given the ample time of a year until the appointed fateful day–is not told to us. Given that historicity is the handmaiden to enhancing dramatic tension, this is no surprise. The notice about the death penalty for appearing before the king at one's own initiative is thus essential to the transformation of Esther from beauty queen to heroic savior, and from self-styled Persian to reconnected Jew.[30]

(4:12-17) As the beginning of this chapter comes closest to an explicit religious connection, 4:14 adds support for implicit religious overtones. Mordecai, drawing on psychological persuasion, reminds Esther that if she remains silent before the king "relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another quarter."[31]

The Joseph story continues to provide the Esther author with intertextual analogies. Esther proclaims the extent of her commitment in approaching the king, recognizing the high risks involved. She simply states, "If I perish, I perish." (4:16). Similarly, Jacob is again transformed into Israel, as he agrees to send his youngest son Benjamin, at the risk of losing him, back into Egypt, along with his brothers. He accepts, "And if I am to be bereaved, I shall be bereaved." (Gen. 43:14).[32]

(5:1-8) As Esther takes on the dramatic challenge of saving her people, the author takes advantage of the opportunity to increase the tension of the story. As the king asks his queen of her request, so predisposed to satisfying her that he would give her "up to half the kingdom," (5:3) Esther simply requests the presence of the king and Haman to a

[30] Levenson, 80.
[31] Levenson, 81.
[32] Levenson, 82.

banquet she is to prepare. At this banquet, Ahasuerus again asks Esther what it is she requests of him, promising her up to half the kingdom. And again, Esther toys with the king, as the author ratchets the tension up a notch, by merely asking the king and Haman to yet another banquet. Esther is now clearly in command, stage-managing the scene, commanding both Ahasuerus and Haman, as she commanded Mordecai at the end of the previous chapter (4:15-17).[33]

(5:9-14) The threads of coincidence and the carnivalesque continue in the story. Haman, flying high after his privileged banquet with the royal couple, with another invitation to join them the next day, just happens to encounter, on his way home, the defiant Mordecai. This beautifully sets up the next scene where Haman relays his rage over Mordecai to his wife and friends, and they advise him to impale the defiant Jew. Like Ahasuerus, Haman swallows the advice without any hesitation. The satire continues as the supposed decree of the submission of wives to their husbands from earlier in the story, (1:16-22) gives way to wives guiding the actions of their husbands: Esther with Ahasuerus, Zeresh with Haman.

(6:1-14) Coincidence is now pushed so far to the extreme, it borders on slap-stick comedy. The king, having a bout of insomnia, asks to have the historical records of the empire read to him. The page just happens to open to the record reminding the king that Mordecai had saved his life, but was never properly acknowledged for doing so. Just as the king is looking for someone in the court to suggest the most appropriate way to honor Mordecai, his life-saver, who should be in the king's courtyard, but Haman. The author, through the omniscient narrator, cleverly lets the readers in on all of the pertinent

[33] Levenson, 90.

information (that it was Mordecai the king was looking to honor), but keeps those very select and critical pieces from Haman. The author takes full advantage of the set-up he has created, as Haman suggests the way to honor this person to whom the king is alluding, figuring all along that Haman himself is the person who the king wished to honor. When the reversal comes true, and it is in fact Haman who must honor Mordecai in the way Haman had hoped to be honored, the beginning of the end is at hand for Haman.

The author again leaves the reader dangling through ambiguous language as to the possibility of providential protection in the story. Upon Haman's return home in a state of utter humiliation, his wife Zeresh rubs salt into the wound: "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will never overcome him. You shall collapse altogether before him." (6:13) Haman's advisors and wife seem to put themselves in the (presumed) knowledgeable position of the reader, knowing of the scriptural predictions of Israel's triumph (Num. 24:15-19) and Amalek's demise (Num. 24:20), and interpreting Haman's humiliation as the first step in the fulfillment of these prophesies in their own time.[34]

(7:1-10) It is at this third banquet requested by Esther that she delivers the blow. When Esther claims that she and her people have been sold, "to be destroyed, slain and annihilated," the king demands to know, "who is the guy and where is the guy who has had the nerve to do this?" (Esth. 7:4-5). Now the king conveniently has a bout of amnesia, and forgets that Haman offered him 10,000 talents of silver for permission to annihilate a certain very threatening people. Although the author left it ambiguous

[34] Levenson, 99.

whether the king accepted the money (effectually selling Esther's people), it is clear that Ahasuerus gave Haman permission to do with the people as he saw fit. (3:10-11).

After Esther identifies the adversary and enemy as "this evil fellow Haman," the king, in a state of rage, goes out into the courtyard. Things go from bad to worse precipitously for Haman, as he places himself in a compromising position with Esther for the king to witness upon his return. And it is upon the advice from one of the king's eunuch's (the king is consistent in both never having an original thought, and accepting without hesitation the advise from amongst the ranks of his insubordinates). The rhetorical device of reversal is also evident as Haman ultimately falls by the very gallows in which he hoped to bring Mordecai down.

(8:1-17) Esther, knowing exactly what buttons to push, falls at the king's feet in tears, begging Ahasuerus to reverse the edict set to annihilate her people. Like Abraham with God concerning the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:22-33), Esther pleads with the king to save her people (8:5-6). As with Esther's call from a mortal (Mordecai) to save her people, she pleads with a mortal (Ahasuerus) to allow her people to protect themselves. Esther is in relationships with human beings, not a divine being.

The most significant reversal in the story comes with the king's new edict that grants the Jews the right to protect themselves on the very day that they were to be slaughtered. This raises the question whether the Jews needed a decree from the king in order to protect themselves. Perhaps, as he has done throughout the story, the author is satirically portraying law and peoples' often blind following of it. The author may be sending a message to his fellow Jews: we do not need anyone else's permission to protect our lives.

The chapter ends with the unusual report that the people of the land *mit'yahadim*, "identified themselves with the Jews." (8:17) This is often understood to mean that the people converted to Judaism. This is suspect for a couple reasons. Although we read of conversion elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (as with the book of Ruth), the actual standards for conversion were not worked out until the post-Temple, rabbinic period. These standards articulated, among other considerations, that conversion "out of fear" would be judged invalid. As seen throughout the story of Esther, historical likelihood is not the point. The author draws on the irony and peripity; now it is the Gentiles pretending to be Jewish, as it was Esther from the beginning of the story who pretended to be Gentile.[35]

(9:1-32) The great theme of reversal, which dominates the entire book, comes at last to be exposed in an explicit statement: "In the twelfth month (that is the month of Adar), on its thirteenth day, when the king's command and decree were to be put into operation, on the day when the enemies of the Jews expected to overpower them, the reverse occurred: It was the Jews who overpowered their enemies." (9:1) It is the very nature of this explicit attention to the theme of reversal that throws this verse and the following chapters in a suspicious light regarding their original unity with chapters with 1-8.[36] The author of the book of Esther, with great care, creates the tension and surprise throughout the story with his use of implicit language. He would be taking the wind out of his own sails by reverting to this explicit reference in 9:1.) On the contrary, it would not be surprising for a later editor, wanting to find a story to provide a "historic" basis to

[35] Levenson, 116.
[36] Levenson (117) draws attention to David J.A. Clines' argument that chapters 9&10 are added on to the Esther, (Mordecai story in chapters1-8. [Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament,), 26-30. I have added my thoughts to Clines'.

the festival of Purim, to take advantage of the story to provide the etiological roots. This editor was a good enough reader of the Esther chapters 1-8 to understand the rhetorical device of reversal. To lend credibility (with transparent self-consciousness) to his add-on, the editor finds a foothold of legitimacy by highlighting the great reversal at the end of the story.

The author's intention regarding the use of imagery and themes from other biblical text is often left ambiguous. It is up to us to determine whether we are compelled by the notion that the author is intentionally bringing resonance from other biblical texts into the Esther story. If we are compelled, it is then up to us to determine what we think the author was trying to say by drawing on a parallel text with his own original twist. Juxtaposed to 9:2: "Throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, the Jews assembled in their cities to lay hands upon those who were seeking to do them harm, and no one could withstand them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples," we hear the ringing anew of an ancient motif. The neighboring nations are frightened by the victorious exodus of Israel, and are cowering at their approach (Ex. 15:14-16; Josh. 2:8-11; Ps. 105:38).[37] It is possible that the author is drawing a satirical portrait of religion by this contrast. In other words, this was a demonstration that the Jews could intimidate their enemies and stand up for themselves without the help of God.

Continuing to add the echoes of other biblical texts, a reader may hear Exodus 11:13 resonate in Esther 9:4. As Mordecai's ascent is duly noted, "Moses himself was much esteemed in the land of Egypt, among Pharaoh's courtiers and among the people."

[37] Levenson, 120.

Mordecai's status, as bestowed by Ahasuerus, is eclipsed by the author placing him side-by-side Moses.[38]

That the Jews "did not lay a hand on the spoil" (the first of three times we encounter this phrase, 9:10) stands in conspicuous contrast with Saul's conduct in war against the Amalekite king Agag in I Sam. 15. Mordecai rises on the very point on which Saul fell.[39] There is a strong judgment being asserted here: completing the job of slaughtering the enemy, but not looting them, is held in greater esteem than sparing the life of the enemy, but looting them. Any notion of the Jews taking the high road has to be tempered with other realities in the text. Esther for example, drawing on precedent from the times, requests that Haman's ten sons, after they were killed, be humiliated in the public view by being impaled on the stake. Then, given the opportunity to exercise newly realized power in the kingdom, Esther chooses to add to the death count by ten-fold.

The main function for chapter 9 (and some argue for the whole book of Esther) is to provide a foundation for the festival of Purim. Whereas the Book of Esther presents Adar 13 as the day of the great battle against the anti-Semites, other Jewish literature reports that this was the day on which Judah Maccabee's forces slew the Seleucid general Nicanor, seizing spoil and cutting off his head and right hand for public display in Jerusalem (1 Mac. 7:43-49; 2 Mac. 15:28-37). A rabbinic source continues to consider this a feast day, the "Day of Nicanor," though post-Talmudic Jewish tradition makes it into the opposite, the "Fast of Esther," which is still observed today. 2 Mac. 15:36 reports that 13 Adar is "the day before Mordecai's Day," though it must remain unclear

[38] Levenson, 121.
[39] Levenson, 122.

what exactly the author thinks happened on the latter and what, if anything, is the connection of the Day of Nicanor to the events of the Book of Esther.[40] Perhaps, given the sensitivity that the book of Esther was hypothetically written during Hasmonean rule, the victory celebrations over the enemies of the Hasmoneans was layered and coded by drawing from an era, safely apart from their own.

[40] Levenson, 123.

