THE EVOLVING PORTRAYAL OF ESTHER: TRACING CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT FROM THE ANCIENT SOURCES TO CONTEMPORARY ART

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Thesis Introduction

The biblical story of Esther fascinates ancient and modern readers. In this story of power and survival, Esther boldly acts to save the Jewish people. Extensive literature, from post biblical writers and medieval commentators to modern scholars, helps one understand the character of Esther. From the biblical portrayal of a woman who brilliantly uses compliance, femininity and foresight, the character of Esther develops through time, taking shape based on the author's agenda and cultural context. As each generation interprets this biblical book, the characterization of Esther changes. She takes a somewhat different shape in each community, standing for distinct principles while her characteristics are celebrated or limited in unique ways. This thesis seeks to investigate how the characterization of Esther has evolved through the ages by comparing the characterization of Esther in various texts and mediums.

This analysis will begin with the biblical book of Esther. The first chapter of this thesis will explore the Bible's portrayal of Esther through a close reading of texts that illuminate her character. After grounding the reader in the biblical portrayal of Esther, the second chapter of this study will examine the Greek additions to Megillat Esther. By mining the language of selected Greek texts and the cultural context in which they were produced, I seek to understand how Esther was recast through the Greek authors' lens. The third chapter will progress into the rabbinic period to investigate Esther's depiction in a survey of rabbinic texts. By comparing how the rabbis and the Greek authors relate to Esther, I will have a foundation for the fourth chapter, an examination of artistic

depictions of Esther. By studying paintings from the 16th to 18th centuries, I will explore more modern presentations of Esther and the sources that inform each artistic piece.

By studying the characterization of Esther through time, as opposed to a static presentation of Esther in a particular text, one gains a more complete understanding of this character. By parsing Esther's transformation into four sections, this analysis will focus on how her character was shaped in these different time periods. This quest merits attention in part because popular understandings of Esther are based on an amalgamation of sources. Even if one attempts to only learn about Esther from the Hebrew text, he or she may carry associations and judgments based on presentations of Esther in popular culture, religious school textbooks, and holiday celebrations. By carefully examining sources that inform our understanding of Esther, it is possible to tease out which features of Esther were introduced, reshaped, and eliminated by each source. Examining each source also serves as a foil for understanding the author and culture of that period.

Studying Esther also merits attention because she stands out as a powerful female role model who faces challenges. In the biblical story, Esther utilizes her personal resources and inner strength to save the Jews of Persia. Instead of waiting around for a miracle or deferring responsibility to someone with more power, Esther seizes control of her situation and boldly utilizes her strengths to achieve her goal. Bible scholar Michael Fox's comments on Esther capture why I feel passionately about this project:

> "[Esther] raises the question of whether a person of dubious character and strength and (initially) unclear self-definition can carry the burden of national salvation. Esther becomes a sort of judge (of the type we see in the book of Judges) without benefit of the Spirit of the Lord. She is a leader whose charisma comes not in a sudden divine imposition of spirit

> but as the result of a difficult process of inner development and self-realization."[1]

Esther calls on us to take stock of our personal resources, carefully examine our circumstances, and bravely pursue our mission. Her model of careful planning, patience and bravery gives me strength and inspiration. This thesis seeks to elevate Esther as a powerful model of leadership.

An examination of Esther's character begins with some background on Megillat Esther. Megillat Esther stands as one of the latest texts written and canonized in the Hebrew Bible. Dated by its content, linguistic features, and vocabulary, it is clear that Megillat Esther was composed in exile. While scholars debate the exact date of composition, consensus exists that it was composed between 400-200 B.C.E. Adele Berlin notes that older scholarship dated the text to Hellenistic or Maccabean times, while more modern scholars locate it between 400-200 B.C.E. Berlin dates the writing "earlier in the accepted period rather than later, about 400-300 B.C.E., after the reign of Xerxes and before the Hellenization of the East in the wake of Alexander."[2] Berlin's dating results from a linguistic analysis that identifies late Biblical Hebrew typical of the Persian period, including, *birah* (capital, fortress), *keter* (crown), *'igeret* (letter).[3] Berlin also supports her dating with the presence of Aramaic and late syntactic features.

Because of the scroll's late composition, the time of its canonization remains debated. Scholar Carey Moore notes that Esther was not considered canonical in the

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[1] Michael Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2001), 205.
[2] Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society), xli.
[3] Ibid.

second century B.C.E. by the Essene community at Qumran, making it the only Tanakh book missing from Qumran.[4] Scholars debate whether Megillat Esther was omitted from the Dead Sea scrolls because it was not yet written, or if it was removed for theological reasons. While the reason for this omission remains obscured, by the time of the Talmud, Megillat Esther rested firmly in the canon. The scroll's canonical status is reflected in its presence in the second century C.E. work, *Baba Bathra 14b-15a*, which enumerates the twenty-four books of the Jewish canon.

The narrative of Megillat Esther locates its geographical setting in Persia, or modern day Iran/Afghanistan. According to Berlin's dating, the story took place during the reign of Xerxes. The Persian period began in 539 B.C.E., when Babylonia was conquered under the reign of Cyrus. Berlin notes Cyrus was benevolent toward the Jews and many were allowed to return to Judah to rebuild the Temple.[5] After Cyrus, Xerxes assumed the throne. According to Berlin:

> The reign of Xerxes ushered in the period of Persian decadence and decline. While this is a biased view, and may be exaggerated, modern historians speak of a period of consolidation and the beginning of stagnation following Darius.[6]

The contextual reality of a king losing territory echoes in Megillat Esther's presentation of the fallible King Ahasuerus.

Megillat Esther employs many linguistic and narrative devices. Jon Levenson comments that the narrative contains substantial elements of symmetry, like the banquets

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[4] Carey Moore, *The Anchor Bible: Esther* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1971), xxiii.
[5] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, xxxii.
[6] Ibid.

that bookend the narrative.[7] He notes: "The very structure of Esther suggests the transformation from a 'time of grief to one of joy, and from an occasion of mourning to a holiday' which is it great theme."[8] In addition to the unique structure, the text features a narrator. Jack Sasson explains that the omniscient narrator describes the inner thoughts of the characters and describes the narrative. Sasson also notes that the narrative contains far less dialogue than other narratives of the Bible, highlighting the prominence of the narrator.[9]

The genre of Megillat Esther indicates how to read the text. To describe the narrative, Berlin writes:

> The story itself is implausible as history and, as many scholars now agree, it is better viewed as imaginative storytelling, not unlike others that circulated in the Persian and Hellenistic periods among Jews of the Land of Israel and of the Diaspora.[10]

In addition to classifying Esther as "imaginative storytelling," Berlin describes the book as "festive comedy,"[11] which impacts the way the reader views the text. She explains, "The largest interpretive problems melt away if the story is taken as a farce or a comedy associated with a carnival-like festival."[12] The defining features of farce or comedy include: exaggeration, humorous and preposterous situations, sexual innuendo and mock destruction. These features pervade Megillat Esther and are not inserted as comic relief;

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[7] Jon Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Lousiville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 5.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Jack Sasson, "Esther," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 336.
[10] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, xv.
[11] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, xxii.
[12] Ibid.

rather, these features define the genre and inform the reader how to understand the narrative.

The dramatic presentation of the characters also reveal information about Esther. By contrasting Esther in relief to the other characters, the author creates characterization through contrast. The reader learns about Esther through the narrative's direct descriptions of her character, and through comparing her behavior to other characters. For example, Esther's ability to perceive nuance is contrasted by the king's reliance on his advisors. The types of characters found in Megillat Esther link the text with other Wisdom literature texts, where righteous characters struggle with cunning enemies. Susan Niditch notes the presence of many linguistic styles in the Hebrew text:

> The most distinctive feature of style in Esther is the extensive use of elaborative chains of synonyms, the tendency to say precisely the same thing two, three, or four times. This is the parallel style of Hebrew narration pushed to the hyperbolic, a style entirely appropriate to the exaggerated extremes of good and evil, wise and foolish, imminent destruction turned to instant salvation found in Esther.[13]

While these literary techniques are not unusual in the Bible, their strong presence in Megillat Esther is noteworthy.

Before focusing in on the character of Esther, it is helpful to summarize briefly the basic plot of Megillat Esther. The biblical story of Esther begins in King Ahasuerus' Shushan kingdom at a lavish, drunken banquet, lasting 180 days (1:2-3). After the first banquet, the king hosts a second banquet lasting seven days. While the king's wife hosts a women's banquet, Ahasuerus wants to showcase his wife Vashti's beauty, but she refuses (1:12). Enraged, Ahasuerus expels Vasthi from her position because the king's

[13] Susan Niditch, "Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna,* ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 31.

ministers suggest that her actions will make other wives despise their husbands (1:17). After the king's anger subsides, the process to find the next queen begins, and young women assemble in the kingdom (2:1-4). The reader then meets Esther, the beautiful niece of Mordecai who had been exiled from Jerusalem (2:5-7). After extensive beauty treatments lasting 12 months, Esther wins the king's love; and she becomes the queen while hiding her Jewish identity (2:16-20). While sitting in the palace gate, Mordecai overhears two eunuchs plotting to harm the king, and Esther informs the king on Mordecai's behalf (2:21-22). Ahasuerus then promotes Haman to the highest official position and orders all the courtiers to bow before Haman. When Mordecai refuses to kneel down to Haman (3:1-5), in retribution, Haman vows to kill all the Jews (5:6). Ahasuerus approves Haman's plan and issues a decree (3:10). Upon hearing about the decree, Mordecai urges Esther to intervene (4:7-8). Although initially reluctant to get involved and risk her life by appearing before the king without being requested, Mordecai urges her to take action (4:13-14). Esther instructs Mordecai to tell the Jews to fast on her behalf; then she comes up with a plan that involves inviting the king and Haman to two subsequent banquets (Esther 5:4, 5:7). As a result, she successfully lobbies him to save the Jews (7:3-6). Ahasuerus orders Haman hung on the gallows and the Jews prevent annihilation by killing their attackers (7:10; 9:1-3). The events are recorded and form the basis for the celebration of Purim (9:32).

As the summary of the narrative reveals, Megillat Esther lends itself to extensive commentary because of its dramatic events, interesting literary features, and connection to Purim. Because readers have long been fascinated by the heroine of this story, extensive literature about the characterization of Esther exists. Linda Day places the

various publications on the character of Esther into two camps: scholars who portray Esther in a generally negative light, and scholars who portray Esther in a positive light. Of the scholars who place Esther in a negative light, Day notes that E. M. Forster categorizes Esther as flat, Carey Moore describes her as lacking depth, and Lewis Bayles Paton notes that she lacks virtue and does not act admirably.[14] Day notes:

> The major proponents of an understanding of Esther as not a particularly positive figure include the aforementioned Moore, Solomon Zeitlin, Alice L. Laffey, Mary Gendler, and Esther Fuchs, in addition to Paton and Anderson. These scholars tend to interpret Esther as one which is weak, immoral or unreligious, selfish, passively obedient, manipulative, and who only gets ahead by using her beauty and 'feminine charms.'[15]

In the other camp, scholars raise up Esther as a model queen and heroine. Of the notable scholars in this group, Day highlights Elizabeth Cady Stanton's presentation of Esther in *The Woman's Bible*, S. Talmon's assertion of Esther as a superior courtier to Mordecai, and Sidnie Ann White's claim that Esther models life in the diaspora.[16]

Scholarship also exists describing how Esther's characterization has developed through the extant sources. Linda Day examines Esther in the biblical and Greek sources, but does not address rabbinic material.[17] Jonathan Jacobs focuses on Esther's characterization, but only in the second chapter of the biblical text.[18] Michael Fox also

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[14] Linda Day, *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 11-12.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Jonathan Jacobs, "Characterizing Esther From the Outset: the Contribution of the Story in Esther 2:1-20," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 8, 16 (2008).

writes on Esther's characterization with the aim of understanding, "What are the persons in the story like?"[19]

A number of articles and books explore artistic representations of Esther. Dorothee Soelle and Joe Kirchberger analyze art related to biblical women and present a survey of a handful of Esther paintings.[20] Chiara De Capoa describes the features of significant paintings about Esther.[21] But few scholars trace the sources the artists use to draw their conclusions.

This thesis will advance the characterization of Esther by continuing the examination into the modern period. By looking at the biblical text, Greek additions, rabbinic commentary and artistic representations, I seek to add a new layer to research on Esther. By analyzing art to conclude my research, I aim to discern which sources influenced the artists. After examining the biblical, Greek, rabbinic, and artistic material, I will draw conclusions about how and why the portrayal of Esther has developed through time.

[19] Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 205.
[20] Dorothee Soelle and Joe Kirchberger, *Great Women of the Bible: In Art and Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).
[21] Chiara De Capoa, *Old Testament Figures in Art, Volume 4* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2003).

