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THE BOOK OF ESTHER AND ANCIENT STORYTELLING

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Very few twentieth-century Bible scholars believed in the historicity of the book of Esther, but they certainly expended a lot of effort justifying their position. Lewis Bayles Paton, in 1908, wrote fourteen pages outlining the arguments for and against historicity and concluded that the book is not historical. In 1971 Carey A. Moore devoted eleven pages to the issue and arrived at the same conclusion. In more recent commentaries, those of Michael V. Fox in 1991 and Jon D. Levenson in 1997, we find nine and five pages respectively, with both authors agreeing that the book is fictional.¹ You might notice that the number of pages is going down, probably because all the main points were laid out by Paton, and if you are going to rehash an argument you should do it in fewer pages than the original. But why does every commentator, myself included,² rehash the argument?

The question of historicity seems to have loomed larger for Esther than for most other books in the Hebrew Bible, at least until the last decade or so, when the historicity of all parts of the Bible was put in doubt. During the greater part of the last century, scholars assumed the basic historicity of most of the Bible, although problems in its historical and chronological information were duly noted and debated. Exceptions were stories that could be defined as myth, epic, and legend. These genres were well known from the ancient Near East, so

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¹ Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (ICC; New York: Scribner, 1908), 64–77; Carey A. Moore, *Esther* (AB 7B; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), XXXIV–XLVI; Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 131–40; Jon D. Levenson, *Esther, A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 23–27.

² Adele Berlin, *Esther* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xvi–xvii.

their presence in the Bible was not cause for concern. Short fiction, however, a late phenomenon in the Hebrew Bible, seems to have generated more apologetics than myth or legend.

On what grounds is a story to be judged fictional? Because it is easier to accept a patently unrealistic story, fictionality was sometimes determined by whether or not the events of the story could have happened or by whether the story seemed realistic. But to judge a story's historicity by its degree of realism is to mistake verisimilitude for historicity. Verisimilitude is the literary term for the illusion of reality. Just because a story sounds real does not mean that it is. Realistic fiction is just as fictional as nonrealistic fiction. Among the leading arguments for Esther's historicity are that its setting is authentic and that its knowledge of Persian custom is detailed and accurate. But this realistic background proves nothing about the historicity of the story, as our aforementioned commentators were well aware.

Why, then, did the commentators feel so defensive about denying the historicity of Esther? Perhaps from the need to convince readers whose religious convictions demand that everything in the Bible be taken as true. But there may be more to it than that. It has to do with the centrality of the discipline of history in biblical studies (and in the humanities in general) throughout a large part of the twentieth century. The historical approach saw as one of its objectives the recovery of the history of ancient Israel. A major resource in that quest was the Bible, and so it is not surprising that the Bible's historiographical writings (or what were thought to be its historiographical writings) played such a dominant role. One might even suspect that this encouraged scholars to view more and more of the biblical text as historiography—and, if at all possible, as historically accurate. More important for the present discussion, scholars retrojected their value system back to ancient Israel. That is to say, modern scholars liked to think that the ancient writers meant their work to be taken as history. The history they wrote might be selective, inaccurate, or otherwise flawed, but it was nevertheless history. That an ancient writer may *not* have intended for his work to be viewed as historical—by which most people mean “true”—does not seem to have entered the discussion until much more recently.

What about the current reassessments of the Bible's historicity, especially by the scholars known as minimalists?³ Clearly, the minimalists do not believe that the large block of narrative from Genesis through Kings is credible history. Do they, though, think that these writings were intended to be read as histori-

³ For some discussions of the minimalists, see Iain W. Provan, “Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writing on the History of Israel,” *JBL* 114 (1995): 585–606; Thomas L. Thompson, “A Neo-Albrightean School in History and Biblical Scholarship?” *JBL* 114 (1995): 683–98; Philip R. Davies, “Method and Madness: Some Remarks on Doing History with the Bible,” *JBL* 114 (1995): 699–705.

ography in ancient times? Ancient historiography is quite different from modern historiography in that ancient historiography may include fictions, myths, legends, and hearsay. So Genesis–Kings can still be called historiography even if it is patently untrue (from a modern perspective). Just to make matters more confusing, I will mention that at least one classical scholar questions whether Herodotus's work was historiography.⁴ Where this leaves us is that the ancient Jew read the Bible much as the ancient Greek read Herodotus. But what they believed about it, and in what sense they believed it, remains unclear. We moderns should not believe either one, but I suspect that Herodotus still has more credibility than the Bible, although not as much as he used to. Actually, it may be more correct to conclude that the ancients did not care about historical accuracy, although they surely cared about the past.⁵ If so, this entire discussion would strike them as trying to make a distinction without a difference. But that will not deter us from pursuing it.