Canon

3.1 Jewish Adaptation of Canon

Apart from dictionary entries (and even they vary) there is no single, agreed upon definition of what canon means. The different perspectives on the authorship, development and purpose of canon greatly influence how a canon is read. The earliest use of the word canon is found in the Hellenistic era. Grammarians of the time, who assembled lists of required books for their students called any author worthy of inclusion *kanonikos*, "one who comes up to the standard."[1] The original conception of a canon was indeed about the selection of books made by a select group of people, but did not carry with it the notion of "closing" the canon. In other words, the Greek decision-makers were not building their canon with the goal of closing it to further additions. Although the notion of canon has developed to encompass both "secular" and "sacred" texts, the primary focus here is on sacred canon, specifically that of the Hebrew Bible.

Where it was not the intent of the Greeks, in their original notion, to close the canon to additional texts, the adaptation of the concept of "canon" within a religious framework did result in establishing a closed set of documents. There are differing views related to the motivations for the closing of religious canon and these are important to understand.

Menachem Haran offers a simple explanation for canon closure: the theory of preservation.[2] Facing the risk of being lost or forgotten, Haran argues that the survival of independent stories depended on collecting them into a sort of anthology volume. This

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[1] Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 1.
[2] Philip Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 46/47.

may give reason to their being placed into a canon, but neither addresses the criterion for choosing certain stories over others, nor the need to close the canon.

The preservation theory of canon loses its strength when considering the development of a closed canon. The Christian and Jewish communities were not merely interested in creating an anthology for the generations. If preservation were the goal, there would be no reason to close the canon to great religious works in subsequent generations. This is not to say that canons were not manipulated and changed. It is this reality that strengthens the case that canons were being used by their respective communities for the purpose of exercising control over their communities. Why the conscious effort to manipulate and change a text if not for some over-riding intention to influence readers of the canon?

Representing a different perspective, Bible scholar James Sanders asserts that the selection and closing of canon was motivated by the needs of the community to *concretize* a common vision. The motivation therefore is based on using the canon to influence the shared values of a community. More than the neutral preservation of texts, Sanders claims there is a deliberate design in creating a canon that is meant to serve as a guide for the community. Sanders imagines this as a participatory process in which the community has an active role in determining the content and form of the canon.[3]

That canon is created to influence a community is a commonly shared perspective. The disagreement turns on the question of whether canon is created from the bottom up (as Sanders argues), or from the top down. The scholars in favor of the latter assert that canon is created by an elite group whose intention is to use the canon as a way to impose control upon their community. Supporting the top down school is Philip

[3] Davies 49.

Davies in his book on the canonization of the Hebrew Bible. Davies suggests that, "Perhaps the most important point to make overall is that canonizing is a function of the cultural transmission of knowledge. In the first instance knowledge is accumulated as a means of social and economic control."[4] The canon Sanders speaks of serves as a more innocent guide as compared to the canon of which Davies speaks, serving the interests of the elite.

The contents and order of the "original" Hebrew Bible remains unknown. The earliest extant collection of "biblical books" are the scrolls discovered in the Qumran caves in the Dead Sea region of modern Israel. These scrolls are dated from early to mid-second century B.C.E. Known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, they are significant for many reasons, but three in particular for the concerns of this paper. First, they represent the oldest examples of scrolls, which later became included in the Hebrew Bible. Second, all of the books of the later canonized (Masoretic Text) Hebrew Bible, except the Book of Esther, were found amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls. Second, the liturgical calendar found at Qumran did not include the festival of Purim. Third, there are scrolls found in Qumran that were not included in the final redaction of the Hebrew Bible. There is scholarly debate as to who actually comprised this community in Qumran. What is not debatable is that amongst the treasured literature of this community were scrolls that were later selected to be included in the biblical canon, as well as books later excluded from the canon (e.g. Ben Sirah).

The main point to be emphasized is that what we accept today as "the" Hebrew Bible must be seen in a historical context. This context highlights the choices made by those in positions of power within their respective faith communities (or those creating

[4] Davies 35.

new communities) to influence the "final" form of their respective Bible, their respective Word of God.

The significant transformation within Judaism occurred after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E. The rabbis of this post-Second Commonwealth era[5] had a hand not only in the selection of and final architecture of the (Tiberian) Masoretic Text, [6] but ingeniously reopened the canon only to close it again with their own seal of authority. The scholarly debate as to when the canon of the Hebrew Bible was fixed cannot be resolved due to a lack of solid evidence. The road to canonization of the book of Esther sheds light on this debate. The resistance experienced along this road to canonization makes an important point. Outside the accepted final redaction of the Hebrew Bible there are many equally valuable texts that represent the diversity of Judaism.

By the time this canon-in-formation had reached the rabbis (post Second Temple), much of it was already firmly entrenched in Jewish culture. The rabbinic imprint is manifest in the systemization of the Hebrew Bible – the order and division of the books – but more importantly in the interpretation of the written Hebrew Bible (*torah she-biktav*) through their creation of an Oral Torah (*torah she-be'al peh*): Mishnah and Talmud. Functionally, the Hebrew Bible became a pretext for the Talmudic rabbis to establish their own authoritative interpretations.[7] Ironically, canon serves those seeking a vehicle for *change* as much as those who seek to *conserve*. One may insist on adopting the canon recognized by a competing school, so as to have a legitimate basis for justifying an

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[5] The Second Commonwealth refers to the time of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (538 B.C.E.-70 C.E.).
[6] For more information on the Masoretic Text see: Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Fortess Press, Minneapolis, MN, 2001) 21-79.
[7] Tov, 173.

alternative understanding of history. Such an alternative is legitimized by virtue of the fact that that it took hold of the mainstream's library.

Effectively, the rabbis used the canon to justify a new worldview—at once establishing an alternative hermeneutic, while also acting as if the canon were still in place. The rabbis explicitly wrote themselves into the chain of authority within Jewish tradition. The beginning of *Mishnah, Pirke Avot* reads: "At Sinai Moses received the Torah and handed it over to Joshua who handed it over to the elders who handed it over to the prophets who in turn handed it over to the men of the Great Assembly." The rabbis *were* the men of the Great Assembly and they did not intend for anyone to add to their canon as they, again, explicitly called to "make a fence around the Torah." The rabbis transformed the notion of canon by writing themselves into the core of it. Canon now *included* their interpretive literature.

The multiple voices of the Hebrew Bible are manifest in the internal contradictions and imperfections of the text. The dialectic tension within the Hebrew Bible remains unfettered by those intent on controlling its message. Or as Robert Alter writes, "The true gift of the Hebrew Bible may be as a springboard for the evolution of thoughts and cultures, a bustling conjunction of the contradictory aims and values, and not. . . vehicles for the enforcement of ideological conformity."[8] Whatever the origins of canon might have been, the truth is that religion found a way around its implications. Even when canon is created to control a community's ideological profile, texts do not necessarily work as canonizers might want. Just as authorial intent can be bypassed by an aggressive misreader, so can the intent of the canonizer be averted by an intentional

[8] *Canon and Creativity*, 60.

reframing by a competing ideology. This is what the New Testament and rabbinic literature does. Religion is constantly evolving. Although the intention of biblical authors, redactors and editors may have indeed been to impose an ideological conformity upon their (various and changing) community of readers, the dialectic reality within the text resists this control.

Michael Fishbane, in his book *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, writes of this biblical dialectic as the inter-textual dynamic between the tradition (*traditum*) and its received text from the comments, clarifications, and revisions thereof (*traditio*).[9] "From this perspective, the living tension in *traditum* and *traditio* between religious authority and its reinterpretation comes to the fore. . . . The older *traditum* is dependent upon the *traditio* for its ongoing life. This matter is paradoxical, for while the *traditio* culturally revitalizes the *traditum*, and gives new strength to the original 'revelation'[10], it also potentially undermines it."[11] In other words, despite the attempt of the canonizers to create a text to influence the lives of their readers in a very prescribed manner, the paradigm is found within that very same text to resist a univocal voice. This is the lifeblood tension within any faith tradition seeking to remain relevant.

Compare for example the following texts. In Deuteronomy 5:9 we read: "You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the Lord your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments." In Deuteronomy 24:16 we read:

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[9] Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 10/11.
[10] My quotation.
[11] Fishbane, 14/15.

"Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children put to death for parents: a person shall be put to death only for his own crime." The contraction between the texts illustrates the inter-biblical dialectic, giving one author the license to challenge or change what was written by another. In this particular case, it became unacceptable to the community to put a family member to death because of the misdeeds of another. Instead of accepting what became viewed as an injustice, the authorities within the community, changed the law. How we choose to deal with this "conflict" in the text is a reflection of how we choose to read the text.

The core issue here is how we conceptualize canon and how we behave regarding it. On the one hand, we preserve, and on the other hand we establish hermeneutic methods to bypass, avoid or rewrite the text. Literary critic Northrope Frye sums up well these two very distinct approaches in reading the Hebrew Bible: the critical and the traditional. "The critical approach establishes the text and studies the historical and cultural background; the traditional interprets it in accordance with what a consensus of theological and ecclesiastical authorities have declared the meaning to be."[12] If we are aligned to a given authority (the traditional approach), we will mine the Hebrew Bible for "proof-texts" that support the world-view of that particular institution. If we approach the Hebrew Bible without a fixed notion for what we want the text to provide for us, we are poised as critical readers. In another sense, it is the difference between the reader who "serves" the text, as the word of God, the interpretation of which someone has determined as authoritative and the reader as critic, unencumbered by an authoritative voice within the community.

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[12] Northrope Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (Toronto: Academic Press Canada, 1982), xvii.

As we read the Hebrew Bible, we do so recognizing both the textual choices made in the process of canonization, and the perceived meaning within those chosen texts. "The texts," adds Robert Alter, "do not have a single, authoritative meaning, however much the established spokesman for the canon at any given moment may claim that is the case. After all, even within the community of traditional believers, the biblical canon has been imagined to endorse as a matter of divine revelation: rationalism, mysticism, nationalism, universalism, asceticism, sensualism, determinism and free will."[13]

Decisions on canon selection, and their intended purpose were directly related to the desired impact those decision-makers hoped to have on their communities. As we will now see with the book of Esther, the potential impact of this story within the community at that time, as well as into the future, presented a great threat to the leaders of the community.

3.3 Resistance towards the Canonization of the Book of Esther

Of the twenty-four books ultimately selected for inclusion in the (Masoretic Text) Hebrew Bible, none traveled a road of greater resistance than the book of Esther. It is, to this day, a book of great controversy. The actual date of the Bible's final canonization remains open to scholarly debate. What is clear, though, is that the book of Esther was one of the latest books (along with Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs), if not the final book, to be included.