Chapter One: Esther in the Bible

This chapter will focus on the character of Esther in the biblical book, Megillat Esther. I hope to illuminate how the biblical author presents Esther by examining the character's personality traits and the language used to describe the character. I will isolate three sections of text that are representative of the author's portrayal of Esther. The first section of the analysis focuses on Esther's introduction. The second section describes Esther's plan to save the Jewish people, and the third section records Esther's heroic achievement.

Esther's Introduction (2:5-12)

To examine the biblical portrayal of Esther, one must begin with the portrayal of Vashti, the terms for the king's search, and the introduction of Mordecai. Esther is not explicitly introduced in Megillat Esther until the second chapter, and at this point in the narrative, the reader already has clues about Esther from the other characters. Vashti stands as the first foil for learning about Esther. At the king's lavish, drunken banquet, Ahasuerus asks his eunuchs to "bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman," (1:11). The Queen refuses to comply with the king's request, angering the king. Michael Fox explains:

> The Vashti episode is prefixed to the story to demonstrate that humility and indirection were necessary to Esther's success. Vasthi's fate showed that the king may react badly to strong-willed women who do not temper their strength with subtlety.[22]

From Vashti's story, the reader learns that the king appreciates physical beauty and favors compliance, two features that will figure prominently in Esther.

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[22] Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 201.

After Vashti is expelled from the kingdom, the king's servants propose that he seek a beautiful young woman to be his new queen. The text states:

> The king's servants who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for Your Majesty. Let your Majesty appoint officers in every province of your realm to assemble all the beautiful young virgins at the fortress off Shushan, in the harem under the supervision of Hegai, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women.[23]

The characteristics for this search provide more clues about Esther. The term *narat* (girl) signifies a young woman of marriageable age. When paired with *betulot*, the term becomes "virgin young woman" and frequently appears in Tanakh.[24] The servants also suggested women who are *yafet torah*. *Yafet toar* commonly appears in the Tanakh to describe physical beauty or pleasing appearance. First used to describe Joseph, *yafet toar* is most often reserved for women, like Rachel,[25] who receives an almost identical descriptor.

After establishing the terms of the search for a queen, the text introduces Mordecai as the exiled Jew:

> In the fortress Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia.[26]

From this description the reader learns that Mordecai was exiled, and thus a foreigner in Persia. Jon Levenson suggests that by repeating to root for exile *g-l-h* four times in Esther 2:6, the author emphasizes the lowly position of the exiled Jews in comparison to the

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[23] Esther 2:2-3. In this thesis, the biblical citations will be taken from the JPS translation.

[24] Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishing, 1996), 655.

[25] Genesis 29:17.

[26] Esther 2:5-6.

power of the Persian kingdom.[27] Because the reader will learn that Esther is related to Mordecai, his status in exile influences her status.

After introducing Mordecai, the text explicitly introduces Esther: "He [Mordecai] was foster father to Hadassah – that is, Esther – his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother," (2:7). Mordecai receives a longer, richer introduction in the previous verses than Esther's brief, curt introduction. Berlin notes: "Esther is presented in relation to Mordecai, as his relative and dependent."[28] Esther's status as an orphan put her in a precarious and vulnerable position. For this to be the first explicit information about Esther suggests it was of paramount importance to the author. The author may have elevated Esther's orphan status to explain her connection to Mordecai, or highlight her vulnerable position.

Esther's introduction stands out from other female biblical characters. The first description of Esther does not emphasize her beauty, as is more typical in the Bible. For example, Rebekah (Genesis 24:16), and Bathsheva (2 Samuel 11:2) are introduced first by their beauty. Leah (Genesis 29:17) is also introduced by her physical appearance, noting her "weak eyes." Other characters receive deeper introductions, like Miriam (Exodus 2:4; 15:20) who is introduced by her actions and later as a "prophetess," and Abigail who is introduced as "intelligent and beautiful," (1 Samuel 25:3). Esther's intelligence becomes explicit later in the text. By introducing Esther as an orphan, and later detailing her intelligence by describing her successful plan, Megillat Esther demonstrates an evolving character. In the beginning of the story, Esther's orphan status

[27] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, 25.
[28] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, 24.

and beauty stand out as her dominant features. Only later will she evolve into a fuller character.

After describing Esther's orphan status, the text explicates her beauty. While the reader already suspects Esther's beauty because of the terms of the search for the new queen, the author explicitly declares Esther's attractiveness. "The maiden was of beautiful form, pleasing to look at."[29] The first term, *yafeh toar*, echoes the terms for the search. The king looked for a woman like Esther, with a pleasing appearance. The other term used, *tovat mareh*, appears frequently in the Bible; and is first used to describe Rebekah.

Next, the text details Esther winning favor from Hegai:

> The girl pleased him and won his favor, and he hastened to furnish her with her cosmetics and her rations, as well as with the seven maids who were her due from the king's palace; and he treated her and her maids with special kindness in the harem.[30]

Esther creates two reactions within Hegai. First she was appears pleasing in his eyes, *titav hanarat b'aynav*, and then she gains his favor, *tisah hesed.* Moore comments on the second phrase, "to gain favor." He explains that the phrase involves Esther doing something to deserve favor, rather than merely finding favor.[31] By describing how Esther's behavior caused people to like her, the text characterizes Esther as deeply charming.

Esther's introduction continues, and states that she hid her Jewish identity. "Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had told her not to reveal

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[29] Esther 2:7.
[30] Esther 2:9-10.
[31] Moore, *The Anchor Bible: Esther*, 21.

it," (2:10). Esther exhibits compliance by following Mordecai's instructions. The text states that Esther concealed her *am,* "people," and her *moledet,* "kindred." Jacob Hoschander explains that this parallel construction, which occurs nowhere else in the Masoretic text, describes that at this time, Judaism had religious and ethnic dimensions.[32]

Next, the biblical author spells out Esther's lineage. "Esther daughter of Abigail – the uncle of Mordecai," (Esther 2:15). Her father's name means, "my father is strength." Esther's patronymic description foreshadows the strength she acts with when saving her people. Throughout the narrative, Esther becomes her father's daughter, which the text hints at in the introduction of her character.

In addition to Esther's lineage, the text describes Esther's humility. The women of the harem were permitted to bring whatever they wanted from the harem to the king's palace. Esther "did not ask for anything but what Hegai, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women, advised. Yet Esther won the admiration of all who saw her," (2:13). Esther's decision to only take what was needed suggests her utilitarian sensibilities and modesty. This pasuk intensifies Esther's depiction as compliant because she follows the instructions of Hegai. This pasuk also explains that Esther won favor from everyone, not just Hegai. The text explicitly states Esther won the admiration of *kol,* "all." This gender-neutral term suggests that the other people in the kingdom, men and women, also favored Esther.

When Esther meets the king, she wins his love. "The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace an favor more than all the virgins," (2:17). Meyers describes: "The sense is that the king finds Esther both more sexually attractive

[32] Moore, *The Anchor Bible: Esther,* 22.

and more generally charming than anyone else."[33] While Esther charms the eunuchs and the women of the harem, she solicits the king's love and affection.

Esther Plots (4:1-5:16)

The next section of text relevant to this analysis occurs in chapter four. After Esther attains the throne, the Jewish people are threatened because Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman. In this section, Esther reaches a turning point and devises a plan to save the Jewish people and eliminate Haman's power. From Esther's introduction as beautiful, compliant, and charming, this section advances the character to a sensitive, cunning person.

This section of text reveals Esther's emotional life. After maidens and eunuchs inform Esther of the decree to eliminate the Jews on the thirteenth of Adar, the text states: "the queen was greatly agitated," (4:4). The reflexive verb employed, *vatitchalchal*, comes from the root "to writhe." Berlin explains, "The form here, with the reduplication of *hlhl* is unusual. The more common form of the *hitpa'el* is *hitholel*, as in Job 15:20 and Jer. 23:19. It means, "to write in fear," suggesting a physiological reaction."[34] From this term, the reader learns that Esther feels deeply and reacts with intensity. The Bible does not often describe the emotional life of its characters, causing this verse to jump out at the reader.

After describing Esther's emotional reaction to the news, the text explains that Esther springs into action She sends Mordecai clothes to wear to allow him to enter the kingdom (4:4), and she dispatches Hatach to gather more information from Mordecai (4:5).

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[33] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, 29.
[34] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, 46.

The reader's understanding of Esther's sensitivity further develops when Mordecai asks her to go to the king to plead for the Jewish people. In the Persian kingdom, contacting the king without invitation was punishable with death. Esther replies to Mordecai's plan by stating:

> All the king's courtiers and the people of king's provinces know that if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him – that he be put to death […] I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days.[35]

Esther does not explicitly reject the mission; rather, she articulates the threat she faces. Esther's hesitation reflects her justifiable fear. Meyers labels this reaction "one of helplessness,"[36] but I submit that it reflects a basic human fear and because she does not reject the mission, it is part of Esther's journey towards action.

At this point in the narrative, Esther experiences a dramatic turning point. She has begun to act on her power, sending Mordecai clothes and dispatching Hatach. In 4:16, Esther responds to Mordecai with boldness. After Mordecai suggests that Esther may have gained her royal position to save her people, Esther intuits a plan and puts it into action. She commands:

> Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish![37]

Esther declares to Mordecai: *lech*, "go!" By employing the imperative verb form, Esther takes command of the situation. She calls for a communal fast – declaring her power to

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[35] Esther 4:11.
[36] Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther in the Hebrew Bible," in *Women in Scripture*, ed. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, Ross Shepard Kraemer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 75.
[37] Esther 4:16.

influence others. While Esther complies with Mordecai's request to act, Esther builds the plan herself and organizes the action. The text states, "Mordecai […] did just as Esther had commanded him," (4:17) declaring that he now complies with her requests.

Next, Esther: "Esther put on royal apparel," (5:1) to approach the king. Esther uses her clothing to remind the king of her own royal status and to utilize her physical appearance to achieve her goal. "As soon as he the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won his favor," (5:2). After winning the king's favor, Esther receives permission to approach through the golden scepter. The king asks Esther what troubles her, and promises to grant her request, even if it is up to half the kingdom. Esther makes her first appeal: "If it pleases Your Majesty […] let Your Majesty and Haman come today to the feast that I have prepared for him," (5:4). Instead of using her first audience with the king to ask for his help, Esther requests the king's attendance at dinner. Demonstrating patience and foresight, Esther knows she needs to build rapport with the king to bend his will. A few verses later, the king asks Esther a second time about her wish, and she again repeats the dinner invitation. Meyers labels this tactic, "a superb moment of understatement."[38] Esther stays firm in her plan to build rapport, even when the king gives her another opportunity to make a request.

Esther Executes (7:3-8:6)

In the third section of this analysis, Esther heroically asks the king to spare the Jewish community. At this point in the narrative, Esther has developed a sophisticated plot to gain the king's support in saving the Jewish people. The king asks Esther on two different occasions about her request, and Esther merely asks for his presence at a feast

[38] Crawford, "Esther in the Hebrew Bible," 76.

with Haman. In chapter seven, Esther, Haman and the king gather for the feast. On the second day of the feast Esther implores the king:

> If your Majesty will do me the favor, and if it pleases Your Majesty, let my life be granted me as my wish, and my people as my request. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated. Had we only been sold as bondsmen and bondsmen, I would have kept silent; for the adversary is not worthy of the king's trouble.[39]

Careful examination of Esther's petition reveals a tremendous amount about the biblical author's perception of Esther. Esther introduces her request by honoring the king with flattery, and an invocation of their relationship. Then, Esther requests that her life be spared before she asks for the lives of her people. Esther knows that the king's only connection to the Jews rests in her Jewish identity. Esther appeals to the king's emotions by utilizing their relationship. Esther also chooses language she heard from the king. The king asks Esther: "What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be fulfilled," (7:2). Esther orders her petition by stating that her life is her wish, and her community is her request. By mimicking the King's question, Ester skillfully presents her argument. Next, she states that her community has been targeted for "destruction, massacre, and extermination." She lifts this phrase from Haman's edict (3:13), adding accuracy to her claim. Esther finishes her request by specifying that she would not seek the king's help if the threat were less severe. This remark flatters the king by acknowledging his stature. Berlin adds that Esther's rhetorical device is "intended to recast Haman's plot as a treasonous act against the king."[40] Esther does not name Haman directly in this verse, but by quoting his edict

[39] Esther 7:3-4.
[40] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, 66.

she indicts him. When the king directly asks Esther who plotted against the Jews, Esther bravely declares: "the adversary and enemy […] is this evil Haman," (7:6).

Esther's speech mirrors features of Abigail's speech to David in 1 Samuel 25. To calm David's anger, Abigail speaks to him with flattery and diplomacy when she approaches David without permission.