Was Esther intended as a work of fiction? Lawrence M. Wills thinks that is likely.⁶ Wills dates Esther to the Hellenistic period and sees it as belonging to the genre of novel that is prevalent in that period. I date the book to the Persian period, as an increasing number of people do nowadays, a time when we can already speak of fictional storytelling of the kind we find in Ruth and Jonah.

Is there a way to distinguish fictional storytelling from historiography? I turn for help to David M. Gunn, who has questioned the assumption that the David story is historiographical. He prefers to designate it as “serious entertainment,” since he does not think its purpose was to write history. Is the David

⁴ D. Fehling, *Herodotus and His “Sources”* (Leeds: Francis Cairns, 1989). This is not the same issue as whether Herodotus's history is reliable. For an introductory discussion on the historiography of Herodotus, see Herodotus, *The Histories* (trans. R. Waterfield with an introduction and notes by C. Dewald; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xxvii–xxxv; and Herodotus, *The History* (trans. David Grene; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1–32. To add to the already confusing picture I would add that Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*, nowadays considered fiction, was reconsidered as historiography by Christopher Tuplin, “Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*: Education and Fiction,” *Education in Greek Fiction* (ed. A. H. Sommerstein and C. Atherton; Bari: Levante Editori, 1997), 93–162.

⁵ See Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1995), 2. He notes that “definitions that emphasize the scientific nature of history, its fundamental differences from literature, or the intentions of an author, are problematic” (p. 12). His own definition ends up defining history as “a narrative that presents a past.” By this definition, Esther would be history, as would every tale of past events.

⁶ Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 96. By fiction he means: “Between about 200 B.C.E. and 100 C.E., Jewish authors wrote many entertaining narratives marked by fanciful and idealized settings, adventurous tone, happy endings, and important women characters. They were probably considered “fictitious,” not in the sense of bad or credulous history that misrepresents the past but in the sense of prose writings that involve a new sort of reading experience, the creation of invented worlds that are nevertheless like our own” (p. 1).

story also an example of Persian-period fiction writing? If so, it differs in scope and structure from the other biblical stories in this category. The David story has more often been compared to Herodotus, a comparison that Gunn rejects. In a very recent discussion of the issue, Gunn explains:

I believe that probably the closest literary productions in the ancient world to the King David Story are not the “histories” of Herodotus or Thucydides . . . , with their authorial self-consciousness and concern with sources, but the late fifth century plays of Euripides . . . with their engaging plots and characters, their intricate ironies and ambiguities, and their splendid potential for subversive readings of the established order.⁷

I find this comment interesting because I too will have something to say about the Greek historiographers and dramatists. I also thought that perhaps Gunn’s criterion could help me prove that Esther was intended to be fictional. If there is an “entertainment” in the Bible it is surely Esther, although it is a comic entertainment, not a serious one. But Gunn’s dichotomy does not quite work. Esther certainly has an engaging plot and characters and intricate ironies and ambiguities, so I could easily align it with Euripides rather than with Herodotus. On the other hand, Esther has a stronger authorial self-consciousness than most other biblical narratives, although perhaps not as strong as Herodotus. There is less direct discourse, and hence the narrator’s presence is more strongly felt. The narrator stands at some distance from his story and often inserts explanations for why things happened. There is also a concern with sources, or at least with recording things in official documents. So I might then conclude that Esther is historiography. In fact, a number of scholars have done so for just these reasons.