Solomon Zeitlin, in writing about the canonization of the Hebrew Bible, argues that Esther was a late addition. As support, Zeitlin points to the inclusion of the festival of Purim in Megillat Taanit: a chronicle listing 36 semi-holidays, compiled close to the

[13] Alter, 5.

time of the destruction of the Second Temple. If, as Zeitlin deducts, the book of Esther was already canonized in the year 65 C.E. (a year some scholars link with the canonization of much of the Hebrew Bible) there would not have been a need to add it to Megillat Taanit. "The rabbis, in a later period, when they wanted to prove that the day of Purim is a festival and that no Jew is allowed to work on this day, infer it is a law from the book of Esther itself, which goes to show that at the time of the early Tannaim, although the day of Purim was observed, the book of Esther was not yet canonized."[14]

Zeitlin goes on to say that the sages finally yielded to Esther's inclusion because of public pressure by rank and file Judeans who, especially after the Bar Kokhba catastrophe (the Jews final, unsuccessful revolt against Rome, 135-132 B.C.E.), found great consolation in the Esther story. Thus, Zeitlin concludes, "The decision to include the book of Esther in the Hebrew Bible was made at the Academy of Ousha, *ca.* 140 C.E.[15]

Looking to the Talmud, there is support that pushes the inclusion of the book of Esther to an even later date. There are Talmudic voices that, speaking as late as the third or fourth century C.E., explicitly refute that Esther is holy enough to be included in the canon at all. A book accepted as part of the sacred (God-given) canon of the Hebrew Bible was said to "defile the hands (make the hands unclean)." This notion of sacred is counter-intuitive to our modern sensibilities. One would think that something that defiles the hands would be far from sacred. This is just the opposite for our ancestors in the

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[14] Solomon Zeitlin, *An Historical Study of the Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933), 12.

[15] Solomon Zeitlin, "The Books of Esther and Judith: A Parallel," in Morton S. Enslin's *The Book of Judith* (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1972), 24.

ancient world. "Defiling the hands' imbues the object referred to with the status of sacred.

Considering our awareness of this expression, we read in the Babylonian Talmud, *Megilla* 7a:

> Rab Judah said in the name of Samuel: (the scroll of) Esther does not make the hands unclean. Are we to infer from this that Samuel was of the opinion that Esther was not composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit? How can this be, seeing that Samuel has said that Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit?—It was composed to be recited (by heart), but not to be written.

Both Samuel ben Judah and Rab Judah were rabbis of the third century C.E. Carey Moore concludes from this that, "This passage shows that Esther was not regarded by all as sacred scripture; moreover, it tries to save Samuel's reputation by harmonizing his unorthodox opinion in this matter with the 'official' view of Jamnia."[16]

The second talmudic passage, Moore relates, is even more illuminating: "Levi ben Samuel and Rabbi Huna ben Hiyya were repairing the mantles of the scrolls of Rabbi Judah's College. On coming to the scroll of Esther, they remarked, 'O, this scroll of Esther does not require a mantle.' Thereupon he reproved them, 'this too savours of irreverence.'" Rabbis Levi and Huna belong to either the third or fourth century C.E. "Whatever there reason may have been," Moore concludes, "it is clear that neither Levi nor Huna believed that the scroll of Esther 'defiled the hands.'"[17]

Following Zeitlin's lead, H. M. Orlinsky continues the discussion of Esther's quest for canonical status among the sages: "If Josephus's[18] total of 22 books is taken

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[16] Carey A. Moore, *Esther* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1971), xxiv.
[17] H.M. Orlinsky (Carey Moore), xxv.
[18] Josephus: Jewish historian (38-100 C.E.) and one of the chief representatives of Jewish-Hellenistic literature.

literally—and there is no evident reason I know of for not doing so—it was obviously lacking two Books that ultimately came to constitute part of the Third Division ("Writings") of the Hebrew Bible. . . . It would seem that the two Books in question were Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) and Esther."[19]

As argued, resistance to the book of Esther dates back to ancient times. Whereas the rabbinic concerns (as we will look at in more detail in the coming chapter) deal with the absence of God and Jewish ritual, the concerns in modern times deal more with ethical issues. Regarding the latter, voices against the book of Esther would continue to echo loudly throughout the generations, to our own day. Martin Luther in his oft quoted words, denounced Esther with no uncertainty, "I am so hostile to this book (Macabees 2) and Esther that I wish they did not exist at all; for they judaize too greatly and have much pagan impropriety."[20] Lewis Paton, in his 1908 commentary on the book of Esther, claimed that, "There is not one noble character in the book. . . . Morally, Esther falls far below the general level of the Old Testament, and even of the Apocrypha." The leaders of Reform Judaism at the beginning of the 20th century, focusing on the universal values of Judaism, renamed the national festival of Purim as the "holiday of feminine grace."[21]

Schalom Ben-Chorin, a former German Jew, writing in 1938, wanted Esther dropped from the Jewish canon and Purim dropped from the Jewish calendar. He wrote, "Both festival and book are unworthy of a people which is disposed to bring about its

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[19] Carey A. Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1982), xxvi.
[20] Martin Luther: German religious reformer (1483-1546); significant in the context of this paper for his invective towards Esther and his translation of the Bible into German.
[21] Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan, 1995), 224.

national and moral regeneration under prodigious sacrifice." During the same period in which Ben-Chorin wrote these words, reading the scroll of Esther was a rare practice in American Reform congregations, most likely because of the discomfort with the level of vengeance it contains.[22]

Finally, for the purposes of these selected examples, the late professor of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Samuel Sandmel, in his book *The Enjoyment of Scripture* (1972), wrote, "I should not be grieved if the Book of Esther were somehow dropped out of Scripture."[23] What is it about the Book of Esther that elicits such vituperation? And how has the Jewish community, which holds the Hebrew Bible as their foundational text, come to terms with this controversial book?

3.3 Problems and Solutions

Throughout the ages, scholars and religious communities have expressed reservations about a variety of "problems" within the book of Esther. They include (but are not limited to) the absence of an explicit mention of God, questionable morality on the part of the heroes, demeaning images of women, the lack of interest in the land of Israel, vengeance against the non-Jews and celebratory responses to their brutal defeat. Of all the books in the Hebrew Bible, the book of Esther is the only book of the canon missing from the Dead Sea Scrolls found at Qumran. The reasons for its absence are speculative, therefore we can, at most, only gently suggest that the Qumran community might have rejected the book. It is surely some combination of these "problems" that must account for our Talmudic sages rejecting the Book of Esther; placing it in the

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[22] Meyer, 323.

[23] Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque* (Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 42. (Craig references Carey Moore, 1992:635).

profane category of "not defiling the hands." It is reasonable to conclude that within these 'problems' the Protestant Reformation found the motivation to remove the book of Esther from the Old Testament and place it in the Apocrypha (to "hide" the "hidden").[24] The combination of these "problems" has caused the book of Esther to be considered one of the "most secular" books in the Bible.[25] Jewish tradition (as well as Christian) approaches these perceived problems with the aim to sanitize, harmonize and otherwise bring it into line with the idealized, ideological profile of that respective community.

Septuagint Additions Response

The book of Esther stands alone within the biblical canon for not once mentioning the name of God. An early opportunity for community leaders to recast the "original" Esther story came when it was translated into Greek in Alexandria, Egypt around 114 B.C.E.[26] The biblical translation, a part of what came to be commonly know as the Septuagint (LXX)[27], reflects the needs of the Jewish community living in Alexandria at this time. The community, or at least its leaders, felt a great need to deal with the glaring absence of God in the Hebrew text. They would unabashedly seize the moment and recast the text through the leeway given to them by the license of translation and interpretation. This Greek translation added six chapters, know as the "Additions" (A-F) to the proto-MT's ten. In these six additions God's name is inserted no less than 45 times and is referred to pronominally frequently. Jon Levenson writes about the Additions to Esther found in the Septuagint: "This uninhibited attribution of the deliverance of the

[24] Katrina J. A. Larkin, *Ruth and Esther* (Sheffield , England, Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 79-87.
[25] Craig, 42 (referencing Carey Moore, 1992:635).
[26] Julio Trebolle Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 399.
[27] For more on the Septuagint, see: Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 134-147.

Jewish people to God conforms not only to the general biblical pattern, but also to the way the Jewish tradition has historically interpreted Esther. It does not, however, conform to the book itself in the MT [Masoretic Text], which never mentions the name of God and is noteworthy in its lack of theological editorializing."[28]

In particular, Additions C and D make up amply for all the connections to God that are left out of the Hebrew text. In C Mordecai prays (also something not explicitly mentioned in the Hebrew text to God), and in doing so recognizes God as the "maker of heaven and earth and everything under the heavens." Moreover, he recalls God's desire to "save the people 'Israel.'" The Hebrew text of Esther never once refers to Israel, either in connection to the people or the land. Mordecai refers to God as the "God of Abraham," despite the fact that the Hebrew text makes no reference to God's covenant with the patriarchs. Mordecai refers to the Jews as God's "portion," while the Hebrew text makes no reference to the Jews as God's chosen people. Finally Mordecai of the Septuagint recalls that God redeems the Jews from Egypt. The Hebrew text does not recall any exodus of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage.

In Addition D, Esther similarly prays to God, adding to Mordecai's prayer some of the key religious touchstones nowhere to be found in the Hebrew text. Esther refers to God's "altar;" the backsliding of the people into idolatry; God as the "ruler over every power;" God's power to assign prophets and put "the appropriate words into my mouth;" and God as one who will "rescue" and "deliver" the Jews from the "hands of the wicked." The fact that the Hebrew text of Esther make's no reference to any of these connections to God was unfathomable to the religious leaders at that time. They saw it as

[28] Levinson 1997, 40.

their mission to recast the Esther story, so as to avoid having to explain how such a godless book could be so revered by the community of Israel. The very response to the book of Esther, through its translation in the Septuagint, speaks to the authority that the document had already achieved at this time. Otherwise, there would be no compulsion to make a translation at all.

Targumim Response

As extreme as the liberties taken by the translators of the Jewish community in Alexandria might seem, they were restrained compared to those of their brethren living in Palestine in (approximately) the fourth century CE.[29] There are two translations in Aramaic (the native tongue of the Jews in Palestine in this era) from this time, commonly referred to as Targum Rishon and Targum Sheni (literally the "First Translation" and the "Second Translation"). These translations, like the Septuagint Additions, placed God in the central role. Far beyond the Septuagint Additions, the two Targumim addressed a greater range of concerns.

Esther, who in the Masoretic text seems to have no concern for Jewish ritual observance, goes out of her way in the Targumin to observe various Jewish precepts, including dietary law. Picking up on the verse, "And Esther did as Mordecai instructed, just as when she was reared by him" (Est. 2:20), Targum Rishon expands: "Sabbaths and festivals she would observe; during the days of separation she watched herself; cooked dishes and the wine of the nations she did not taste, and all the religious precepts which

[29] The dating for the Two Targums of Esther is uncertain, ranging from 200 – 1000 C.E. For more information, see Bernard Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther: Translated with Apparatus and Notes* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 20-21.

women of the House of Israel were commanded, she observed by the order of Mordecai." Not only do the rabbis of the Targumim make Esther a Shabbat observer, they highlight Esther's subservience to Mordecai. The rabbis' ideal Jewish woman both obeys her husband and obeys the Jewish laws created by their husbands over the generations.