In the next scene of Megillat Esther, Haman prostrates himself near Esther. The text explains, "Haman remained to plead with Queen Esther for his life," (7:6). Haman's posture indicates his deference to Esther's power. When the king sees Haman's position, he accuses Haman of attempting to seduce Esther. The king determines that Haman will be hung on the gallows built for Mordecai, and Esther gains more status. The text notes, "King Ahasuerus gave the property of Haman, the enemy of the Jews, to Queen Esther," (8:1). By transferring Haman's property to Esther, the king signals Esther's capacity to manage finances and property, acknowledging her status. Next, Esther convinces the king to issue an edict to counter Haman's edict to eliminate the Jews. The biblical author describes:

> Esther spoke to the king again, falling at his feet and weeping, and beseeching him to avert the evil plotted by Haman the Agagite against the Jews. The king extended the golden scepter to Esther, and Esther rose and stood before the king.[41]

By prostrating herself, Esther demonstrates deference to the king, as Abigail prostrated herself before David (1 Samuel 25:24). Next, the text states, "Esther arose and stood before the king," (8:4). In rising to stand before the king, Esther declares her stature and power. Then Esther continues:

> And if I have won your favor and the proposal seems right to Your Majesty, and if I am pleasing to you – let dispatches be written countermandering those

[41] Esther 9:3.

> which were written by Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, embodying his plot to annihilate the Jews throughout the king's provinces For how can I bear to see the disaster which will befall my people! And how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred![42]

Esther clearly articulates what she needs from the king. Instead of encouraging the king to determine his own actions, she stipulates a plan. Berlin notes the beauty of Esther's plea, stating: "Her words are poetically, plaintively, expressed. She portrays herself a potential witness to the destruction of her own people, which she find unbearable."[43] Esther succeeds in her plot to save the Jewish people, while remaining in good standing with her husband and her uncle.

Analysis

By examining these three sections of text, one can understand the biblical author's nuanced picture of Esther. Esther is at once charming and compliant, and bold and wise. The author initially introduces Esther by focusing on her orphan status, and physical beauty. Yet, as the narrative progresses to the second section of this analysis, Esther wields significant power, thinks critically, and acts with bravery. In the third section of text, Esther marries her feminine charm with her courageous, heroic traits to become a successful heroine. The biblical portrayal of Esther represents one version of a successful woman- pleasing to the eye, with a strong heart, mind and gut. Esther cleverly weaves her femininity into her tactics to get her way with the king. She intentionally chooses her clothing, acts sweetly, and accomplishes her task.

[42] Esther 8:5-6.
[43] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, 74.

The biblical author clearly admires Esther, presenting her as an exemplar of tempered heroism. Esther is strong, yet deferential and obedient. Susan Niditch comments on the author's portrayal of Esther. Of Megillat Esther, she writes:

> Its heroine is a woman who offers a particular model for success, one with which oppressors would be especially comfortable. Opposition is to be subtle, behind the scenes, and ultimately strengthening for the power structure […] She is an altogether appealing portrait of women's wisdom for the men of a ruling patriarchate.[44]

Esther's works within the established gender roles, gaining power by manipulating the male actors. Esther is not a static character in the biblical portrayal – she grows and develops. Whether or not Esther as a character matures and change, or the author's characterization develops remains uncertain. Either way, the original presentation of Esther focuses on her compliant, gentle, attractive ways. Then she undergoes a transformation and turns into the dominant actor. Michael Fox explains this transformation by writing: "[Esther's] dynamism stands out in relief against the static nature of the other characters. She develops in three stages, from passivity to activity to authority."[45] Esther's power moves from behind the scenes, where she curried the favor of Hegai and the king through her subtle actions, to the forefront of the narrative, where she issues commands and acts boldly. For a woman do to this in the Persian diaspora, where they were marginalized members of society, makes Esther's feat incredibly triumphant. The biblical text imbues Esther with significant power. As a model of women's leadership and life in the diaspora, the Bible characterizes Esther as beautiful and bold, brilliant and effective.

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[44] Susan Niditch, "Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority," 33.

[45] Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther,* 197.

Thesis Chapter 2: Esther in Greek Sources

The story of Esther provides an opportunity to examine the portrayal of Esther through time in part because three versions of the text are extant. In addition to the Hebrew Masoretic Text, two Greek versions exist today. One version, called the B-text, was preserved in the Septuagint. The other, called the A-text, or the Lucianic recension, is a shorter version of the B-text that Lucian revised. This chapter will analyze how the portrayal of Esther developed in the Greek sources that retell and expand the biblical story.

The Greek additions are preserved in some Christian Bibles. Adele Berlin explains that the additions were once fundamental to the Septuagint but were removed in the fourth century C.E. when they discovered that the Greek additions had no correlation to the Hebrew text. She notes that the Greek additions,

> Remain canonical for the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Protestants declared them uncanonical […] some modern Christian Bibles have reinserted them into their appropriate positions within the story.[46]

When the additions are printed in Protestant Bibles, they typically appear between or after the two Testaments. In Catholic Bibles, if the additions are present, they stand at the conclusion of the canonical text.[47]

The most significant difference between the Greek versions and the Masoretic Text is that the Greek versions contain six additions, comprising more than 100 verses.[48] These additions, labeled "A" through "F," are interspersed into the Hebrew narrative at

[46] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, 1.
[47] Carey Moore, "Esther, Additions to," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary D-G*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992), 625.

various places. Scholars disagree about how to read the Greek sources. Berlin represents the majority perspective that claims the Greek versions are early biblical interpretations that do not strive for literal translation. She claims that the Greek texts "diverg[e] rather more from the Masoretic Text than its translation of other biblical books. Of the 270 verses in the Septuagint, 107 find no parallel in the Masoretic Text."[49] Carey Moore disagrees, viewing the A-text not as a revision of the Septuagint, but an additional and separate translation of the Hebrew story.[50]

> The Greek versions range in their composition date. Carol Meyers notes:
>
> > The Additions, which probably were not composed at the same time by the same person, can be dated to second or first centuries B.C.E. because of their literary style, theology, and anti-gentile spirit.[51]

With the Hebrew text dated to the 3rd or 4th century B.C.E, the Greek texts were likely composed 200-400 years after the Masoretic Text. Moore describes that scholarly consensus asserts: "Adds A, C, D, and F were originally composed in either Hebrew or Aramaic, and that they were added to the canonical Heb text prior to the latter's being translated into Greek." He further comments: "Adds B and E were originally composed in Greek and were added sometime after the completion of the Greek translation."[52] Moore argues that while it is possible to imagine the Greek additions were created in a Greek Jewish center like Alexandria, "there is no reason to think that the remaining Adds had any other provenance than Palestine."[53] Because of the anti-gentile spirit of additions

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[49] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, li.
[50] Moore, *The Anchor Bible: Esther*, lxii.
[51] Carey Moore, "Esther in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books," in *Women in Scripture*, ed. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, Ross Shepard Kraemer (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), 77.
[52] Moore, "Esther, Additions to," 630.
[53] Moore, "Esther, Addition to," 632.

A and F, Moore sees the additions as aligned with Palestinian- authored texts like Daniel and Judith.

The Greek additions shift the plot of the Hebrew story in dramatic ways. In the Greek additions, the king has stature and might, intimidating Esther while wielding great power. This stands in contrast to the presentation of the king in the Hebrew text who appears cowardly and clueless. While the Hebrew text does not mention God, God plays a critical role in the Greek additions, interceding in the narrative and receiving prayer.

The Greek additions fill in gaps of the Hebrew narrative in a way that asserts each authors's agenda. Examination of the additions reveals the aspects of the narrative that troubled the Greek authors. Each addition focuses on a different section of the Hebrew narrative. Addition A describes Mordecai's dream, foreshadowing the plot against Ahasuerus. It locates itself before the beginning of the canonical text. Addition B details the royal edict that Haman distributes condemning the Jews, and would stand between verses 13 and 14 of the Hebrew chapter three. Mordecai and Esther pray to God for help in Addition C, which could be a corollary to 4:17 of the Hebrew text. In Addition D, Esther approaches the king, an elaboration of 5:1-2 of the Hebrew text. Addition E describes the counteredict issued by the king, granting permission to the Jews to defend themselves. This counteredict is mentioned in Esther 8:10-12 but receives no elaboration. Addition F contains another description of Mordecai's dream, which would locate itself at the conclusion of the Hebrew text. While each section adds to the reader's understanding of the text, Additions C and D shed most light onto the portrayal of Esther. This section of analysis will focus on Addition C and D to investigate what the Greek sources contribute to an understanding of Esther. Moore summarizes that the Greek texts

differ in four important ways from the Hebrew text: "(1) a number of additions, (2) many omissions, (3) some basic inconsistencies with and contradictions to the MT, and (4) several explicitly stated religious concerns."[54]

Addition C[55]

"Then Queen Esther, seized with deadly anxiety, fled to the Lord. She took off her splendid apparel and put on garments of distress and mourning, and instead of costly perfumes she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she utterly humbled her body; every part that she loved to adorn she covered with her tangled hair. She prayed to the Lord God of Israel, and said: "O my Lord, you only are our king; help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, for my danger is in my hand. Ever since I was born I have heard in the tribe of my family that you, O Lord, took Israel out of all the nations, and our ancestors from among all their forebears, for an everlasting inheritance, and that you did for them all that you promised. And now we have sinned before you, and you have handed us over to our enemies because we glorified their gods. You are righteous, O Lord! And now they are not satisfied that we are in bitter slavery, but they have covenanted with their idols to abolish what your mouth has ordained, and to destroy your inheritance, to stop the mouths of those who praise you and to quench your altar and the glory of your house, to open the mouths of the nations for the praise of vain idols, and to magnify forever a mortal king.

O Lord, do not surrender your scepter to what has no being; and do not let them laugh at our downfall; but turn their plan against them, and make an example of him who began this against us. Remember, O Lord; make yourself known in this time of our affliction, and give me courage, O King of the gods and Master of all dominion! Put eloquent speech in my mouth before the lion, and turn his heart to hate the man who is fighting against us, so that there may be an end of him and those who agree with him. But save us by your hand, and help me, who am alone and have no helper but you, O Lord. You have knowledge of all things, and you know that I hate the splendor of the wicked and abhor the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien. You know my necessity- that I abhor the sign of my proud position, which is upon my head on days when I appear in public. I abhor it like a filthy rag, and I do not wear it on the days when I am at leisure. And your servant has not eaten at Haman's table, and I have not honored the king's feast or drunk of libations. Your servant has had no joy since the day that I was brought here until now, except in you, O Lord God of Abraham. O God, whose might is over all, hear the voice of the despairing, and save us from the hands of evildoers. And save me from my fear!"

Addition C appears in the Greek text at the end of chapter four in the Masoretic Text. At this place in the narrative, Mordecai alerts Esther to the threat against the Jews,

[54] Moore, *The Anchor Bible: Esther*, lxi.
[55] This chapter will utilize translations from the New Revised Standard Version.

and Esther responds that anyone who approaches the king without invitation confronts death. Mordecai pleads with Esther to save her people, adding that deliverance will come from another source if she does not act. Esther calls a community-wide fast to prepare for going before the king (Esther 4:16). Addition C records Esther offering a prayer in the first-person narrative mode. The language of the prayer tells the reader about the author's understanding of Esther by illuminating her theology, emotional life, and religious behavior. Addition C also reframes Esther by altering its depiction of the king.

Esther's prayer in the Greek addition emphasizes Esther's God-fearing nature. She employs many epithets for God in this section, including "Lord God of Israel," "My Lord," "O King of the gods," "Master of all dominion," and "God of Abraham." The variety of titles for God makes Esther seem familiar with liturgical and biblical terms. The Greek author's insertion of God into the text reveals discomfort with God's absence in the Hebrew text. The author also portrays Esther's theology in her statement that the Jewish people are suffering because they sinned, another element absent in the Hebrew text. This reflects the author's belief that God rewards and punishes based on behavior and provides an explanation for the crisis facing the Jews. The author may have viewed Jewish exile as punishment, and reveals that perspective through Esther's words.

Esther's prayer demonstrates her belief in an all-powerful God. Esther turns to God for help by asking for strength and intervention. She appears to believe that God can intercede in the world by assisting humans. Describing God as having knowledge of all things, she asks God to place eloquent speech in her mouth. She will be saved by God's hand, yet Esther will be the one acting. The author may have fleshed out Esther's understanding of God's presence in the world to reflect his understanding. The author

lived in a world where prayer was the means of communicating with God, rather than sacrifice. The text depicts Esther offering a formal, personal prayer, probably similar to the prayers offered in the author's community.