Moore is most explicit on this point:

On the face of it, the story seems to be true. . . . Moreover, the author, who begins his work in the manner typical of biblical histories . . . , encourages his readers to confirm the details of his account for themselves by referring them to an accessible and well-known historical record. . . . Only a writer acting in good faith would dare extend such an invitation to his readers.⁸

So, while Moore himself does not think Esther is true, he is arguing here that the ancient reader did. Paton makes the same argument, as does Fox, who says: “[T]o read Esther as fictional, while a legitimate critical stance, runs contrary to

⁷ David M. Gunn, “Entertainment, Ideology, and the Reception of ‘History’: ‘David’s Jerusalem’ As a Question of Space,” in *A Wise and Discerning Mind: Essays in Honor of Burke O. Long* (ed. S. Olyan and R. C. Culley; BJS 325; Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2000), 154.

⁸ Moore, *Esther*, XXXV.

the intentions of the author, who almost certainly meant us to read the book as a precise report of actual historical events.”⁹

But alas, the perception of historiography, like the perception of reality, is an illusion. The author of *Esther* was not writing history; he was *imitating* the writing of history, even making a burlesque of it. Historiography is not a comic genre, and *Esther* is very comic. The reference in 10:2 to the Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia is just another piece of realia, perhaps fake realia, like the names of the officials in 1:10 and 14. For one thing, even if the Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia did exist, it would have been difficult, as Jack Sasson observed, for the average reader to check them.¹⁰ The Annals are the functional equivalent of the pea at the end of Hans Christian Andersen’s story “The Princess and the Pea.” That story closes with the words: “So the Prince took her for his wife, for now he knew that he had a true princess; and the pea was put in the museum, and it is there now, unless someone has carried it off. Look you, this is a true story.”¹¹

It is a literary convention to say that your story is true and to offer proof. And I dare say that an author is just as likely to invoke this convention for a fictitious story, if not more so. The author of *Esther* is imitating the history writing of the book of Kings not because he wants his story to sound *historical*, but because he wants it to sound *biblical*. *Esther*, like other Diaspora stories, draws extensively on biblical themes and style because it wants to create strong ties with preexilic Israel and with the traditional literature that had been or was in the process of being canonized. The burden of Diaspora stories is to provide Jewish continuity in the face of the overwhelming dislocation of the Jewish community. A good way to provide this continuity is to link the present with the past, and the new literature of the Diaspora with older, traditional literature. Moreover, by sounding biblical, *Esther* increases its chances of being perceived as traditional and authoritative, which was essential for a book that is providing an etiology for a new, non-Torah festival.¹²

Back to our *Esther* commentators. They defend their own interpretation of *Esther*’s fictionality by noting that the story resembles a number of other

⁹ Paton, *Esther*, 64; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 138.

¹⁰ Jack M. Sasson, “*Esther*,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. R. Alter and F. Kermode; Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1987), 335. Sasson’s comment that “[t]he teller spares no effort to convince his audience of the story’s historical setting” falls just short of saying that the storyteller wanted to believe that the events of the story actually happened, but one may infer that this is what Sasson meant. Wills refers to “the pseudohistorical appeals to the ‘Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia’” (*Jewish Novel*, 95).

¹¹ Hans Christian Andersen, *Stories and Tales* (Cambridge: Hurd & Houghton, 1871), 179.

¹² See Levenson, *Esther*, 133.

ancient fictional stories, such as Daniel and Judith.¹³ In fact, this is the strongest proof they bring for the fictionality of Esther, and it is a compelling proof, although they do not quite say how they know that Daniel and Judith are fiction. I would add that it might also be compelling proof that the ancient reader took Esther as fiction, no less than the modern reader does. In the corpus of comparable stories, biblicists generally include Daniel, Judith, Tobit, 3 Esdras, and Ahiqar—that is, biblical and ancient Near Eastern stories—since biblicists are trained to look eastward for their comparisons. Classicists look to the west, to the Greek writings. As the famous classical historian Arnaldo Momigliano noted in 1965:

No doubt many features of the Books of Judith and Esther can be explained in terms of international storytelling with a Persian background; and the same is true of several stories in the first Books of Herodotus, in Ctesias and, up to a certain point, in the *Cyropaedia* of Xenophon.¹⁴

Why didn't biblicists include Herodotus and his colleagues among the storytellers? Not because they did not know their work but because they thought of Herodotus and company as historians, not as storytellers, and these two categories are generally seen as opposites (as Gunn's statement cited earlier attests). Fox says: "When testing the assumptions and details of Esther against data known from elsewhere, we must rely primarily on the Classical Greek historians, in particular Herodotus, Ctesias, and Xenophon."¹⁵