The sages seize the opportunity to add prayer and supplication (missing from the Hebrew book of Esther) without inhibition. Upon hearing Ahasuerus's edict against the Jews (at Haman's behest), Targum Sheni expands upon Mordecai and Esther's reaction:

> Now when the righteous Mordecai saw the decree that was issued and the letter that was sealed, he destroyed the garments from his front and his back, covered himself with sackcloth, and rolled himself in ashes. He then raised his voice and said: "Woe! How great is the decree that the king and Haman issued against us. He did not issue the decree upon half [of us] and spare half, nor upon a fourth [of us], but rather upon the entire body did he issue the decree to uproot and to destroy us from our roots." Now when the people of the House of Israel saw the righteous Mordecai, who was considered great and important to all of them, they assembled and came to him until they became an extremely large delegation, great in number. . . . Mordecai rose to his feet in the midst of the assembly. . . and said: "People of the House of Israel, beloved and respected ones, let us proceed to look at the people of Nineveh, when the prophet Jonah son of Ammitai was sent to it, to overturn the city of Nineveh. So when the word reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his precious throne and removed his crown from himself, covered himself in sackcloth, rolled himself in ashes, and issued a proclamation in Nineveh which said: 'It is the decree of the king and princes as follows: No man or beast, herd or flock should go out into the pasture or drink any water. They should repent from their evil ways and from the violence in their hands.' Then he retracted through his *memra* the evil which He planned to do unto them and did not do [it]. . . . . Mourning intensified for the Jews—fasting, weeping wailing, sackcloth, and ashes.[30]

The Targum embellishes Mordecai's reaction to the edict, connecting it firmly to Jewish mourning ritual; enhances his stature in the eyes of his fellow Jews; and makes a parallel

[30] Targum Sheni, 4:1,3

to the Jonah story, assuming, like the biblical author of Esther, a biblical literacy amongst its readers.

Not to leave out the namesake of the story, the rabbis expand upon Esther's response to Mordecai, after her resolve to approach the king:

> Proceed and assemble the Jews who are in the fortress of Shushan and fast on my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days and three nights. Also I and my maidens will fast like you (Est. 4:15-16. . . . Let the bridegroom emerge from his bedroom dressed in sackcloth, and the bride from the nuptial chamber, head strewn with ashes. Let men, beasts, cattle, and sheep not taste anything at all; and separate the babies from the breasts of their mothers." At that point in time they inspected the community and discovered twelve thousand young priests, so they made them hold horns in their right hands and the Torah in their left hands. Thus they wept and addressed the Supreme One, the God of Israel: "Here is the Torah which You have given us; here your beloved people is about to cease from the world. Who will rise up and read from it and mention your name? The sun and the moon will eclipse their light and not illuminate, for they were only created for the sake of Your people." Whereupon they fell on their faces, saying: "Answer us, O our Father, answer us! Answer us, O our King, answer us!" They blew the horns that [they had] with them, in answer to which the people responded, until the heavenly hosts wept and the ancestors moved in their graves.[31]

Esther and all the creatures of the earth, follow suit, and demonstrate their repentance before God. The central place of the priesthood is emphasized, as 12,000 are "discovered" and given the role of beseeching God for His divine mercy. Like the biblical models of Abraham and Moses, the priests remind God of His covenant with the Israelites. The very symbols of creation, the sun and the moon, depend on God's favor towards the Jews.

The stream of coincidence that flows through the biblical account of Esther is now dammed in no uncertain terms by the Targumic authors. God, unequivocally, is the

[31] Targum Sheni, 4:15-16

cause of everything that happens within the story. How is it, the Targum imagines, that the king is suddenly reminded of Mordecai's unheralded deeds?

> The sleep of the king became unrestful, and he rose in the morning troubled in appearance. So he ordered Shimshai to brng the book of the chronicle before him. When Shimshai, the scribe, perceived that which Mordecai related concerning Bigtan and Teresh, he turned over the pages of the book and did not wish to read; but on account of the desire from before the Lord of the Universe, the pages unfolded before the king.[32]

There is no turn of the biblical story, in the eyes of the rabbis, left to chance or coincidence. Coincidence is simply the hidden, but unmistakable hand of God directing every movement of the story.

Contrary to what *we today* might perceive as a problem in the biblical text, the rabbis of the Targumim respond very strongly in the opposite manner. Granted the tables turn on Haman and all those prepared to destroy the Jews, but this translation rubs salt into the wounds of those bent on slaying the Jewish people:

> [Haman followed the king's instructions in preparing Mordecai's raiment and horse, then] proceeded toward the righteous Mordecai. Haman addressed him and said: "Arise, you righteous Mordecai, son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...arise from your sackcloth and your ashes and put on the royal garment and ride on the royal horse!. . . . Whereupon Mordecai responded and said to Haman: "One who was in a state of fasting for three days and for three [nights], how can he ride a royal horse?" When Haman heard this statement, he entered the treasury of the king and brought out all kinds of spices from there as well as fine ointments. Then he anointed him and bathed him [and] dressed him in the royal garments [and] thoroughly adorned him with all the royal adornments, then fed him from the meal that Queen Esther had sent to him.[33]

> As [Mordecai and Haman] were walking opposite the house of the wicked Haman, Shlakhevah, his daughter, looked down from the roof, and it appeared that the man walking on the road was Mordecai, while the man riding on the horse was her father. So she took a pot of excrement and flung it upon his head. Haman raised his head and said to her: "You, too,

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[32] Targum Rishon 6:1.
[33] Targum Sheni 6:11.

> my daughter, you embarrass me." Whereupon, immediately, she fell from the roof and died from the balcony chamber."[34]

Now begging for his life (in the biblical story before Queen Esther [Est.7:7]), Haman is in the hands of the crafters of the Targum, as the story continues:

> [After Ahasuerus had ordered Mordecai to escort Haman to the gallows where Haman would be hanged,] the wicked Haman responded, saying to the righteous Mordecai: ". . . . I tremble from [before] you, O righteous Mordecai, that you do not do to me as I schemed to do to you. Have pity on my honor and do not kill me or destroy me like my ancestor Agag. You are good, Mordecai; do according to your kindness rather than take a life. Do not kill me, as there are no killers among you. Do not call against me the hatred of Agag nor the vengeance of Amalek. Do not take vengeance against me, with enmity in your heart, nor nurture a grudge against me, as my father Esau nurtures a grudge and vengeance. Great wonders have been accomplished for you, as they were accomplished for your ancestors when they crossed the sea. My eyes are too dim to see you, nor am I able to open my mouth before you, in that I should take counsel concerning you from my friends and from my wife Zeresh. I beg of you, spare my life, O my righteous lord Mordecai; do not summarily blot out my name like that of my ancestor Amalek, and do not hang my gray head upon the gallows. But if you are determined to kill me, remove my head with the king's sword with which all the nobles of the province are killed." [Then] Haman began to cry out and weep, but Mordecai paid no attention to him.[35]

The rabbis do not hesitate to place the issues with which they are struggling in Haman's mouth. At the end of the day, though, the rabbis opt not to let Haman off the hook (or the gallows as it were) but simply turn their collective head the other way.

Further Rabbinic Response

The rabbinic creativity in recasting the biblical book of Esther, as demonstrated in both the Greek translation (Septuagint) and the Aramaic translations (Targumim), sets a

[34] Targum Rishon 6:11.
[35] Targum Sheni 7:9.

precedent for continued interpretations of Esther. This mode of interpretation, known as *midrash*, was a standard operating practice for the rabbis over the generations, as they sought to make sense of problems left to them in the biblical texts. The *midrashim* can be viewed as a reflection of the challenges, both internal and external, which these respective communities were faced. Responding to the internal problem of an absence of prayer in the book of Esther and the external problem of how certain Jewish prayers could be perceived from outside the Jewish community, the rabbis wrote:

> And their laws are different from those of every other people" (Esther 3:8). Haman said to Ahasuerus: "Come and see how they are different. . . from the nations. Once every seven days they. . . call it *Shabbat*, and they open their synagogues, and read words which are impossible to hear, and they say, 'Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one!' and afterwards they stand and pray. And they say in their prayer, 'Subjugate the wicked'—and they say that we are the wicked![36]

Not only is prayer now made explicit in the Targumim of book of Esther, but the arch-enemy of the Jews, Haman, knows of specific rubrics of Jewish liturgy—the *Shema* and the *Birkat Minim*.[37]

The strong theme of divine reward and punishment, so clearly evident in the Pentateuchal book of Deuteronomy, provides a foundation for the rabbis to make sense of the continued oppression, now experienced by the Jews in the Esther narrative. In the following *midrash,* it is not king Ahasuerus, whose sleep is disturbed, but the King of the World:

> On that night the king's sleep was disturbed" (Esther 6:1). R. Yochanan taught: The sleep of the King of the World was disturbed, and He called to the patriarchs and said to them: "Your children are to be destroyed." They said before Him: "Master of the World, on the account of what?" He said to them: "Because they did not satisfy My name in the days of the wicked

[36] *Panim Acherim* B3.
[37] *Shema:* the central Jewish prayer declaring faith in one God; *Birkat Minim:* the Jewish prayer calling for the destruction of slanderers, interpreted by some to be a curse upon Christians.

> Nebuchadnezzar, and they have made Me as one who lacks the power to save.[38]

This *midrash* not only places the fate of the Jews on their own back, but roots the message in biblical, Jewish history.

Not only is punishment meted out against the sinner in his own generation, biblical tradition extends this punishment through the succeeding generations. The *midrash* reads this into the book of Esther:

> God said to the sons of Jacob: "You sold your brother after eating and drinking;[39] so I will do to you." And so it is written: "And the king and Haman sat down to drink" (Esther 3:15). . . . R. Issachar of Kfar Mandi said: Joseph was forgiving and said: "Now, it was not you but God who sent me here" (Genesis 45:8), and yet see how far that offense cast its shadow, for until the days of Mordecai the penalty for the sale of Joseph was still due![40]

> When Mordecai knew all that was done, Mordecai rent his clothes and put on sackcloth, as it says: And Jacob rent his clothes, and put on sackcloth upon his loins" (Genesis 37:34),[41] it never again departed from his descendents.[42]

The midrashic authors mirror Esther's biblical author in making a strong connection between the Esther story and the Joseph story from which it draws. The rabbis are faced with the theological problem of how their God could stand by in silence, while His chosen people continued to suffer. The rabbis place blame, not with God, but squarely on the shoulders of the Jews for past transgressions.

Rabbinic commentators reflect a predisposition toward women that rings dissonant with our modern sensibilities. These sensibilities will be a focal point later in

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[38] *Panim Acherim* A (Because Israel did not sanctify God's name in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, God lacked the strength to save His people in Persia. *Agadat Esther* 6:1).
[39] A reference to the sale of Joseph in Genesis 37:25.
[40] *Esther Rabah* 7:25.
[41] After the brothers presented Jacob with the Joseph's bloodied coat.
[42] *Esther Rabbah* 8:1.

this paper. For the moment, though, let us get inside the rabbinic mind-set, as they focus upon Haman's wife, Zeresh:

> R. Levi said: Two men great in wealth were in the world, one in Israel and one among the nations: Korach in Israel and Haman among the nations of the world. And the two of them listened to their wives and fell. . . . From where do we know that Haman listened to the advice of his wife and fell? As Scripture says: "Then Zeresh his wife and all his friends said to him: 'Let a gallows fifty cubits be made; and in the morning speak to the king so that Mordecai may be hanged upon it. And gladly go with the king to the banquet.' And the thing pleased Haman, and he caused the gallows to be made" (Esther 5:14).[43]

Such views of women must have been prevalent in these times, for the rabbis take no care to cloak them in less explicit language.