The text strengthens its portrayal of Esther as a pious woman by citing core Jewish concepts. Esther refers to the Jewish people as a tribe of families, calling upon aspects of communal identity. She cites biblical stories referencing God choosing Israel from the other nations (Deuteronomy 7:7) and the everlasting inheritance promised to Abraham (Genesis 15:5). Esther's prayer also references the Temple cult by describing God's altar and the glory of God's house. Writing in a Greek-speaking land, the author of Addition C was far in distance and time from the Temple and the land of Israel. With the Bible as the new center of Jewish life, the Greek author makes the story of Esther feel more biblical. As scholar David Clines noted, the biblical references in the Greek text help "assimilate the Book of Esther to a scriptural norm."[56] By aligning the Book of Esther more closely with the canon in language and content, the Greek author resolved discontinuity between Megillat Esther and the earlier books of the Tanakh.

Addition C depicts Esther's emotions. The text describes her as seized with anxiety and in need of strength and courage. The level of emotional intensity of the Greek text dwarfs the emotion of the Hebrew text. When Esther learns of the Haman's plot in the Hebrew text she becomes, "greatly agitated," (Esther 4:4). The Greek word choice makes Esther seem more timid and overcome with fear than the Hebrew text. The author portrays Esther as disdainful of her position as queen. In her prayer, Esther states that she abhors the bed of the uncircumcised alien and her position a queen. By describing

[56] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, lviii.

Esther's disgust for her relationship with the non-Jewish king, the Greek author reveals his agenda against fraternizing with non-Jews. Esther's sexual relationship with the king must be addressed because they were not married, and the Greek author clarifies that Esther abhorred the exchange. The Greek author also frames Esther as disdainful of the opulence of her royal life by stating that she did not wear her crown during leisure time and she removed her royal garb to pray. The author may have portrayed Esther's dislike for the Persian court because of Greco-Persian relations. Adele Berlin notes that Greek culture viewed the Persian court system as, "indulgent, decadent, and effeminate."[57] She explains: "There was much emphasis on Persian luxury, palace bureaucracy, and an extensive hierarchy including slaves. The Persians were, in the eyes of the Greeks, an inferior power in decline."[58] Concerned that the Hebrew text allows the reader to imagine that Esther enjoyed her royal position, the Greek author fills in the gaps of the narrative by making it clear that Esther was deeply uncomfortable with her life in the kingdom.

The text also adds religious behavior not described in the Hebrew text. Esther specifies that she did not eat at Haman's table, drink non-kosher wine, or honor the king's feasts. As the rabbis will do later, the Greek author was concerned that the Hebrew text leaves room to imagine Esther participating in non-kosher activities. The Greek author presents Esther as pious according to his understanding of religious observance. The author's inclination to add religious practice may reflect the Hellenistic worldview. According to Richard Frye, in the Hellenistic world, "religious identity had replaced ethnic identity."[59] To portray Esther's Jewishness, the Greek source needed to elucidate

[57] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, xxix.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, 1.

her Jewish practice. In the Hebrew text, the religious issues of sexual contact with non-Jews, kosher food, and the decadence of the court are not presented as problematic.

Finally, Addition C advances the depiction of Esther by contrasting her character to the king. Esther asks God to put eloquent speech in her mouth before the lion. By referring to the king as a lion, the author suggests that Esther views him as fierce and dangerous. In the Hebrew text, the king is no lion. Rather, he is weak and clueless. The king of the biblical story needs his assistants to make decisions and he is often the last one to figure out the plan. By elevating the king, the Greek text diminishes Esther's power. The Greek author seemed to be uncomfortable with Esther's strength and bravery, and felt the need to embolden the king to weaken her.

Addition D

"On the third day, when she ended her prayer, she took off the garments in which she had worshipped, and arrayed herself in splendid attire. Then, majestically adorned, after invoking the aid of the all-seeing God and Savior, she took two maids with her; on one she leaned gently for support, while the other followed, carrying her train. She was radiant with perfect beauty, and she looked happy, as if beloved, but her heart was frozen with fear. When she had gone through all the doors, she stood before the king. He was seated on his royal throne, clothed in full array of his majesty, all covered with gold and precious stone. He was most terrifying.

Lifting his face, flushed with splendor, he looked at her in fierce anger. The queen faltered, and turned pale and faint, and collapsed on the head of the maid who went in front of her. Then God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness, and in alarm he sprang up from his throne and took her in his arms until she came to herself. He comforted her with soothing words, and said to her, "What is it, Esther? I am your husband. Take courage. You shall not die, for our law applies only to our subjects. Come near."

Then he raised the golden scepter and touched her neck with it; he embraced her, and said, "Speak to me." She said to him, "I saw you, my lord, like an angel of God, and my heart was shaken with fear at your glory. For you are wonderful, my lord, and your countenance is full of grace." And while she was speaking, she fainted and fell. Then the king was agitated, and all his servants tried to comfort her."

Addition D immediately follows Addition C. While Addition C presents Esther's first-person prayer in anticipation of approaching the king, Addition D describes Esther's

interaction with the king. The Greek text fills in the biblical text between chapters four and five. It precedes the biblical account of the king asking Esther about her wish, and Esther inviting the king and Haman to a feast.

Addition D advances many of the themes of Addition C. It continues to highlight Esther's pious nature by describing that her prayer lasted three days and offering another divine epithet, the all-seeing God and Savior. Addition D offers new insights into Esther by presenting her as a fragile damsel in distress, enhancing the king's ferocity, and shifting the drama of the text.

The Greek text goes to great lengths to highlight Esther's timidity. While the Hebrew text does not articulate any of Esther's feelings when she approaches the king, the Greek text depicts her as frozen with fear. She needs to lean on her maid for support, turns pale and faints twice. By adding two scenes with Esther fainting, the Greek author paints her character as timid and meak, cowering in front of the king. The Greek author must have been uncomfortable with a female protagonist acting boldly against the monarch, so he reshapes the Hebrew text. In the biblical version, instead of fainting, Esther acknowledges the threat of approaching the king and decides to approach with bravery, declaring: "If I am to perish, I shall perish!" (Esther 4:16). By ascribing to her anxiety and weakness, the author diminishes Esther's power.

Esther also acts as a damsel in distress. After Esther faints, the king leaps to take her in his arms and revive her. Esther responds to the king with flattery and charm, calling him an "angel of God," a person "full of grace," and a "wonderful lord." The Greek author likely shaped Esther into this negative stereotype of female weakness to fit into his desired gender roles. Esther uses her dainty, feminine allure to elicit the king's

tenderness. This was a safe model of female behavior to the Greek author. The added emotional and psychological drama of Esther approaching the king as a damsel in distress reflects the style of Greek romance.

Addition D intensifies the power of the king. Describing him as most terrifying and containing fierce anger, the king becomes a character worthy of great anxiety. Yet, God diminishes the king's anger so that the king treats Esther with gentleness. Carey Moore notes that God's intervention to change the king's anger into gentleness represents the climax of the Greek story. He writes:

> This is the high point in the Greek version, in contrast to Hebrew Esther 9, where the establishment of the festival of Purim represents the book's climax. In the Greek version, God, not Queen Esther, is "the hero"! In other words, just as Queen Vashti was demoted by the king, so Queen Esther is, in effect, demoted by Addition D.[60]

The Greek source builds emotional tension in the scene with Esther's fainting, and the king's terrifying presence to make this the most dramatic moment in the narrative. The Greek author needed to fixture God as interceding so that Esther does not appear to heroically save the Jewish people by herself. The author employs characterization through contrast by making the king seem more powerful to diminish Esther.

Analysis

By recasting Esther in Addition C and D, the Greek authors fit Esther into a more familiar, conventional mold, one that would be less problematic for a later audience. Esther as a character looks significantly different in the Greek additions than the Masoretic Text. In the Hebrew story, Esther singularly develops her plan to save the Jews

[60] Carey Moore, "Esther in the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books," 78.

and acts alone. Through her brave words and carefully planned strategy, Esther heroically saves the day in the Hebrew story. The Greek texts eliminate Esther's heroism by employing God as the savior. God gives Esther eloquent speech, bravery, and ultimately changes the king's anger to gentleness. The Greek text's insertion of Esther's religious life has no counterpoint in the Hebrew text. This dramatically shifts the portrayal of Esther into a pious, meak woman. While both texts portray Esther as beautiful and feminine, the Greek texts belittle Esther's strength with her fainting spells, weakness, and need to rely on her maids. By not articulating Esther's feelings about approaching the king, the reader can see her as fearless and committed in the Hebrew story. Yet the Greek text belabors her anxiety and trepidation. Because of the author's agenda, worldviews, and concerns with the Hebrew text, the Greek author dramatically shifts the portrayal of Esther.

Chapter Three: Esther in Rabbinic Sources

For a full understanding of how Esther developed as a character, one must follow her through rabbinic literature. The rabbis of the Talmud received the biblical text, which renders Esther as a compliant yet bold heroine, who wields feminine charm and significant bravery to save her people. Uncomfortable with various aspects of this depiction, the rabbis recast Esther, shaping this biblical character to reflect their own values and world-view. To glean how and why the rabbis transformed Esther, this analysis will focus on a section of text from Tractate Megillah 13a.

During the rabbinic period spanning 70 BCE to 500 CE, a large body of rabbinic literature about Esther developed. The Babylonian Talmud contains a midrashic exposition of the entire biblical book called Tractate Megillah. Tractate Megillah is the only exposition of an entire biblical book in the Talmud. Esther is also discussed in the two Aramaic translations of Megillat Esther, and the midrashic compilations Esther Rabbah, Abba Grion, Panim Aherim, Leqah Tov, Midrash Megillat Ester, Aggadat Ester, Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, Yalkut Shimoni.[61] Within this large collection of material, scholars note a common "infrastructure of thematic and narrative assumptions such that we can speak of a common exegetical tradition."[62] Because of this common tradition, a close reading of one section of text allows us to learn about the rabbinic portrayal of Esther.

Examining Tractate Megillah provides a survey of rabbinic material on Esther. One section in particular, 13A, provides many clues into the rabbinic agenda in recasting Esther. For this chapter, I will outline and translate a section of 13A and use a close

[61] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, liii.
[62] Ibid.

analysis of the text to represent the rabbinic portrayal of Esther. This section of text lends itself to studying Esther because it describes her physical features, religious behavior, relationship to Mordecai, and position in Jewish tradition. Tractate Megillah, the tenth Tractate of Mishnah in the Order Moed describes the laws of Purim and comments on Megillat Esther.

Outline and Translation of Text from Tractate Megillah 13A

1) "Who had been exiled from Jerusalem." *(Esther 2:6)*
   a) Rava[63] said: He [Mordecai] was exiled on his own accord.
2) "And he brought up Hadassah." *(Esther 2:6)* She is called Hadassah, and she is called Esther.
   a) It had been taught, Rabbi Meir[64] said: Esther was her name so why call her by the name Hadassah?
      i) Because the righteous ones are called myrtles. *(Sanhedrin 93a)* And therefore it says, "And he stood between the myrtles." *(Zech 1:8[65])*
      ii) Rabbi Yehuda[66] said: Hadassah was her name, so why call her name Esther? Because she hid her facts, as it was written, "Esther did not reveal her people."
      iii) Rabbi Nechemia[67] said: Hadassah was her name, so why call her Esther? Because all the peoples of the world called her that after Ishtar.
      iv) Ben Azzai[68] said: Esther was not long or short, she was medium sized, like myrtle.
      v) Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha[69] said: Esther was greenish, but a thread of grace was around her.
3) "For she [Esther] had no father or mother…and when her father and mother died." *(Esther 2:7)* Why these last words?

[63] Rava, the third century Babylonian Amora.
[64] Rabbi Meir was a third generation Tanna from Babylonia.
[65] Zecharia was a post-exilic prophet and he described a righteous person/angel standing between myrtles.
[66] Rabbi Yehuda, 2nd century Palestinian Tanna.
[67] Rabbi Nechemia, the 4th generation Palestinian Tanna.
[68] Ben Azzi was a 2nd century Palestinian Tanna.
[69] Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha was a 4th generation Palestinian Tanna.

i) Rav Acha said: When her mother was pregnant, her father died. When her mother gave birth, her mom died. And when her father and mother died, Mordecai took her for his own daughter. *(Esther 2:7)*

4) A Tanna taught in the name of Rabbi Meir: do not read "for a daughter," *(Esther 2:7)* but instead read "for a house." Thus he said: "But the poor man had nothing except one small ewe lamb that he bought and reared. It grew together with him and his children, it ate his morsel and drank from his cup and in his bosom she lied and she was like a daughter." *(2 Samuel 12:3)* Because she laid in his bosom was she like a daughter to him? Rather it means she is like a wife, so here, it means a wife.

5) "And the seven maidens." *(Esther 2:9)*

   a) Said Rava: She used them to count the days of Shabbat.

6) "And he changed her maidens." *(Esther 2:9)*

   a) Rav said, he gave her Jewish food to eat. However, Samuel said: he gave her chines (a cut between the shoulder blades) of pork, while Rabi Yochanan[70] said: seeds And so it says, so the steward took away their food and gave them seeds.

7) "Six months with the oil of myrrh." *(Ester 2:12)* What is this oil of myrrh?

   a) Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba[71] said: satchet. Rav Huna[72] said, oil from olive not a third grown. It has been taught Rabbi Yehuda said: anpakinon is oil from olives not a third grown. Why is it used for spreading? Because it removes hair and makes the skin dainty.

8) "In the evening she came and in the morning she returned." *(Ester 2:14)*

   a) Said Rabbi Yochanan: from the slander of that wicked man we learn something of praise, that he did not use his bed during the day.

9) "And Esther won favor." *(Esther 2:15)*

   a) Said Rabbi Eleazar, this teaches that every person took her as his own people.

10) "Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus into his royal house during the tenth month, the month of Tevet." *(Esther 2:16)*

   a) The month when body warms body.

11) "And the King loved Esther above all the women and she won grace and favor in his eyes more than all the virgins." *(Esther 2:17)*

   a) Rav said: "If he desired to find in her the taste of a virgin, he found the taste. And the taste of a married woman, he found it.

12) "Then the king made a big feast" *(Esther 2:18)*

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[70] Rabbi Yochanan was a 1st generation Palestinian Tanna.
[71] Rabbi Hiyaa bar Abba, the 1st generation Palestinian Amora.
[72] Rav Huna was a 2nd generation Babylonian Amora.

a) He made the feast for her, and she did not reveal (her Jewish identity) to him. He lowered taxes and she did not reveal, and she did not reveal to him, he sent gifts and she did not reveal.

13) "And when the virgins were gathered together the second time," *(Esther 2:19)* He went and took counsel from Mordecai. He said, a woman is only jealous of the thigh of another, and even so she did not reveal.

Analysis

In this section of text, the rabbis take the biblical portrayal of Esther and add their religious agenda. This section of text from Masechet Megillah is organized by *pasuk*, with a direct quote from the biblical text framing each section. The text contains twelve *pasukim* selected from the second chapter of Megillat Esther.

The first *pasuk* that the rabbis employ to discuss Esther describes Mordecai as exiled from Jerusalem. Megillat Esther contains a lengthy description of Mordecai's exile (Esther 2:5-6), further establishing the narrative in a Diaspora setting, which the reader already knows because of its setting in the Persian kingdom (Esther 1:2-3). The text's discussion of the foreign nature of the land is central to the plot because it explains why Esther needs to conceal her identity. After presenting the *pasuk* describing Mordecai's exile, Rava asserts that Mordecai left on his own accord and was not forced into exile. The Talmudic rabbis, also living in exile, may have provided this explanation to bolster their sense of power. They frame Mordecai with agency by noting that he moved by choice.

After discussing Mordecai's exile, the text moves on to the *pasuk* stating Esther's two names. Redundancy and ambiguity in the biblical text troubled the rabbis, and they needed to resolve the contradiction of Esther having two names. Because they viewed every word of the Bible as holy and ordained by God, the rabbis saw its structure as

flawless. They needed to explain the redundancy to imbue it with meaning. Five different opinions are offered to explain the redundancy. The first explanation, given by Rabbi Meir, takes the redundancy of having two names to elevate Esther's character. Rabbi Meir explains that Esther had the additional name Hadassah because she was righteous, and myrtles represent righteous people. Rabbi Meir cites Zechariah 1:8, a pasuk that describes a righteous person or angel standing among myrtle branches. By comparing Esther to this verse, Rabbi Meir draws Megillat Esther closer to other biblical texts. The need to align Megillat Esther with other biblical texts results from its late canonization and the many unique characteristics of the narrative. To affirm Megillat Esther's place in the canon, Rabbi Meir relates Esther to Zechariah.

Rabbi Yehuda offers the second explanation to address Esther's two names. He explains that her official name was Hadassah, but she was called Esther because of the way she concealed her identity. Rabbi Yehuda makes an aural play between the name Esther and the root s-t-r, "to conceal." He suggests that Esther's ability to conceal her Jewish identity warranted people calling her by the name Esther. Rabbi Yehuda's explanation, like Rabbi Meir's explanation, attributes the character's additional name to her behavior. Rabbi Yehuda seeks to explain the name Esther, while Rabbi Meir focuses on the name Hadassah.

Rabbi Nechemia asserts a connection to the planet of Venus, called "*ishtar*" noting "all the peoples of the world called her that [name]." Esther's name sounds similar to Isthar, a Babylonian god from the Babylonian creation-myth. The Encyclopaedia Brittanica explains:

> Esther is a modification of Ishtar, the name of the Babylonian goddess of fertility and of the planet Venus, whose myth must have been partially known to the Israelites even in pre-exilic times, and after the fall of the state must have acquired a still stronger hold on Jewish exiles.[73]

Marduk and Ishtar are the gods of light and order, and in the creation myth they defeat Humman and Vashti and bring peace and blessing to the world.[74] Rabbi Nechemia explains that outsiders – "peoples of the world"- attribute Esther's name to the connection to the myth. His statement demonstrates the popularity of the story of Esther in non-Jewish communities. It explains that Hadassah gained the additional name of Esther because so many people connected her to Ishtar. This reasoning differs from the previously cite rabbis because it draws its explanation from the outside culture and not a character trait.

Rabbi Ben Azzai offers the fourth explanation in the text. He states that Esther was average-sized like a myrtle, explaining the name Hadassah. Just as the myrtle plant measures neither large nor small, Esther's body was average sized. This explanation draws its conclusion through a connection to Esther's physical appearance. Megillat Esther highlights Esther's physical beauty so it seems appropriate that the rabbis would also describe her appearance. Rabbi Ben Azzai's explanation marks a new section of the text, where two explanations relate to Esther's physical appearance.

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[73] *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed., s.v. "Esther" (New York: Encyclopedia Britannica Company, 1910), 797.

[74] Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 90.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha offers the last explanation, claiming that Esther received the name Hadassah because her skin-color was green like a myrtle. After stating that Esther's sallow appearance warranted her second name, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korcha explains that she had a thread of grace around her. This was a common rabbinic compliment for a person who perhaps didn't possess physical beauty. For example, Hillel states that all brides contain threads of grace and therefore should be considered beautiful.[75] Rabi Yehoshua ben Korcha's explanation of Esther's skin tone fits with Rabbi Ben Azzai's explanation about her physical characteristics and suggests that the rabbis viewed Esther's appearance as a defining feature of her character.

Next, the rabbis explicate the *pasuk* stating that Esther's parents died. The biblical text contains redundancy, stating Esther "had neither father nor mother," and "her father and mother died," (Esther 2:7). Because the biblical text states this in two ways, the rabbis need to resolve the redundancy. Rav Acha explains that first Esther's father died, and then her mother died in childbirth.

The text then presents a teaching from a tanna in the name of Rabbi Meir. It states that Esther was not Mordecai's daughter but rather his wife. The tanna writes, do not read daughter "bat," instead read home "bayit," - a euphemism for wife. The text employs the common rabbinic phase "do not read x but read y." This device acknowledges one way of reading the text but directs the reader to a different understanding. The tanna directs the reader to understand Esther as Mordecai's wife to eliminate tension with the story of the man whose only possession was a lamb. The man cared for the lamb and she was "like a daughter" to him. This story uses the word daughter as a term of endearment, opening the

[75] Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 16b–17a.

possibility to read the Hebrew text as a metaphor. Other biblical texts, including Ruth 2:8, use daughter to describe fondness. Berlin cites contemporary scholarship to explain reading of Esther as Mordecai's wife.

> [Michael V.] Fox speculates that this line of interpretation eliminates the otherwise improper presence of an unmarried woman in Mordecai's house. Levenson suggests that it is because these Jewish sources were loath to see a Jewess married to a Gentile.[76]

The tanna's assertion that Esther was Mordecai's wife puts forward a distinctly different reading than Megillat Esther, demonstrating the range of opinions preserved in Talmud. Determining Esther's status as wife or daughter carried significant implications for the rabbis. Viewing Esther as Mordecai's wife makes her relationship with the king inappropriate and eliminates any question about the appropriateness of Esther and Mordecai living in the same house. Reading Esther as Mordecai's niece makes her relationship with the king a more significant marriage.

The text continues and discusses a *pasuk* about the seven maidens that assisted Esther. The rabbis utilize the number seven to describe Esther's religious life. Although there is no biblical basis, Rava states that Esther used the maidens to count the days of Shabbat. The rabbis were deeply troubled by the lack of religious practice in the biblical story. The narrative never describes Esther performing a religious act like praying or observing Shabbat. Through this *pasuk,* the rabbis create an opportunity to connect seven maidens with seven days of the week.

The fifth section of this text continues to discuss Esther's maidens. Rava states that the maidens gave her Jewish food to eat. Samuel asserts they gave her pork.

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[76] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, 26.

Yochanan claims they gave her seeds. The Talmud reads the biblical verb, *vayisaneh* to mean "change." According to Moore's reading, in the biblical verse, the king changes the location of Esther and the maids to the best quarters of the harem.[77] The rabbis take the verb "change" out of context to insert a conversation about kosher food. In verse 9, the king gives Esther *manoteha,* "rations." The biblical text does not state that Esther refused to eat these rations, which were probably not kosher. Moore notes: "Unlike Daniel and Judith, Esther did not refuse- at least not in the Masoretic text – these delicacies."[78] Thus the rabbis use the verb "change" to refer to the maids changing Esther's rations to kosher food, even though the verb in the biblical text refers to Esther's location. In the rabbinic world, following the laws of *kashrut* keep an individual within the community and preserved the tradition. They read "change" out of context to recast Esther keeping kosher.

Next, the rabbis introduce the *pasuk* that describes Esther's twelve months of beauty treatments. The rabbis focus on the oil of myrrh. They explain that it removed hair, softened skin, and came from olives. Bible scholar Adele Berlin notes:

> Myrrh is used often in Song of Songs and is associated with love-making. Anointing the body with oil, after bathing and before dressing, is mentioned in women's preparations. […] The emphasis here seems to be more on the quantities of fine products that the palace supplied rather than on the woman's personal preparations.[79]

By recasting the myrrh as olive oil, the rabbis desexualize the *pasuk*.

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[77] Moore, *The Anchor Bible: Esther,* 16.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, 27.

The next three sections of the Talmud text describe Esther's sexual encounters with the king. First, the Talmud states that Esther would enter the king's quarters in the evening and leave in the morning. Rabbi Yochanan states that this allows the reader to find something worthy of praise in the king - that he only used his bed during the evening. The rabbis do not try to cover up the sexual nature of the biblical text to suggest they did not have intercourse. Rather, the rabbis were more concerned with Esther's marriage to a non-Jew. By explaining that the king only used his bed during the evening, Esther seems more sexually demure.

Next, the Talmud declares that Esther won everyone's favor because people viewed her as part of their own people. This highlights Esther's ability to ingratiate herself with the people around her. She felt familiar to everyone who met her. This statement also affirms Esther's ability to conceal her Jewish identity.

The text continues and quotes the *pasuk* stating the king loved Esther more than the other virgins. Rava explains that if the king wanted to think of Esther as a virgin, she allowed him to. And if the king wanted to think of Esther as a married woman, she allowed him to. This statement comments on Esther's sexual versatility.

Next, the text cites the *pasuk* that describes the feast the king sponsored for Esther. An anonymous source in the Talmud records Esther's willpower to keep her identity concealed, even though the king made the feast for her, lowered taxes on her behalf, and gave her gifts. This statement honors Esther's effort to conceal her Judaism even when the king tempted her with favors. Esther's ability to hide her identity allowed her to become queen and ultimately gain the power to save her people. If Esther had

revealed her Jewish identity to the king when he made a feast and lowered taxes for her, Esther may have lost her royal position.

The last *pasuk* employed in this passage explains that it was impossible to make Esther jealous. In addition to being beautiful, likeable, and strong-willed, Esther was secure in her sense of self and not swayed by jealous feelings.

Tractate Megillah 13a reveals the rabbinic agenda to reshape the characterization of Esther. In this text, the rabbis seek to make Esther religious, sexually demure, beautiful, and heroic. This section of text serves as a representation of the rabbinic characterization of Esther because its themes are echoed elsewhere in rabbinic commentary.

The rabbis desperately wanted to make Megillat Esther more religious to reflect their worldview. In the examined text from Megillah 13a, the rabbis insert religious elements by framing Esther eating kosher food and counting the days for Shabbat. In other sources, the rabbis make the biblical text more religious by inserting God into the text. They weave God into the narrative as a behind-the-scenes mover. For example, in Tractate Megillah 14a, the rabbis suggest God clothed Esther. The Talmud records: "Surely it should say royal apparel? What it shows is that the Holy Spirit clothed her. It is written here, 'and she clothed,' and it is written in another place. Then the spirit clothed Amittai." By stating that God clothed Esther as God clothed Amittai in prophecy, the text elevates Esther to be closer to God. The Talmud strengthens Esther's relationship with God by declaring Esther a prophetess. "Our rabbis taught: forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses prophesied to Israel… Seven prophetesses. Who were these? Sarah, Miriam,

Deborah, Hannah, Abigal, Hulda and Esther..." By stating that Esther possessed the word of God like a prophetess, the Talmud embeds God into the story.