The rabbis demonstrated a distinct hermeneutic in justifying their reading of the text. They began with a preconceived, intransigent belief in what the text must mean and proceeded to interpret the text to be in harmony with their theology and dogmatic ritual. The rabbis represent a fascinating blend of reader response/deconstruction and authorial intent. On one hand, they dramatically rewrote the Esther narrative to fit their needs as readers, believers and community leaders. On the other hand, they did this, believing in their heart of hearts, that this divinely transmitted text, from Yahweh to Moses on Mount Sinai, could not possibly mean anything else.

How might modern thinkers deal with the very same conundrums that inspired both the translators of the Septuagint and the Tragumim? Are the same issues still pressing? And if so, are the ancient solutions still sufficient? The final chapter will seek to explore these questions.

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[43] *Midrash Proverbs* 11.

Teaching Esther Today

The challenge of how we teach the book of Esther is heightened by reconnecting to our earlier discussion of canon. As there are many ways of reading the Hebrew Bible, there are as many ways to express ourselves as Jews. Where one draws the boundary, outside of which one is not considered Jewish, is answered with as many variations as there are Jewish communities. I propose as the boundary, what is arguably the core of Judaism—Torah. This boundary directs us as Jews to be engaged with the texts of our tradition. Indeed, any texts written from a Jewish perspective and adding to the discourse inspired by the Hebrew Bible fall under the umbrella of we refer to as Torah. Specifically for this discussion, I am referring specifically to the Hebrew Bible, also known as Tanakh (Torah [the Five books of Moses], Prophets and Writings). There is no one correct way to interpret these texts, and we may often find ourselves in conflict with the message of the text. But an outright excision of the text from our tradition is not an option. That is where the boundary line is drawn.

This is where religious leaders have a different role as teachers of our respective Scriptures than teachers in the secular world. Indeed, certain secular texts are very much revered in the secular community. These communities would be greatly diminished, if not outright impoverished without the works, for example, of Shakespeare, James or Rilke. But they could function nonetheless and remain in business. In contrast, Judaism (as with the respective texts of Buddhism, Christianity, Hindu and Islam) would be bankrupt without the biblical texts from which it sprang. The short reading list in Judaism begins with, and is always in dialogue with, the Hebrew Bible. The choice,

though, as to how we read and teach the text, is most definitely within the boundary of Judaism.

This is not to say that we are to elevate Scripture as a privileged class of texts considered an invulnerable kingdom to itself.[1] Rather we are to turn it over and over again, looking for the warts amidst the beauty. As we identify the fractures and imperfections, aesthetically and ethically, in the text, the goal of the model reader is not censorship. Would we, for example, support the request of local rabbis to remove *The Merchant of Venice* from the classroom because of its anti-Semitic content? Would we advocate *Huckleberry Finn* dropped from the reading list because of its racist content?[2] The challenge becomes one not of banning or burning the text, but of approaching the text in as honest and as critical a way as possible. Again, the stakes are much higher when approaching the canon of a religious tradition with such a critical eye. The ethical reader does not seek the road of least resistance.

The ethical reader is faced not only with rejecting both the fundamentalists black and white view of the text, but the anything-goes interpretation from the reader responders. Ethical criticism is not for those looking for flat judgments like "true" or "false" or "virtuous" or "wicked," nor those looking for fixed solutions.[3] "Fictions," as Martha Nussbaum writes, "display to us the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer *difficulty* of moral choice."[4] The model reader must be prepared to make difficult decisions, while always predisposed to hearing another's argument with the openness to being influenced and willingness, if persuaded, to change.

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[1] Booth, 152.
[2] Booth, 159-160.
[3] Booth, 217.
[4] Nussbaum, 288.

Learning how to make such choices in reading a text is not a natural born skill. The competency of the reader, like one's competency in any other endeavor, requires hard work to develop. We should be aware not only of our own limitations in reading and interpreting a text, but of the expertise and particular orientation of other commentators toward a text that we might read. Would we consider the critique of a biblical text by the editor of Marvel Comics on the same scale as the President of Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion?

At the same time, we must throw caution to the wind not to confuse competency with a criticism of those views contrary to ours. While we may have a very different perspective from the post-Second Commonwealth rabbis in being able to stand back and critique Scriptures, this is not to say we are more competent readers. Our perspective in part comes from the view of standing on the shoulders of those with whom we disagree. One's competency is acquired through teachers, drawing on the methodologies of reading offered by literary criticism, and putting in the time to be intimately engaged with the primary text. There is no substitute for reading a work time and time again.

In the preceding chapter we looked at examples of how the Rabbis responded to perceived problems in the book of Esther. We now compare their reading of the text with two divergent, modern perspectives within the Jewish community.

Abaraham Cronbach and the Pacifist Response

Abraham Cronbach, the Jewish pacifist hired as professor of Jewish social studies at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion during the interwar years, first identifies the story's flaws before rewriting his own version of Esther. Cronbach begins

by citing the chronological problems. He notes with humor that Esther would have had to be in her late eighties (even younger in comparison to Levenson's age calculations!) when selected as queen by Ahasuerus—hardly "a radiant maiden, but a faded old woman."[5] He quickly concludes, due to the numerous discrepancies in the book, that Esther is not history but a work of fiction. This point is not problematic for Cronbach, as he understands that "a work of fiction can be valuable literature. The real objection to the story lies in the relation of the story to our ideals."[6]

Cronbach proceeds to enumerate those parts of the story in conflict with *his* ideals. He is critical of Mordecai for putting the Jewish people in jeopardy by not bowing down to Haman. "Nowhere in Jewish law or practice," Cronbach insists, "is it forbidden to render obeisance to a person in authority. Hebrew kings in the Bible are constantly receiving that token of respect from their subjects. Mordecai was indulging a whim and, in doing so, imperiling all his people. . . . A good Jew heeds the law. Mordecai did not heed the law, and the author of the story narrated that without disapproval."[7]

Additionally, Cronbach disproves of Mordecai's advice to Esther to hide her Jewishness, and for Esther's compliance. "Jewish people who hide their Jewishness," he writes, "are not the Jews we admire." Cronbach momentarily tries to imagine the author's purpose in writing this into the story. No sooner than he entertains the question does he throw up his hand claiming that, "We can hardly commend such an act of deception."[8]

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[5] Abraham Cronbach, *Stories Made of Bible Stories* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1972), 283.
[6] Chronbach, 283.
[7] Chronbach, 284.
[8] Chronbach, 284.

Finally, Cronbach confronts the greatest flaw in the text. Although he is relieved that the Jews were spared at the hands of the Persians, he is distraught over the reverse fate of the Persians at the hands of the Jews. "Particularly regrettable," Cronbach laments, "is the glee with which the Jews celebrated Haman's execution, and, months later, the carnage. Granted those killings could not have been avoided. Surely jubilation over them could have been avoided. The spirit animating the Book of Esther is not one of comedy, [it] is one of revenge. The author is vindictive. The people he favors are vindictive. In Judaism, revenge came to be regarded as ungodly. The Book of Esther forsakes that Jewish ideal."[9]

Cronbach prefaces his Esther rewrite with the explicit goal of altering the story "in accordance with our ideals."[10] In this version, Mordecai dutifully bows to Haman, and Haman comes up with another reason why he wants the Jewish people killed. Esther does not conceal her Jewishness, and Mordecai never requests that she do so. Ahasuerus still marries Esther, even knowing her Jewish identity. Mordecai refuses to be rewarded by the king with clothes, public acclaim and position. His actions are part of being a Jew, and he looks for no reward as a consequence of his deeds. Additionally, Mordecai refuses to humiliate Haman. Esther gets in on the act, pleads with the king in behalf of Haman, and saves his life. Mordecai in turn pleads with the king that Haman is able to retain his second in command position. Haman, transformed by his new lease on life, publicly thanks his Jewish friends. "I have always known the Jews to be a magnanimous

[9] Chronbach, 284.
[10] Chronbach, 285.

people. Always have I held the Jews in great esteem. Always have some of my best friends been Jews."[11]

Unfortunately, a decree is a decree, and as in the biblical Esther story, the king cannot reverse the decree permitting the Persians to kill the Jews. Mordecai comes up with another decree that the king willingly signed, stating that all people, Jews and Persians, must remain indoors on that fateful day in Adar, with only the police outdoors to enforce the 24-hour curfew. The day passed, and no Jews were killed. Haman and Mordecai went on to become best of friends. "The more Haman learnt about the Jewish people, the more he revered them. Mordecai gave Haman lessons in ethical Judaism, teaching him that, 'Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself,' 'Thou shall not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people,' 'Thou shall not oppress thy neighbor, nor rob him,' 'Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart.'" (Lev. 19:13,16,18).

Haman becomes so taken by Judaism that he declares, "Friend Mordecai, I want to make your religion my religion. I want to speak like Ruth, that Moabite woman, in the book you lent me: 'Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.'" But Mordecai would not hear of this, proclaiming, "Friend Haman, we Jews are not proselytizers.[12] We respect not only our own religion, we respect every religion."[13] As the two friends grow old together and begin to think of their mortality, Mordecai comforts Haman with the hope of life everlasting and concludes by reciting to Haman Psalm 23.

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[11] Chronbach, 287.

[12] Cronbach, although he did not identify forced conversion as a flaw of the story, may well have been responding to the use of the word *mit'yahadim* in verse 8:17. The people of the land "identified themselves as Jews" is often understood to mean converted to Judaism.

[13] Chronbach, 289.

The Carnivalesque Genre

In truth, I have set up Abraham Cronbach as the fall guy here. I do so with the utmost respect to a man who obviously had a big heart and stood for goodness in the world. His writing on Esther, though, could not have provided us with a better introduction to Kenneth M. Craig's unique commentary on the book of Esther. In his work, *Reading Esther: A Case for Literary Carnivalesque*, Craig makes a case that as moderns, we have misread the book of Esther, having lost sight of the literary genre in which it was written. Craig bases his thesis on the work of the literary theorist Mikhail Bahktin. Craig draws a parallel between Bahktin's work on the French author Francois Rabelais[14] and the author of the book of Esther. Both authors use the narrative form to respond "to official culture and dogma with carnivalized language, themes and images. A diminishing carnival perception of the world may explain the futile efforts of a number of interpreters (as cited earlier) such as Luther, Paton, Ben-Chorin, Sandmel, and many others (including Cronbach) who have expressed contempt for the Esther (MT) narrative."[15]

Bakhtin's reading strategy integrates "literary and social documents,"[16] providing, like Umberto Eco, a valuable, accessible model for ethical criticism. Bakhtin suggests that the Russian Formalists (associated with New Criticism) made a mistake by treating texts as mere objects to be studied, or as repositories for formal, linguistic analysis: "In a word, formalism is not able to admit that an external social factor acting on literature

[14] Francois Rabelais (1490-1553): satirist, monk, physician and thinker in 16th century France.
[15] Kenneth M. Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for Literary Carnivalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 43.
[16] Craig, 13.

could become an intrinsic factor of literature itself, a factor of immanent development"[17] Following this, Craig makes explicit his goal in reading the book of Esther: "To discover how individual words, phrases, and speech units carry ideology in the Hebrew story. Such a full-working view will illustrate that the Esther tale is an aesthetic as well as a social text where content is produced within an ideological frame."[18]

What, then are those elements of speech that communicate the multiple meanings of the book of Esther? The elements of the carnivalesque genre include historical manipulation, peripety, caricature, coincidence and exaggeration. With this in mind, let's now look back at the Esther narrative to identify these elements.