The examined text reveals the rabbinic discomfort with Esther's sexuality. While the text discusses desexualizes the oil of myrrh and states that the king and Esther only used the bed at night, it also highlights Esther's sexual versatility. Elsewhere in rabbinic and medieval texts, the rabbis attempt to limit Esther's sexual relationship with the non-Jewish king. For example:

> B. Sanhedrin 74b says that "Esther was like the ground" – that is, she was entirely passive when the king made his advances toward her. The Zohar (Ra'yamehemma. Ki Tetzei 3:276a) says that God sent down a female spirit disguised as Esther to take her place with the king.[80]

As demonstrated in the examined text, the rabbis spend considerable effort describing Esther's physical appearance. Perhaps the rabbis describe Esther's beauty because it stands as a considerable part of the biblical narrative. In Tractate Megillah 15a, the rabbis discuss Esther's beauty. "The rabbis taught: there have been four women of surpassing beauty in the world- Sarah, Rahab, Abigail and Esther." The rabbis elevate Esther' beauty by stating she was one of the most beautiful women in the world. While the biblical text notes Esther's attractive appearance, the rabbis qualify it as superior to almost every woman in the world.

The Talmud celebrates Esther's ability to conceal her Jewish identity in service of saving lives. Bible scholar Leila Bronner explains that the rabbis were able to celebrate Esther because her power was limited. Bronner writes:

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[80] Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther*, 26.

> Why [the rabbis] accepted [Esther's] leadership uncritically, in contrast to how they treated Deborah's may have something to do with the legal issues of judges and courts that the rabbis were dealing with at that time. Deborah as judge presented more of a threat than did Esther. Esther, after all was said and done, was still the wife very much under control of her kingly husband. […] Queen Esther waited, with both strength and temerity to be recognized and summoned into her husband's presence. Perhaps that is why so much is elaborated on her physical beauty. The dual role that she played – savior of her people and tiptoeing wife – enabled the midrashist to heap glory upon her.[81]

Esther was a safe figure to celebrate because she did not threaten the rabbinic system. The rabbis of the Talmud exert tremendous energy to shape Esther into a character they feel comfortable promoting. While the biblical text presents Esther as a woman who at first seems diffident and compliant, and eventually claims her power to boldly save the people, the Talmud focuses on the non-threatening aspects of Esther. By describing Esther's beauty, likeability and pious behavior, instead of the way Esther boldly called for a community-wide fast, approached the king without invitation, and bravely accused Haman, the rabbis effectively filter Esther through the prism of their world-view.

[81] Leila Bronner, *From Eve to Esther* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994), 180.

Thesis Chapter Four: Esther in Art

The story of Esther lends itself to visual representation because of the dramatic narrative, emphasis on Esther's beauty, and description of the lavish royal lifestyle. As a result, images of Esther abound – ranging from religious school textbooks and graphic novels to paintings and sculptures. The oldest extant artistic depiction of Esther was found in the third century C.E. mural in the Dura synagogue. Centuries later, Esther became a popular figure in European art when the Renaissance and Baroque artists frequently depicted religious icons. Contemporary artists have also used Esther as a subject but with less frequency than earlier artists. This chapter seeks to examine how artists characterize Esther and what influenced their renderings of her character. By focusing on six paintings[82] from the 16th to 19th centuries, this chapter will represent modern characterizations of Esther to compliment the biblical text, Greek additions, and rabbinic commentaries.

Art stands as a powerful tool for examining characterization. Katharine Martinez describes three approaches for examining images that can be applied to the study of Bible: art as illustration, art as illumination, and art as narrative interpretation.[83] When art is used as illustration, the art highlights a particular message about a text and is presented to underscore an agenda. Art as illumination seeks to draw connections between concepts by using art as a tool for understanding complex ideas. And finally, art as narrative interpretation aims to make sense of text by depicting images, ideas and concepts in a

[82] Six paintings were selected for this study out of dozens found in textbooks and online galleries. While thousands of artistic portrayals of Esther exist, there appear to be about 75 significant works of art depicting Esther. For this study I selected paintings that were either displayed in museums, reviewed by art historians, or created by well-known artists.
[83] Katharine Martinez, "Imaging the Past: Historians, Visual Images and the Contested Definition of History," in *Visual Resources* 11 (1995): 21-45.

contextual framework. Lynn Huber and Dan Clanton Jr. explain that to use art as narrative interpretation, students must first describe what they see and then ponder the image as text by describing what the image captures. They write: This method of reading the image parallels the method of reading texts in which we look first at its component parts – the words, grammar, syntax, structure, imagery – before addressing its meaning(s)."[84] I will use this model of analysis to study art as narrative interpretation of the story of Esther.

"Esther Before Ahasuerus" by Jacopo Tintoretto in 1547-1548

Jacopo Tintoretto was born in Venice in 1518. An artist from childhood, Tintoretto favored religious images for his work. The Renaissance painter was called "Il Furioso" for his high energy level and prolific work. Biographer Gaston Sortais describes Tintoretto's artistic goals by noting that he sought to influence Venetian painting by "adding to its distinguishing qualities of brilliantly harmonious coloring and pleasant grace of form the merits of the Florentine and Roman schools, a knowledge of anatomy,

[84] Lynn R. Huber and Dan w. Clanton Jr. "Introduction: Teaching the Bible with Art" in *Teaching the Bible: Through Popular Culture and the Arts,* eds. Mark Roncace and Patrick Gray (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 179.

[…], a pose full of movement, a vigorous contrast of light and shade."[85] This agenda is present in Tintoretto's work, "Esther Before Ahasuerus."

Painted between 1547-48, "Esther Before Ahasuerus" depicts Esther fainting in the king's presence. Staged in the palace and surrounded by a crowd of people, Esther appears mid-fall with closed eyes and a limp posture suggesting unconsciousness. Esther's porcelain skin stands out in contrast to the dozen onlookers of court attendants. The dark, rich colors of the paintings set the warm flesh tones apart. Esther's dress stands out as luminous and pink. The painting achieves great texture with light and shadow, effectively portraying the realistic nature of the scene. Tintoretto's piece reflects the Baroque style with exaggerated motions, heightened emotions, and a dramatic tone. Characters and architectural details fill almost the entire canvas, leaving little negative space and making the viewer feel the tension of the scene. The characters in the scene crane their necks toward Esther, as if she just fainted, heightening the tension. The king leans his left shoulder toward Esther and appears to be moving closer to Esther. A male attendant supports Esther and leans his right shoulder towards Esther. The body language of the characters helps draw the attention to Esther at the center and these exaggerated motions heighten the drama.

The narrative interpretation of this work stems from the Greek text, as it appears to be a literal depiction of Addition D when Esther faints in the king's presence. Because Esther does not faint or falter in the biblical text, it is obvious that Tintoretto drew

[85] Gason Sortais, "Il Tintoretto" in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14737a.htm. (accessed Feb 1, 2014).

inspiration from the Greek additions. In the painting, the king gazes at Esther with the tenderness described in Addition D: "He comforted her with soothing words."[86] At first glance, the viewer may think Esther appears weak because she has fainted; nevertheless, she clearly stands out as the center of attention. In the center of the painting a male figure reaches down to support Esther. His bright blue head covering and long, tanned and muscular arm direct the viewer to Esther. While Esther appears to be falling toward the ground, she seems to have a gravitational pull on the king. The king stands on one foot and appears to be off balance, falling toward Esther. Esther influences each character in the painting – the onlookers gaze at her and the king leans toward her. Esther appears to spark the other figures into action. In describing this image, art professor Mati Meyer notes:

> The portrayal of Esther in an act of archetypal feminine weakness, taken up by most Baroque artists, is based on the apocryphal text […] Yet the reason for the appearance of this particular motif in Italian art, where Esther's posture implies her autonomy vis-à-vis the king, is to be sought in an ever-growing economic and cultural autonomy of women, occurring especially in Venice and Bologna.[87]

Meyer suggests that even though Esther is depicted mid-faint, her presence at the center of the painting can be viewed be a symbol of women's power. Esther may have been an attractive figure in Italian art because her influential role in the narrative resonated with the growing autonomy of women. Tintoretto presents Esther as a weak character who holds some degree of power. While Tintoretto paints Esther at the center

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[86] "Esther: The Greek Version Containing the Additional Chapters; NSRV" in *The Parallel Apocrypha*, ed. John R. Kohlenberger III (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 205.
[87] Mati Meyer "Art: Representation of Biblical Women" *Jewish Women Encyclopedia.* Jewish Women's Archive, http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/art-representation-of-biblical-women (accessed Jan 20, 2013).

of the painting and as the figure that animates the other character, he depicts Esther with closed eyes and a limp body. While the king reaches out for Esther, her maid in the orange dress props up her body. As the maid supports Esther's body she looks to the left, as if ordering someone to act. Tintoretto creates a diagonal line of interest from the bottom right corner where Esther rests up through the king to the upper left corner where Haman hovers. This line suggests that Esther knows she must elicit the king's help to address the ultimate enemy, Haman. Reading this painting as narrative interpretation, Tintoretto highlights Esther's otherness by painting her skin tone differently than the other characters. By depicting Esther with light skin, Tintoretto comments on Esther's physical beauty. While Tintoretto depicts Esther in a moment of weakness, Esther is the central figure of the painting and animates the other characters.

"Esther Before Ahasuerus" by Artemisia Gentileschi, 1630

One of the most prominent female painters of the Baroque period, Artemisia Gentileschi, depicts Esther with skill and nuance. Gentileschi was born in 1593 in Rome, and learned to paint in her father Orazio Gentileschi's studio. Art commentator Richard McBee notes that the young artist suffered a sexual trauma that influenced her art. After being raped by a fellow artist, Gentileschi endured a long trial where she was brutally cross-examined and likely tortured. McBee examines Gentileschi's paintings as responses to this trauma, noting:

> The majority of the subjects in her work are of women in Christian, mythological or allegorical subjects. That is not surprising. But of those paintings, at least a third of them are of Jewish women heroines. This choice, for her time, was rather unusual. And in fact the place where Artemeisia finds her most convincing, strong and vibrant women is always the Hebrew Bible and midrashim.[88]

Gentileschi painted "Esther Before Ahasuerus," around 1630. Esther stands out as the focal point of the painting, although she is not positioned in the center. Esther's luminous complexion and bright gold dress with a low neckline draw the viewer's eye to her figure at the left corner of the canvas. A large dark abyss separates her from the king, who is seated on a throne and dressed in lavish Baroque clothing featuring ruffled shoulders and a linen collar. As was typical of the Baroque period, this piece contains sharp contrast in light and shadow, called chiaroscuro.[89] The king's face and leg depict chiaroscuro, as the shadow reveals the contour of his body. Spanning a canvas approximately seven feet by eight feet, the characters loom large in Gentileschi's work. Esther appears to be fainting before the king with two maidens supporting her body. Both of the maidens turn their heads to face Esther, one below and to the left and the other above and to the left, thus framing the queen in between their gaze. The king looks at Esther with concern, poised to rise up from his chair to assist her, yet he remains sitting. The king's chair rests two steps above Esther, signaling his superior position. Esther's hand appears set off with light and shadow to capture the viewer's attention as the focal point of the painting. While Esther's body is slumped downward and her eyes are closed, she appears to hold her hand with grace. The hand is staged with elegance and femininity,

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[88] Richard McBee, "Jewish Art Before 1800," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, http://richardmcbee.com/writings/jewish-art-before-1800/item/esther-before-ahasuerus-by-artemisia-gentileschi?highlight=WyJlc3RoZXIiXQ (accessed Feb 10, 2014).
[89] "Artemisia Gentileschi," *Famous Women Artists – 17th Century*. http://www.femaleartists.org/artemisia-gentileschi/ (accessed Feb 8, 2014).

perhaps to elicit the king's help. The king's upturned head and the placement of his hands on the chair's armrest suggest he may be preparing to move towards Esther. Gentileschi reflects the biblical narrative's style of heightened drama by depicting the characters in motion.

Reading this artistic representation as text displays Esther from the Greek sources. Because Esther did not faint in the biblical account, Gentileschi obviously worked from the Greek Addition D, which describes: "The queen faltered, and turned pale and faint, and collapsed on the head of the maid who went in front of her."[90] Gentileschi depicts Esther resting on one maid's head, unlike Tintoretto's painting where the maids support Esther in their arms. By choosing to depict Esther as the subject of this work, Gentileschi seems to admire Esther's role in the story. Keith Christiansen of the Metropolitan Museum of Art points out evidence that Gentileschi struggled with this piece, noting that the checkerboard floor was painted over a young black servant with a dog. Of the decision to paint over the boy, Christiansen notes that Gentileschi:

> Needed that space – a moment of silence, during which we hold our breath – to underscore the great risk Esther had taken by appearing before the king without being summoned – an infraction punishable by death.[91]

Gentileschi appreciated Esther's precarious position. Perhaps because of her own experience with danger, Gentileschi highlights the drama of Esther approaching the king.