The author of Esther is not a chronicler of history. As noted earlier, the biblical author is not merely careless or ill-informed with his use of "historical" information. His goals are two-fold: 1) to give the story an air of historicity from another time and place, so as to keep the authorities of his time (or future times) from feeling threatened, and 2) to discreetly send the message to his readers that this story is not to be read as an historical account, but as a number of very relevant messages in their own time (and future times). It is through the author's employment of historical misdirection that he taps into the carnivalesque genre. It is in this light that we now look at the author's description of the Persian empire consisting of 127provinces; a number that shows great exaggeration from historical scholarship. It is in this light that we question Vashti's women-only banquet, contemporaneous with Ahasuerus's men-only banquet. Again, there is historical record showing that there is ample precedent for women partying with

[17] Craig, 16.
[18] Chronbach, 29.

men at Persian banquets. The author had his own motivations for the unfolding of the narrative to create this scene.

As Chronbach, too, points out, the ages of Mordecai and Esther, as they are placed in a historical context by the author, are laughable when thinking of their respective roles in the story. This is particularly true with Esther. Unless the King Ahasuerus's eyes were dim, he selected a woman at the tender age of about 110 as the winner of the empire wide, all-virgins-included beauty contest. Is it possible that the author was way ahead of his time in promoting the content of a woman's character over the lure of her beauty? Is it possible that this was an early representation of feminist literature? Or is it more likely that the author was having some fun in the spirit of carnivalesque, while constructing a story with his own editorial punch?[19] Cronbach was correct in identifying the historical inaccuracies of the story, but he missed the intentionality of the author and the genre in which he was writing.

The author is very careful in setting up a chain of events, the result of which is intentionally predictable. No sooner do we anticipate the obvious to occur, than its very reverse carries the day. Peripety and irony are the trump cards of the carnivalesque—and the book of Esther is chock-full. We see a reverse in the role of the women: From Queen Vashti's absolute and uncompromising refusal to comply with her husband, rendering her powerless and ineffective to Esther's submission to the king and her ultimate ascent to power, as she realizes her goal of saving her people and herself. How ironic it is that Ahasuerus signs a decree mandating that "all wives will treat their husbands with honor,"

[19] Generally speaking, ages in Tanakh strike the modern reader as being unrealistic (Sarah conceiving at 90 years old, and so on). The author of Esther may well be adding his own twist to this biblical conception of age.

after his own wife, Queen Vashti, refuses to parade herself naked before the king and a banquet hall full of men.

As noted above, Levenson highlights the irony in the date set for the genocidal royal order. It is precisely eleven months before the day on which it is to be carried out, and this is the day before Passover, the festival that celebrates the triumph of the Jews over their oppressors. Levenson has to stretch to make this connection, but given the spirit of the author's use of such vehicles, in my opinion, this is not too much of a stretch. We noted, too, the author's extensive connection to the Joseph novella. As with much of biblical intertextuality, passages are not duplicated but used for familiarity while being adapted to communicate a different message. In Exodus, it is God that calls upon Moses to go back to Egypt to liberate the Jewish people. In the book of Esther, the call to Esther is from Mordecai. The author employs the use of biblical intertextuality with great irony. What it actually says about the author's own theology we cannot say for sure. But minimally this twist gives us pause to ponder the irony.

How ironic it is that Haman's wife Zeresh, in contradistinction with the law demanding that she be a submissive wife, is the one guiding the action of her husband. This becomes true with Esther herself, as she begins to play the king as a puppet at her own banquets. Zeresh's suggestion that Haman build a gallows for Mordecai's neck sets up the peripety soon to follow. It will be Haman himself to hang on the gallows designated for his nemesis. And as Haman fulfills the king's request to suggest how to best honor an unheralded hero in the kingdom, believing he is customizing his own glorification, he unwittingly sets the stage for Mordecai to receive the honor in his place. It is one misstep after another for Haman. As he pleads for his very life, in the process of

prostrating himself before the queen, the king returns to the chamber to find him falling all over his wife. Haman's intention to plead for his life is misinterpreted as the rape of the Queen, which ends up being the noose around his neck—his final peripety.

The great reversals in the story are saved for last. "In the twelfth month (that is the month of Adar), on its thirteenth day, when the king's command and decree were to be put into operation, on the day when the enemies of the Jews expected to overpower them, the reverse occurred: it was the Jews who overpowered their enemies." As presented earlier, an argument can be made that this chapter is not part of the original story. What is clear, even if the writing style is more explicit than typically seen in the story, this is a reversal of great magnitude, and is compatible with the genre. Instead of being the victim, the Jews are the victors. The story opens with a banquet thrown by the Persian king for his subject. The story ends with a banquet as part of the new Jewish festival of Purim.

Coincidence, around each turn in the book of Esther, is another key expression of the carnivalesque genre. The biblical author is constantly planting scenes that foreshadow the against-all-odds encounters in the narrative. After Mordecai uncovers the plot to kill the king, just happening to be in the right place at the right time, "the matter was recorded in the book of annals in the presence of the king." Late in the story, it is just this book of annals that the king requests, after being woken from his sleep. The book just so happens to open to the page reminding the king of Mordecai's unheralded deed, a reminder that moves Mordecai closer to taking Haman's number two position. If there was not enough coincidence in the scene the author continues to pile it on. Just as the king is looking for someone in the court, in the wee-hours of the morning, to suggest

the most appropriate way to honor Mordecai, who should happen by but Haman. We had ample opportunities to know how things continue to spiral out of control for the hapless, albeit dangerous, Haman.

Exaggeration too, is a marker of carnivalesque. As the complete coverage of the king's earlier edict is sent to *all* women, so the wishful thinking that *all* virgins are to be brought before the king. And to imagine, amongst all these virgins, the Jewess Esther is be chosen above them all. The use of time as well, is viewed differently in light of the vehicle of exaggeration. We recall that the king's first banquet lasted 180 days. That is one long drinking fest. And consider the patience required of century-old Esther, having to wait four years between Vashti's removal and her ultimate ascension to the throne. Twelve of these months were spent in a marathon beauty treatment regiment— six months being bathed with oil of mirth, and six months applying perfumes and cosmetics.

The author informs the reader that the measurements of the gallows Haman erects to hang Mordecai is fifty cubits. This is the equivalent of about eighty feet, far to large for the more common stake that would come from a single tree. This is of course the very same gallows on which Haman is hanged, and perhaps the same on which his ten sons were hanged. The most shocking number in the story comes from the head count of all those non-Jews killed at the hands of the Jews: 75,000. Are we to read this number as anything else but an exaggeration? Along with the fact that we discount the story as a historical account from the beginning, there are other compelling reasons to dismiss this number, even within this fictional account, as intended to be taken literally.

The author tells us nothing of any Jewish casualties in this two-day slaughter. Is it possible that the Jews could be engaged in close hand-to-hand combat, and not suffer

any of their own fatalities? On the same note, the author says nothing of "those who hated" the Jews defending themselves. Can we imagine, even in a fictionalized setting that these Persians would go to slaughter like sheep? The only way to make sense of these highly inflated numbers and this surreal slaughter scene is by reorienting ourselves within the genre of the carnivalesque. Cronbach does not detect the genre, but listens only to the surface of the text, excised form its native environment of fantasy. Instead of seeing the function of the antipathy between Mordecai and Haman, Chronbach sees only the hatred of two men against one another, representing the mutual hatred of Jew and non-Jew. Cronbach not only misses the literary genre, but is unable to step back to see the heavy-handedness of his own agenda. Cronbach is unabashed as he injects into his Esther rewrite his values, those which he prescribes to all the Jewish people. Understanding genre distinction is a necessary step in guiding our response to a work.[20] We have before us a case of a missed distinction, and consequently, an interpretation gone awry.

The choice of genre is not made arbitrarily, and it is therefore fair and important to ask to what purpose this choice of literary carnivalesque served the biblical author of Esther. The key to answer this, perhaps, is in the writings of the same rabbis explored earlier in this paper. In that chapter we looked at the different ways that the rabbis resolved problem they perceived in the Masoretic Text. We now return to a number of writings from the same works, to read them with an eye toward identifying genre.

[20] Quinn, 138.

The rabbis want to expand on Haman's plans to kill the Jews, and the manner in which he chooses to win the king's approval. The authors of Esther Rabbah :

> R. Isaac Nappaha said: The wicked Haman found a very serious accusation to bring against Israel, for so it says: "And when these days were fulfilled, the king made a feast for all the people to be found in Shushan the capital, from the great to the small" (Esther 1:5). "People" here means only Israel, as in the verse: "Happy are you, Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord" (Deuteronomy 33:29). Said Haman to Ahasuerus: "The God of these men hates lewdness. Make a feast for them and set harlots before them, and order them that they should all come and eat and drink and do as they please," as it says: "They should do according to every man's pleasure" (Esther 1:8).[21]

To counter this temptation set before the Jews, and avoid suffering the wrath of God, Mordecai raises the warning flag:

> When Mordecai saw this, he rose and issued a proclamation, saying: "Do not go to partake of the feast of Ahasuerus, since he has invited you only to be able to lodge a complaint against you, so that the Attribute of Justice should have an excuse for accusing you before the Holy One, blessed be He." But they did not listen to Mordecai and they all went to the feast. R. Ishmael said: Eighteen thousand and five hundred went to the banquet and ate and drank and became drunk and misconducted themselves. . . . Forthwith God said to the Accuser: "Bring Me a scroll and I will write on it the doom of extermination."[22]

The rabbis here, reflecting the genre of the Hebrew MT of Esther, draw on exaggeration as a key literary device. In the first place, how is it that Haman would have such an intimate knowledge of the standards held by the God of Israel for His people? How absurd of Haman to think he could turn the God of Israel against His people. Against Mordecai's effort to keep the Jews on the right path, they bite, hook, line and sinker for the temptation placed before them. Not to be outdone by the biblical author, the rabbis up the ante on hyperbole. Not only do they imagine many thousand Jewish men taking the king up on his invitation, they place the edict approving the genocide of the Jews in

[21] Esther Rabbah 7:13
[22] Esther Rabbah 7:13

the hand of none other than God to sign. God is signing the death warrant for His own people.

The rabbis recognize the use of peripety in the biblical text, and demonstrate that they can write from the same literary toolbox. They write their own version of Haman building the gallows for Mordecai:

> Haman son of Hammedatha, did not sleep nor did he rest until he proceeded to bring carpenters and smiths, the carpenters to make the gallows and the smiths to forge iron, while Haman's sons exalted and rejoiced with his wife Zeresh, playing on lyres. [Then] the wicked Haman declared, saying: "I will remit the wages to the carpenter, and for the smiths I will prepare a meal for this gallows." At that moment Haman arose to try the gallows with his own stature. Thereupon a heavenly voice emanated from the highest heavens and said to him: If it fits you, wicked Haman, and it is good for you, son of Hammendatha.". . . . Haman made a gallows for himself."[23]

The rabbis know of the reversal in store for Haman and they add their own embellishment to the story, keeping in step with the genre of the Hebrew text. Similarly, the authors of Esther Rabbah weigh in on this reversal of Haman's fate.

Adding yet a different twist, even the trees realize that Haman—not Mordecai—is destined to be hanged. The sages overhear the trees boasting to one another, making their case before God that they should have the honor of giving themselves for the hanging of Haman. From fig, to vine, to pomegranate, to nut-tree, to citron, to myrtle, to olive, to apple, to palm, to acacia, to cedar, to willow all pleaded their case to God why they were so special to be selected for this great honor. Finally, it was the modest thorn who simply said, "'I, who have no claim to make, offer myself, that this unclean one [Haman] may be hanged on me, because my name is thorn and he is a pricking thorn, and it is fitting that a thorn should be hanged on a thorn." So they found one of these and made the

[23] Tragum Sheni 5:14.

gallows.'"[24] The rabbis employ the carivalesque literary devices, while never loosing sight of their theological needs. It is always God in control of the action of the story.

So it is with the more theologically threatening device of coincidence. The rabbis make sure that whatever looks like chance, is really being manipulated by God. The rabbis walk a fine line between reflecting the irony of the biblical story and maintaining God's control of all. We see this in the Targum, as Ahasuerus is awoken from his sleep and requests the history of his empire to be brought to him to help ease his mind:

> The sleep of the king became unrestful, and he rose in the morning trouble in appearance. So he ordered Shimshai to bring the books of chronicles before him. When Shimshai, the scribe, perceived that which Mordecai related concerning Bigtan and Teresh, he turned over the pages of the book and did not wish to read; but on account of the desire from before the Lord of the Universe, the pages unfolded before the king.[25]

The last examples illustrate the rabbis' great command of blending their commentaries to match the genre of that which they are interpreting and reveal the most about their psychological state of mind. The rabbis revel in adding misery to Haman's life, as Mordecai and Esther go out of their way to humiliate their arch-enemy:

> [Haman followed the king's instructions in preparing Mordecai's raiment and horse, then] proceeded toward the righteous Mordecai. Haman addressed him and said: "Arise, you righteous Mordecai, son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. . . arise from your sackcloth and your ashes and put on the royal garment and ride on the royal horse!". . . . Whereupon Mordecai responded and said to Haman: One who was in a state of fasting for three days and three [nights], how can he ride on the royal horse?" When Haman heard this statement, he entered the treasury of the king and brought out all kinds of spices from there as well as fine ointments. Then he anointed him and bathed him [and] dressed him in the royal garments [and] thoroughly adorned him with all royal adornments, then fed him from the meal that Queen Esther had sent to him.[26]

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[24] Esther Rabbah 9:2.
[25] Targum Rishon 6:1.
[26] Targum Sheni 6:11.

Another version of this scene portrays Esther in a more active role. As Haman instructs Mordecai to don the royal garments, Mordecai reminds Haman:

> "It is not proper conduct to wear royal garments without washing." Haman went and sought a barber, but he did not find one, for Esther the queen had forbidden all the bath-attendants and barbers [to work that day] so Haman would have to do this work himself.[27]

It was not enough for the rabbis to merely embellish the turn of events for Haman. They were driven to rub salt into Haman's wound.

Finally, combining coincidence and peripety, always remaining true to the genre, the rabbis mercilessly take the life of Haman's daughter before his utterly helpless, humiliated eyes:

> As [Mordecai and Haman] were walking opposite the house of the wicked Haman, Shlakhtevah, his daughter, looked down from the roof, and it appeared that the man walking the road was Mordecai, while the man on the horse was her father. So she took a pot of excrement and flung it upon his head. Haman raised his head and said to her: "You, too, my daughter, you embarrass me." Whereupon, immediately, she fell from the roof and dies from the balcony chamber.[28]

As readers we know how completely unbelievable it is that events happen as they do in the Hebrew book of Esther, or in the translations and interpretations we have looked at from the rabbis. The respective texts are filled with unreality and bitterness side-by-side. This, as Mikhail Bakhtin argues, is characteristic of the carnivalesque genre. There are social conditions that demand a release and an outlet of some kind—a social condition of oppression, isolation and alienation. This is the condition of the Jews for whom the biblical book of Esther was likely written, and this was the condition of the Jews that elicited the kind of response from the rabbis as we have read. These

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[27] Lekach Tov 6:10.
[28] Targum Rishon 6:11

communities were faced with the challenges of living a Jewish life in the Diaspora and enduring the anti-Semitism that manifests itself in many ugly forms.

The Jews, for most of their history, have never been in a position to express their anger and frustration in the form of brute strength. In such a powerless situation to lash out at their oppressors with force, they had little more to resort to than the written word. It is precisely this written word that we see expressed in the Esther versions from the bible and the rabbis—words of vindictiveness spawned from the bitter waters of helplessness. There was a desperate need for hope within these communities, and the book of Esther was the crown jewel in the Jewish arsenal of words.

Purim, the festival holiday with its official roots in the book of Esther, represents both the literary culmination to the story and the highest expression of carnivalesque. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his detailed analysis of masquerading and buffoonery of carnival, suggests that such celebrating is specifically related to crisis situations: "'Ritual laughter,' he writes, 'was a reaction to *crises* in the life of the sun (solstices), crises in the life of a deity, in the life of the world and of man.'"[29] Indeed, sometimes it is best to laugh to keep from crying. Sometimes it is best to fantasize about vengeance—against those whom you are otherwise powerless to lift a hand.

The literary genre of canivalesque allowed the Jews, during the time the unknown biblical author wrote the book of Esther, during the Rabbinic period and through the ages, an outlet to express their pent-up rage. Instead of being the target of the excrement, they could, with the stroke of the writing tool, and the reading of the word, be the thrower of the pot, as imagined in the hands of Haman's daughter.

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[29] Craig, 167.

Esther Fuchs and the Role of the Heroine

We turn from Cronbach's critique of the book of Esther to the more recent commentary written by Esther Fuchs, "Status and Role of Female Heroine in the Biblical Narrative." In her introduction, Fuchs is very clear as to how one is to understand the context, and literary style of Megillat Esther. " The book of Esther. . . is a post-exilic creation which is little more than a fairy tale, though it presents itself as a piece of political history affecting the main diaspora community. Its comic art and schematic neatness departs quite blatantly from historical verisimilitude."[30] Fuchs gets off to a good start, then allows her own agenda to strongly bias her reading of Esther. Fuchs has her own mission, and her particular reading is done through the filter of feminist criticism—identifying problems with a text that denigrate women in any way.

Fuchs, for example, expands upon the common observation that there is no explicit reference to God in the text. "The omission," she writes, "of any direct dialogue with Yahweh is congruous with a more comprehensive biblical policy which allows women characters to hold direct discourse with God (or his agent) only in a 'procreative' context."[31]/[32] Fuchs fails to mention that neither are there are any male characters in dialogue with Yahweh. There are any number of reasons why the author chose to leave God out of the text. True, women are hardly given equal status to men in biblical and Rabbinic literature. It is up to the reader to decide, in stepping back and looking at the story as a whole, how problematic this point is that Fuchs raises.

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[30] Esther Fuch, "Status and Role of Female Heroics in the Biblical Narrative." In *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Alice Bach. Florence, Kentucky: Routledge, 1998.

[31] Fuchs, 79.

[32] Not to diminish from Fuch's specific point, there are three female prophetesses in the Bible: Deborah (Ju 4:4f); Huldah (2 Kg 22:14f); and Noadiah (Neh 6:14), and despite ambiguity and a probable name, there may have been a woman in mind in Ez 5:1 and 6:14.

Fuchs continues her commentary, writing, "Though the king's edict 'to destroy, slay and annihilate' all the Jews 'young and old, babies and women in one day' (3:13) was well publicized all over the kingdom, the queen is too busy with her makeup and other skin-deep activities and is unaware of the imminent danger to her people."[33] Fuchs is so caught up in her mission to identify every opportunity to portray Esther in a negative light, that she misses the very characteristics of the literature that she noted at the beginning. As pointed out earlier in this paper, Esther's extended spa treatment is very much a part of the carnivalesque genre— what Fuchs describes as "comic art." Instead of seeing this scene as a literary construct meant to advance the drama and exaggeration of the story, Fuchs reads the story within the limits of modern political considerations. She fails to recognize, or acknowledge, that the writer was an equal opportunity spoofer: the men are pathetic/stupid/absurd in stereotypically "male ways" and the women are ridiculous in stereotypical "female ways." Granted, Esther may not be to Fuchs' liking, but the men in the story are treated with the same measure of ridicule.

Fuchs does demonstrate, unlike Cronbach, a feel for the text's genre, but then becomes weighed-down by the ball and chain of political correctness. Fuchs reads the text as a slight to Esther, and therefore all women. In doing so, she not only imposes her own postmodern sensitivities upon the culture of the Ancient Near East, but also discounts the choices the author made for the sake of function. Although the author does choose Mordecai to lead the humiliation of Haman and reverse the misfortune of the Jews, his elevated status is not at the expense of Esther's central role in the story. Esther is much more than simply the namesake of the story. The author creates Esther to be

[33] Fuchs, 80.

selected as the queen and ultimately the only one capable of revealing the plight of her people to the king. The story pivots on Esther's understanding of how to influence the king to reverse the genocidal course set in motion by Haman, even though that "understanding" is comically based on sexual innuendo, both in terms of the woman's guileful sexual strategy and the man's utter helplessness and inability to think when sexuality is at play.