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[90] "Esther: The Greek Version Containing the Additional Chapters; NSRV" in *The Parallel Apocrypha*, 203.

[91] Keith Christiansen, "Artemisia Gentileschi's Esther Before Ahasuerus," Metropolitan Museum of Art, http://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-museum/now-at-the-met/features/2010/artemisia-gentileschis-esther-before-ahasuerus (accessed Feb 20, 2014).

While she drew from the Greek text to depict Esther's fainting spell or swoon, Gentileschi's depiction of Esther's hand may be a subtle way to give Esther some power.

"The Feast of Esther" by Jan Lievens, 1625

Jan Lievens was born in Holland, 1607 and achieved artistic success around age ten. Lievens is often associated with Rembrandt, as they once shared a studio and trained as co-apprentices. Lievens and Rembrandt painted with similar styles, which led many scholars to falsely attribute Lievens' depiction of Esther to Rembrandt. Mathew Gurewitsch of the Smithsonian notes that Lievens and Rembrandt "established the exotic, fancy-dress 'Oriental' portrait as a genre unto itself and later showed the same unusual predilection for drawing on paper imported from the Far East."[92] Both artists were known for using vibrant colors, fine brush strokes and rich texture. Lievens' career was mostly obscured by Rembrandt's fame, but recently Lievens has been featured as a re-discovered Dutch master.[93]

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[92] Matthew Gurewitsch, "Jan Lievens: Out of Rembrandt's Shadow." Smithsonian Magazine,
March 2009. http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/jan-lievens-out-of-rembrandts-shadow-52758214/?page=3

[93] "Jan Lievens: A Dutch Master Rediscovered" opened at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C during the fall of 2008.

In “The Feast of Esther,” Lievens uses a large canvas - measuring approximately four and a half feet by five and half feet – to depict Esther, Haman, the king, and a court attendant in great detail. The image features rich red, yellow, and brown hues. The king and Haman sit at a table in the foreground and Esther sits further back. Esther’s light skin stands out in the center of the image, as she points to Haman. Darkened in the shadows, Haman holds his hand to his mouth in surprise while looking to the king. The king, whose body measures significantly larger than the other characters, clenches his fists and reaches one fist in Haman’s direction. The king’s clenched fists depict his angry response to learning that Haman plotted to kill his wife and her people. Lievens bathes Esther in light, whereas the rest of the scene is dark. Esther rests in the middle ground of the image, with Haman and the king sitting in front of her and a male figure lurking behind her. Esther’s head measures on the same horizontal plane with Haman and the king, and she assumes prominence in the center of the image. Each figure’s face conveys emotion. Haman looks shocked, the king seems infuriated, and Esther appears focused on conveying her message to the king. Esther’s flushed cheeks suggest emotional stress or passion. The scene is marked by dramatic energy as each character appears in motion. Esther appears poised to speak, Haman reaches his hand to his mouth and the king’s fists appear as if they are about to move. Lievens depicts the characters in elegant, sumptuous costuming against a textured curtain. Esther wears a blue and white dress with red accents, strings of gold necklaces, and a crown. The king’s sash, robe, hat and shirt are royal and decadent.

This painting depicts Esther 7:6 when Esther directly identities Haman as the adversary and the enemy at the feast she prepared. Lievans’ narrative interpretation

presents Esther as bravely accusing the king. She looks directly at the king, holds her shoulders back, and holds her hand to point directly at Haman. She appears to lean into the table and does not shrink away from the task of accusing Haman. Meyer notes that Dutch culture emphasized learning about Jewish history to better understand Christianity. Commenting on a different Dutch depiction of Esther, she finds "parallels between Esther's triumph over Haman and the successful Dutch uprising against Spanish domination."[94] This may also be present in Lievans piece. Lievan's portrayal of Esther stands as a counterpoint to the damsel-in-distress depictions of Esther fainting by Tintoretto and Gentileschi.

"La Toilette d'Esther" by Theodore Chasseriau, 1841

Theodore Chasseriau was born in 1819 in Saint Domonigue (now Dominican Republic) to a French father and a Creole mother. He began painting during childhood and studied under the neoclassical painter Jean Auguste Dominque Ingres. Chasseriau incorporated many different elements his religious scenes and portraits, borrowing from neo-classisicm and romanticism. Chasseriau's work also reflected his favoritism for Orientalism, the 19th century interest in Middle East subjects. Lynne Thornton notes:

[94] Meyer, "Art: Representation of Biblical Women."

"Theodore Chasseriau's orientalist pictures combine the neoclassical idealization of Ignes and the emotive use of color of Delacroix."[95]

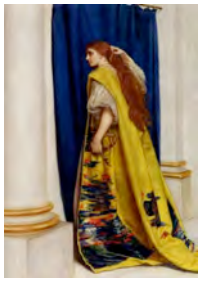
In "La Toilette d'Esther," a topless Esther adjusts her hair and reclines on a green sofa as two maids tend to her. Her naked breasts mark the focal point of the scene. A white sheet covers Esther's lower body, revealing her left foot. Esther holds her arms up to fix her blond hair into a ponytail as she gazes to her right. Looking into the distance, Esther appears distracted or pensive A gold necklace and several gold bangles and bracelets adorn Esther. The gold bracelets have the same coloring as the dress or robe laid across Esther's waist. Esther's pink lips, blue eyes, and dark nipples stand out against her pale skin. Chasseriau draws the viewer's eye to Esther by depicting her off-white skin in contrast to the darker skin of the two figures that face Esther. This outdoor scene contains a blue sky, lush trees and a plant with purple flowers in the background. A dark-skinned maid wearing a red dress with shiny silver jewelry holds a pink box and looks down at Esther with an abstract expression. The figure's muscular arms suggest that the maid may be a man or woman. The figure's dark skin may reflect Chasseriau's Creole family history. The other maid has skin darker than Esther's but lighter than the other figure. She wears a blue skirt and a light green head covering, a sharp contrast to Esther's naked chest and light hair. The maid uses both hands to hold a large gold bowl that appears to be heavy. Her slightly open mouth suggests that the bowl was difficult to hold. None of the characters in view look at each other. The attendants focus on the items they carry while Esther gazes off in the distance, making her seem disconnected and aloof. In her reclined state and distant gaze, Esther appears to have littler concern for the attendants.

[95] Lynne Thornton, *The Orientalists* (France: ACR Edition, 1994), 74.

This piece is characteristic of the romantic style because of its embrace of exoticism and rich colors. Interestingly, Chasseriau depicts Esther with blond hair and blue eyes, features that would have been unusual in the Persian setting of the biblical story where darker features prevailed. Chaasseriau may have painted Esther's features from a model used to stage the painting. Regardless, this depiction of a Jewish woman stands out as less typical than other Semetic images painted by other artists.

"La Toilette d'Esther" appears to depict the scene of Esther 2:12, when Esther's maids administer beauty treatments in preparation for her visit to the king. Chasseriau's painting illuminates the Hebrew description that catalogues "six months with oil of myrhh and six months with perfumes and women's cosmetics." Chasseriau portrays Esther's sexuality by framing her bare breasts in the center of the work. Author Silvestra Bietoletti notes that Chasseriau's depiction of Esther appears "imbued with as touching a sensuality as that found in mythological subjects."[96] By using shadow and light to emphasize the contours of Esther's body, the painting suggests that Chasseriau viewed Esther's femininity and sexuality as her dominate traits.

"Esther" by Sir John Everett Millais, 1865



[96] Silvestra Bietoletti, *Neoclassicism and Romanticism* (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 2009), 157.

Born into a wealthy Southampton family in 1829, John Everett Millais was considered a child prodigy. The youngest student admitted to the Royal Academy Schools, Millais illustrated for publications, produced portraits, and painted religious scenes.[97] He earned tremendous commercial success and was one of the wealthiest artists of his day. While he painted with a broad style, some scholars classify Millais's later work, including "Esther," as precursors to the aesthetic movement, which valued simplicity and bright color. Millais was part of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood that sought to reform art by returning to a style characterized by detail, bright colors, and the complexity of earlier Italian art.

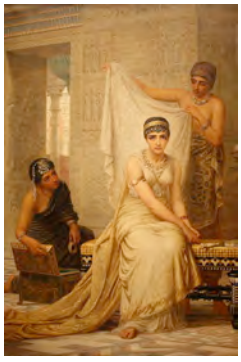
In the 1865 piece "Esther," Millais depicts Esther approaching a deep blue cloth entranceway, reaching with her right hand to remove the pearls binding her hair. In her left hand Esther carries a crown. It appears that Esther is poised to place the crown on her head. The painting depicts Esther in a liminal position: approaching the threshold to a new stage, in the process of changing her appearance from commoner to queen. Esther's long, flowing reddish brown curls and porcelain skin depict her feminine allure. White columns with gold rings frame Esther, setting her yellow dress with billowing white sleeves apart from the blue curtain. Esther's pale skin matches the white columns. Millais painted Esther's dress from a gown given to General Gordon by the Chinese emperor. Millais flipped the gown inside-out to abstract its design. Esther appears attractive, thin, and graceful. While she approaches the king without invitation, Millais depicts Esther holding her arms loosely arms – body language that suggests calm. Milliais could have

[97] Terry Riggs, "Sir John Everett Millais," Tate Galleries, January 1998, http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/sir-john-everett-millais-bt-379. (accessed Feb 10, 2014).

depicted Esther's leftward turning face with an anxious expression; instead she appears focused and determined.

The narrative interpretation of this piece grounds itself in the biblical scene when Esther enters the king's chamber in Esther 5:1. Millais chose to paint Esther alone, setting this work apart from the other works analyzed in this chapter. By singularly focusing on Esther, Millais declares the centrality of her character. Esther's intentional costume change suggests she did not wear her crown at leisure. This may reflect the Greek Addition C when Esther states: "I abhor the sign of my proud position, which is upon my head on days when I appear in public […] I do not wear it on the days when I am at leisure."[98] If Millais did not use this Greek addition for inspiration, he may be trying to suggest that Esther switched between her crown and natural hair to appropriately suit the scenario and elicit something from the king. Regardless of the sources Millais used for inspiration, by depicting Esther as the only figure in this painting, he conveys a message of her importance and strength.

"Esther" by Edwin Long, first displayed in 1878



[98] "Esther: The Greek Version Containing the Additional Chapters; NSRV" in *The Parallel Apocrypha*, 202-203.

Edwin Longsden Long painted historical and biblical portraits. Born 1829 in Somerset and educated in England, Long studied at the British Museum and traveled to Spain, where he was influenced by the Spanish masters. Often portraying religious imagery and Christian iconography, Long received popular acclaim.

In Long's artistic representation, Esther rests on a decorative bench while two servants tend to Esther and gaze at her. This highly detailed painting – highlighting gold, taupe, and ivory as the dominate hues- includes great detail to convey the splendor and decadence of the court. The architectural background highlights Mesopotamian stone reliefs. When Long studied at the British Museum, he would have become familiar with the many Mesopotamian reliefs displayed there. In this painting, Long depicts Esther looking at the viewer with a calm expression. She is the focal point of the piece with her crown in center view. Her soft shoulders and relaxed expression suggest equilibrium or contentment. The two servants gaze at Esther, unlike Chasseriau's painting where the characters appear disconnected. Thin yet voluptuous, Esther appears relaxed with sloped shoulders and a twisted torso. Crossed ribbons on Esther's dress accentuate her chest, and a beaded headdress frames her face. Her ivory and gold dress suggests tremendous wealth, highlighted by her bracelets and an elegant necklace. Esther wears thong sandals while her servants remain barefoot. A hand mirror sits next to Esther and by gathering her hands to her left, Esther appears to be reaching towards the mirror. The standing servant appears to be placing a veil over Esther, suggesting wedding preparations. The marital imagery intensifies with the presence of a marriage chest and Esther's ivory dress that stands out against the servant's darker clothing. Mati Meyer comments on artistic depictions of Esther, noting that after the 15th century Esther "becomes a model of

virtuous married women in fifteenth-century Italy, shown in cassone, marriage chest, paintings and other furnishings that were customarily commissioned for the homes of newlyweds."[99] The fine lines and realistic details of the painting reflect the 19th century European style, when an interest in classical antiquity sparked art depicting literature, the natural world, and history.[100]

Reading this painting as text, Esther's emotions appear muted. Her abstract facial expression makes it difficult to perceive if she feels worried, excited, tired, bored, or brave. The character's body language suggests that she lacks confidence because she contracts into herself instead of placing her shoulders back and sitting with straight posture. Long's painting appears to be based off the biblical description of Esther's twelve months of beauty treatments in Esther 2:12. The piece highlights Esther's femininity with sparkling jewelry, soft curvature in the female forms, and the marital veiling. Long's selection of Esther as a subject may have been related to his interest in Mesopotamia. Michael Seymour explains that Long also highlighted Mesopotamian details in his piece, "Babylonian Marriage Market" which reflected Mesopotamian archeological discoveries that were discovered and became popular during Long's time.[101]

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[99] Meyer, "Art: Representation of Biblical Women."
[100] "19th Century European Painting Pre-Visit Guide for Teachers," *Metropolitan Museum of Art*, http://www.metmuseum.org/~/media/Files/Learn/For%20Educators/Learning%20Resources/MMA_19thCenturyArt_TG.pdf , 2.
[101] Michael Seymour, "Babylon" in *Cities of God*, eds. David Gange, Michael Ledger-Lomas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 181.