If the book of Esther were written in the late 20th century, when Fuchs pens her commentary, her feminist critique would be far more compelling. Indeed, the story would be at odds with a different perception of the role of women in Western society. As Fuchs observes:

> Mordecai is portrayed always as alert, courageous, resourceful, authoritative, and faithful. Esther is described in terms that imply she is pretty, obedient, silver-tongued, and somewhat manipulative. She constantly flatters the king and never fails to recognize and stress his authority. She waits patiently and obediently till the king's permission is given for an audience; only then she speaks. She is shown to fall on her knees, cry and implore the king (8:3). Mordecai, on the other hand, stays proud and regal throughout the story. He appears undaunted when persecuted and not overly grateful when extolled. . . . Aesthetics pave the way for the woman's success, whereas man's power rests on his ethical fiber.[34]

The story is not written in Fuchs' day, but some 2,000 years earlier. At most, the reader can acknowledge that the portrayal of women in those days is not what we would want to emulate today. This recognition hardly gives the reader license to criticize Esther's author for not being "enlightened" thousands of years before his time. Beyond the issue of two different social contexts, Fuchs seems to forget her own understanding that the story is not an historical account, but a piece of fiction. Given this important distinction,

[34] Fuchs, 81.

the reader should expect that the author will employ the range of literary tools available to achieve his goals in writing the text. The characters of the story have a function to carry the story in the direction the author desires. The author can only do this by having his characters reflect the reality of the time. This reality did not know of the woman's liberation movement that would take shape many generations later.

I am not serving as an apologist for Esther's author. The main objective in studying Fuchs's commentary is, as with Cronbach, is to demonstrate that she is comparing apples to figs, both in terms of genre and social realities.

Taking a Stand from Knowledge

Literature, as a reflection of life, is ambiguous. Ethical criticism is not a precise enterprise. "The logic we depend on as we arrive at our particular appraisals is neither deductive from clear premises, even of the most complex kind, nor inductive from a series of precisely defined and isolated instances. Rather it is always the result of a direct sense that something now before us has yielded an experience that we find comparatively desirable, admirable, or on the other hand, comparatively repugnant, contemptible or hateful."[35] As the examples of Cronbach and Fuchs demonstrate, making the decision whether we find a text "desirable" or "hateful" depends, in large measure, on the reader's ability to identify the genre and the time in which a story is written. Differentiating between carnivalesque and something "serious" requires an assumed literacy on behalf of the reader.[36]

[35] Booth, 71-72.
[36] Booth, 217.

The key in bridging the readings of a Cronbach and a Fuchs and that of ethical criticism, is keeping one foot in the author's world and one foot in the reality of the reader's. Neither fully exists without the reality of the other. Cronbach and Fuchs are not being cast aside here. If a work that we deem ethically problematic in some regard is still embraced by a community/institution, it is not enough simply to say: "Everyone was sexist then, and we have no right to 'privilege' our own views just because they are ours."[37] Again, the job of the ethical critic is not that of an apologist. As readers, we do not surrender our right to criticize the ethical implications of any story. But making such criticism outside of proper genre identification and historical realities is reading with blinders on. Or, to adapt Leo Strauss' words, replacing "medieval" with "biblical," we read: "There is scarcely one who would not agree to the principle that teaching, being essentially biblical, cannot be understood by starting from modern presuppositions."[38]

Times change, and with them change the concerns that impact the lives of a community. The conditions of our ancestors, who responded to the world in their own particular way, are not necessarily the same that concern us today. Indeed, we have the right and obligation to read the texts of our tradition with critical eyes. Whereas we are not responsible for justify their stories and their lives, we are responsible for trying to understand, as much as possible, their stories and their lives. What motivated them to write the words they did? What choices did they have in telling their stories? The book of Esther gives us an insight into such lives and such choices in telling their story. Understanding the genre in which they told their story not only gives us a greater appreciation for their lives, but liberates us in our interpretation of the story today.

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[37] Booth, 390.
[38] Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1952), 38.

Conclusion

To paraphrase Jon Levenson, it is our charge, as liberal rabbis and Jewish leaders in the 21st Century, to be prepared to interpret the text against our own preferences and traditions, in the interest of ethical integrity.[1] The Catch-22, of course, is that we do not approach our reading of the text as a neutral, disinterested party. As rabbis and Jewish leaders, the literary well from which we critically analyze is the very same well from which we draw sustenance. This dialectic is the lifeblood of Judaism. Or as George Steiner writes, "In Judaism, unending commentary and commentary upon commentary are elemental . . . . Hermeneutic unendingness and survival in exile are I believe, kindred. . . . In dispersion, the text is the homeland."[2] It is this "reading without end," this "dialogue" that Steiner claims is the "foremost guarantee of Jewish identity."[3]
If this dialogue is to be a two-way street, we need to feel free to speak our mind. Otherwise, Judaism becomes a monologue controlled by those who claim to be the authority of the tradition.

It is for this reason that, before continuing the generations-old dialogue of the book of Esther, it has been necessary to put canon in perspective. Reading is central to how we live our lives, whether from religious or secular canon. Like Henry James' character, Maggie, in *The Golden Bowl*, we are challenged to confront the conventions and constructs of our tradition. Maggie starts off determined "not to acknowledge conflicting obligations, not to waver from 'that ideal consistency on which her moral

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[1] Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (Yale University Press: New Haven, London, 1993), 2.
[2] Steiner, *Real Presences*, 40.
[3] Steiner, 41.

comfort almost at any time depended.'"[4] If we look at canon through James' architectural metaphor, it is too commonly compared to "solid clean-lined buildings, the pure white classical houses and the manicured gardens of Eaton Square rather than the ambiguous grays and complex shapes of Portland Place."[5] Like Maggie, we grow as readers of canon by seeing the grays. As Martha Nussbaum writes of Maggie, "we sense that this way of looking into the distinctiveness of separate and heterogeneous items is not *less* rational than her old adherence to commensurability or to weaker related principles. It is a way of growing up morally, of reasoning like a mature woman rather than a fearful child."[6]

If Jewish canon is worthy of being the text that sustains the Jewish people, then it must have the strength to hold up to our ethically critical eyes. Again, like Henry James' Maggie, "Something significant has been added by her faithful confrontation with all the factors, even if the decision itself remains unchanged."[7] At the end of the day, after being a critical "model reader" we may or may not see the text as the commentators did 1,000 years ago. It is not necessary that we predict the outcome of our reading, only to approach the text with the open mind of ethical criticism. As George Orwell write, "The first thing we demand of a wall is that it shall stand up. If it stands up, it is a good wall, and the question of what purpose is serves is separate from that. And yet even the best wall in the world deserves to be pulled down if it surrounds a concentration camp."[8] As liberal Jews, we are obliged to see the canon in its proper historical context and be

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[4] Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, 89.
[5] Nussbaum, 89.
[6] Nussbaum, 90.
[7] Nussbaum, 93.
[8] George Orwell as quoted by Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep*, I.

"prepared against our preferences and tradition" to tear it down, if necessary. What we do to rearrange and re-Form the broken pieces is the challenge of each generation.

Along with putting canon in perspective is developing the skills to then read the text. We have a responsibility as readers to identify the genre in which a text is written. This step is crucial in order to appreciate the author's intentions, as best as possible. From there, we are better able to establish our own expectations of the text. If we read the book of Esther in the genre of "history," we have misidentified the author's voice. If we misidentify this author's voice, we hear the narrative in a way it was not intended. This is a serious case of misunderstanding—an outgrowth of not employing all the critical tools available to us as readers.

A more flagrant misreading comes from not even considering the author's voice. The extreme example of reader response gives the reader the license to interpret a text in whatever way desired. This is the equivalent of comparing the text to an archeological expedition, and finding a potshard within the narrative. The excavator takes it upon himself to come up with a creative, *midrashic* interpretation, with no scientific, rational methodology to determine its origins and meaning. Our approach to reading a text from the perspective of ethical criticism is more than an academic exercise. Our choice of how to read is directly connected to how we live; it is a reflection of how we approach life. An author writes to have an impact, and it's within our hands to determine what that impact will be. Even Oscar Wilde, whose work many consider "as disparaging all ethical concern," would argue that the value of art (including literature) is in its potential to

"create a better kind of person—the kind who will look at the world and at art in a superior way and conduct life accordingly."[9]

George Steiner has clearly and simply articulated our mission as readers through the notion of "human literacy."[10] Human literacy is achieved not through mocking or censor. Steiner argues passionately that the discourse of literary criticism be conducted "where access to the work is wholly free, and the critic genuinely hopes for disagreement and counterstatement."[11] A critical ingredient to human literacy, to ethical criticism to the model reader, all different names for the same reading strategy, is making value judgments. "In that great discourse with the living dead," Steiner continues, "which we call reading, our role is not a passive one. . . . reading is a mode of action."[12] The recognition that there is, most often, more than one value judgment to be made, should not be treated as a stumbling block to making any decision at all. "Variability of judgment should not be viewed as subjectivity and a sign of non-rational approach, it is the very mark of rationality."[13]

We do not make decisions in a world void of ambiguity and subjectivity. This is part of the nature and reality of life. To shrink from judgments based on the relativity of life is abrogating our responsibility to take a stand for life. If we believe that a text and its implications for a community are harmful, we are obliged to reveal this. If we believe, after a critical reading, that a text lends itself to an exalted vision of life, we are obliged to embrace it. After all, writes George Santayana, "The sole advantage in possessing great

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[9] Wayne Booth, 11.
[10] George Steiner, *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman* (Yale University Press: New haven, London, 1958), 10.

[12] Steiner, 10.
[13] Booth, 97.

worlds of literature lies in what they can help us to become. . . . It is only then, in so far as they are appropriate food and not poison for us, that can add to the present value and dignity of our minds."[14]

The choice of what we read and how we read it is central to how we choose to lead our lives. As rabbis and leaders of the Jewish people, what we choose to focus on, both within the canon and without, as well as the lens through which read, has a great impact on our communities. Martha Nussbaum addresses the heart of this when she summarized that the "practical goal of ethical inquiry:"

> involves understanding and communal attunement. Each of us is not only a professional, but a human being who is trying to live well; not simply a human being, but also a citizen of some town, some country, above all a world of human beings, in which attunement and understanding are extremely urgent matters. . . . We can promote these goals in indefinitely many ways, apart from our professional lives: by raising children, by engaging in some form of political action, by using our money generously, by seeing and conversing and feeling. And yet, when a person happens to have a professional activity that is or becomes relevant to major ends of life—how exhilarating that activity is, and how deep . . . the obligations it then imposes.

Deep indeed are our obligations as rabbis and Jewish leaders to choose texts that will add most to living well, and to read with a large measure of "human literacy"—through the lens of ethical criticism.

Such has been my experience in reading the book of Esther. This book that was selected, after great resistance, into the canon of the Hebrew Bible, has given me the opportunity to explore the very meaning of canon, the strategies available to us as readers, and the importance of choosing the strategy that will best direct us how to live. "It is the task of literary criticism to help us read as total human beings. . . . Compared to

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[14] George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets* [1910], as read in Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 257-258.

the act of creation that task is secondary. Without it, creation itself may fall upon silence."[15] Our choice of how to read the texts does nothing less than provide the voice that continues to keep the discourse of Judaism alive and relevant in each generation. The silence I experienced growing up regarding the tensions within the biblical text has been pierced by the courage of those willing to read with an open mind. We honor them and our tradition by continuing to find our voice through a Jewish ethics of reading and living.

[15] George Steiner, *Language and Silence*, 11.

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