Analysis

This survey of six paintings demonstrates the breadth of artistic depictions of the character of Esther. While thousands of images of Esther exist, this sample represents some of the most famous and insightful portrayals of Esther from the major periods of art history. Rather than demonstrate a narrative evolution, each portrayal of Esther seems to reflect the artists' access to sources, their distinctive artistic style, and their historical context. The Baroque fascination with depicting Esther mid-faint can be seen in Gentileschi and Tintoretto's paintings. The Dutch focus on studying Jewish texts can be seen in the more literal depiction of Lievens' piece. Finally, the 19th century Romanticism and interest in images from the Orient can be seen clearly in Chasseriau, Millais and Long's works.

The range of messages contained in these pieces demonstrates how powerfully the story of Esther resonates with different audiences. The existence of multiple texts about Esther allows for more diverse presentations than other biblical subjects who may only live in one text. People of all genders and religious backgrounds find Esther a compelling subject to portray, reading their own experience into the text, and articulating the story through their contextual lens.

Thesis Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore how the characterization of Esther developed through time. By studying the biblical portrayal of Esther, the Greek additions, rabbinic writings, and art from the modern world, it is clear that interpretations of this biblical character changed shape based on the authors' or artists' agendas and cultural contexts. This approach to Esther deepens our understanding of the diverse and evolving forms of biblical interpretation. In addition, as an important figure in the Bible, and one of its most significant heroines, Esther can serve as a role-model for contemporary readers.

The four periods examined in this study demonstrate a development in the interpretation of Esther's character. The biblical text serves as the most significant source for this study, as it provides the genesis and Jewish context for Esther. *Megillat Esther* presents a dynamic female protagonist. On the surface level of the text, one might read Esther as passive and weak because characters like Hegai and Mordecai at times seem to act upon her (Esther 2:9). But upon further investigation, Esther uses her charm, wit, bravery, and careful planning to bend the will of others. For example, Hegai only administers beauty treatments because first Esther gains his favor. At other moments in the Hebrew narrative, Esther acts with authority. For instance, after learning of Haman's plot to kill the Jews, Esther instructs Mordecai to assemble the people commanding: *lech*, (go). By using the imperative form, Esther takes control and exerts her authority (4:16). At the end of the narrative, Esther wields significant power. Haman begs Esther for his life (7:6) and Esther designates Mordecai to take ownership of Haman's property (8:2). The ten chapters of the Hebrew text reveal a multifaceted, nuanced character that changes

during the course of the narrative. The biblical narrative achieves this textured characterization by revealing Esther through direct description and in contrast to other characters.

The Greek additions to the book of Esther recast Esther by limiting her power and enhancing her weakness. Addition C depicts Esther praying before approaching the king. The text portrays Esther as a prayerful, religious person, who trembles with fear and anxiety about approaching the king. Addition D describes Esther fainting before the king, relying on her maids for support, and flattering the powerful king. The Greek authors change the biblical portrayal of Esther to fit their worldview and correct perceived problems of the Hebrew text. The Hellenistic context of the Greek additions valued religious observance and high drama. The authors attempted to make the text more God-centric, while disparaging the Persian court. Although it seems clear that the Greek additions effectively limit Esther to a damsel-in-distress, even in the Greek text, one can detect signs of Esther's cleverness. Esther employs rhetorical skills in Addition D to inflate the king's ego and suggest that her problem may not warrant his attention. In her fainting spells, Esther draws the king to comfort her and speak tenderly to her, a ploy that may have helped Esther achieve her goal.

The rabbinic period brought additional changes to the characterization of Esther. The rabbis judaize Esther by describing her Sabbath observance and kosher food habits. By twisting Esther into a more religious figure, like the Greek additions, the rabbis present her as more of a Jewish role model. The rabbis were deeply uncomfortable with some of the ambiguities present in the biblical text; so they filled in narrative gaps, insisting that Esther was halakhically observant and sexually demure. The rabbis also

celebrate Esther. They applaud Esther's willpower to conceal her identity, enforcing their interest in Jewish particularity (Tractate Megillah 13a). The rabbis elevate Esther as an ideal wife and a beautiful woman; in doing so, they thus implicitly deemphasize Esther's power. They frame her as one of the most beautiful women in the world (Tractate Megillah 15a), and not one of the most powerful women in the world.

The artistic representations of Esther examined in this thesis come from a later, more modern context. While each painting represents a distinct artist and geographic and historic setting, the breadth of portrayals reveals the resonance of Esther's story. Of the six paintings examined, two explicitly portray scenes contained only in the Greek or Christian version, thus revealing the significant influence of the Greek texts about Esther. The artistic portrayals use various means to send diverse messages about Esther. For example, by placing Esther in the center of the painting, highlighting her skin tone as distinct from the other characters, or having the action of the scene organized around her figure, the artists make statements about Esther's prominence. Many of the paintings surveyed in this chapter depict the characters in dress contemporary of the artist's time. Perhaps an attempt to make the characters more relevant, this decision demonstrates that each generation views Bible stories as applicable for their time. Esther is not limited to being an ancient figure; Esther comes to life in every generation. The artistic depictions of Esther poignantly demonstrate how one's context determines how one reads scripture. As described in the chapter, Esther became a popular figure during the Orientalist period, and again as a motif in Italian art during the Baroque period, when the autonomy of women came into public discourse.

The findings of this study demonstrate the importance of the story of Esther. The Hebrew text portrays Esther with power and authority. The desire of later authors to limit Esther's power demonstrates their discomfort with this biblical character. The research demonstrates that the rabbis were not alone in wanting to reshape Esther to fit their mold. The rabbis stand in an interpretive tradition paved by the Greek authors, who reimagine Esther by adding and removing details of the story.

I find inspiration in the fact that the Hebrew text describes Esther as bold and beautiful, someone who bravely executes her carefully developed plan. As a result, Megillat Esther can serve as a significant text for women's empowerment. The Esther of the Hebrew text testifies to the human capacity to rise to the occasion when faced with a significant challenge. Brilliantly navigating her limitations as a woman and a Jew in the Persian court, Esther saves the Jewish people. She does not wait around for intervention from God or solicit advice from Mordecai; instead, Esther acts out of her sense of purpose. Michael Fox captures the implications of Esther's actions:

> The Scroll is exploring and affirming the potential of human character to rise to the needs of the hour by whatever means and devices the situation demands. [...] In Esther, not miracles, but inner resources – intellectual as well as spiritual – even of people but naturally leaders, are to be relied upon in crises.[102]

While many examples of female leadership exist in the Bible, Esther teaches distinct lessons. One can study Eve as a model of navigating power in relationship with another person, as she was *ezer k'negdo,* a helpmate to Adam (Genesis 2:18). Miriam also represents a model of female leadership. She navigates as a behind-the-scenes mover in relationship to her brothers Moses and Aaron. Deborah speaks with divine authority

[102] Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 205.

and functions as a judge. Yet Esther makes a unique contribution to women's leadership in the Bible by working inside a foreign power system to achieve power and effect change. Esther recognizes her precarious position as an outsider in exile, living under foreign control, and utilizes her strengths of beauty, charm, and access to the king to save her people.

Many of my contemporaries look to Sheryl Sandburg's 2013 book Lean In for messages about women's roles in society. Sandburg advocates that advancements in the workplace requires women to sit at the table and lean in to pursue opportunities. For me, Esther represents an ancient model of what it means to "lean in." Not only does Esther sit at the table, she dreams up the table-scene of the feast and brings the other, influential characters to the table. Esther demonstrates the payoff of acting decisively and managing one's situation. As a feminist, and a proponent of egalitarianism, I see Esther as a role-model for women's empowerment in the 21st century.

Appendix A

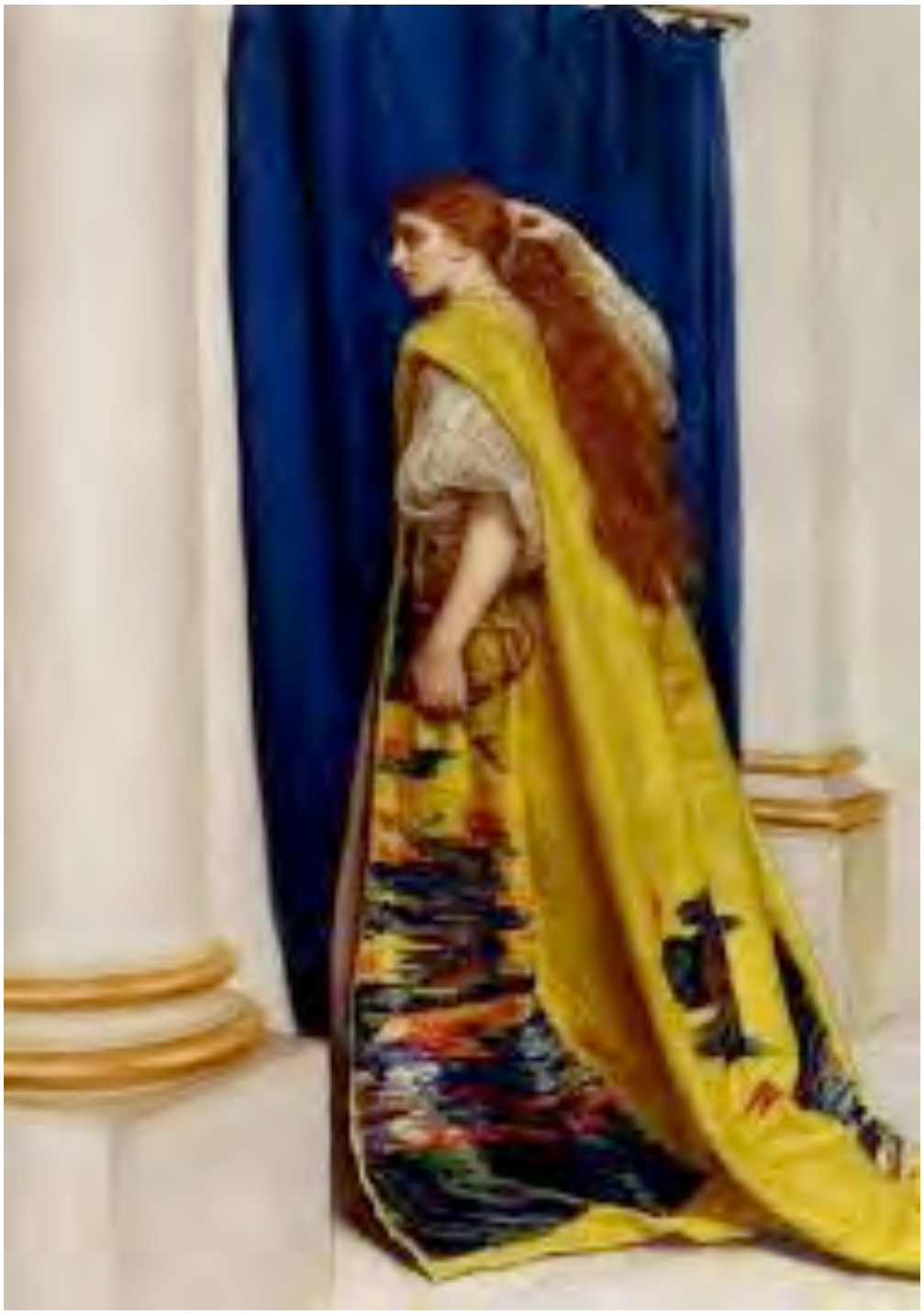
“Esther Before Ahasuerus” by Jacopo Tintoretto in 1547-1548

“Esther Before Ahasuerus” by Artemisia Gentileschi, 1622

“The Feast of Esther” by Jan Lievens, 1625

“La Toilette d’Esther” by Theodore Chasseriau, 1841

“Esther” by Sir John Everett Millais, 1865



“Esther” by Edwin Long, first displayed in 1878

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