Notice that the same three Greeks who exemplify storytelling for Momigliano are called historians by Fox. Clearly these three Greeks are useful for the study of Esther, but how should they be used? Commentaries on Esther are full of references to Herodotus and other Greek authors, but almost always for the purpose of confirming the accuracy of Esther (as in the case of Persian attitudes toward wine, the extensive communication system, and other aspects of the Persian court). When Esther contradicts a classical source, Esther is deemed to be in error, or the confusion is explained in some way (as in the case of the 127 provinces versus the 20 satrapies). To be fair, I should note that biblical scholars understood that Herodotus also tells stories, and some of these are cited in reference to Esther, but the full implication of these stories for the interpretation of Esther is rarely spelled out.¹⁶

¹³ Paton, *Esther*, 75–76; Moore, *Esther*, XLVI; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 138.

¹⁴ Arnaldo Momigliano, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 27.

¹⁵ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 131.

¹⁶ For example, Moore notes that "Haman's desire for a robe of the king is reminiscent of Teribazus' request for Artaxerxes II's robe" (*Esther*, 64–65), and then he quotes the story from Plutarch. But Moore does not spell out the significance of the Teribazus story for the interpretation of Esther. Similarly, the Vashti incident has reminded many of Herodotus's story of Candaules

What does it mean to call Herodotus a storyteller? It does not necessarily deny that he was a historian. It means that when a storyteller tells a story—be that story historically true or not and be that story intended as historiography or not—he (or she) uses narrative forms and conventions. That is what Momigliano had in mind when he said that many features of the book of Esther can be explained in terms of international storytelling. The use of the same narrative form and often the same type of material for true stories and for imaginative ones is what makes it so hard to distinguish between historiography and fiction. Esther resembles Herodotus, especially in its use of motifs, not because Esther is like Herodotus in being historiography but because it is like Herodotus in being narrative. Both are stories about Persians from roughly the same time and place.

I want to look more closely at the use of motifs in Esther. Taking the lead from Momigliano, and from the equally famous historian Elias Bickerman,¹⁷ a small number of scholars have accumulated a growing number of motifs found both in Esther and in Greek sources.¹⁸ It turns out that all stories with a Persian setting, for whatever purpose and in whatever language, are bound to contain similar motifs. When Esther agrees with the classical authors, it is not because of historical accuracy or a desire to sound authentic, but because Esther employs the literary conventions of its day. The Greek writings and Esther are part of the same literary world.¹⁹

Until now, we have been speaking of the Greek historians, most of whom were east Greeks, from Asia Minor, who lived in the Persian empire during the

(Herodotus 1.8) and also of the story of Amyntas (Herodotus 5.18), but the full import of the similarity is left for the reader to discern.

¹⁷ Elias Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 1967), esp. 177–96.

¹⁸ In 1982 Inge Hofmann and Anton Vorbichler published “Herodot und der Schreiber des Esther-Buches,” *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft* 66 (1982): 294–302, outlining nine general motifs that are found in Herodotus and Esther, for instance, mention of the number of satrapies, wearing the king’s robe, requests to the king and their fulfillment, and impalement. In 1988, Cristiano Grottanelli discussed two motifs in Plutarch and Esther: women as supplicants to the king on behalf of others, as in Esth 7; and ceremonies of honor, as in Esth 6 (“Honour, Women and Sanctuary at the Persian Court [Plutarch. *Themist.* 29–31 and *Esther* 6–8],” *Dialoghi di Archeologia* 3d ser. 6 [1988]: 135–38). Jack Martin Balcer found in Herodotus a passage similar to Esth 4, in which the queen approaches the king unbidden. He noted also that Herodotus and Esther agree on other details of the court and the harem and suggested that “such information may have been general knowledge in the eastern mediterranean communities” (*A Prosopographical Study of the Ancient Persians Royal and Noble C. 550–450 B.C.* [Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 1993], 276–78). See also M. Heltzer, “Mordekhai and Demaratos and the Question of Historicity,” *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 27 (1994): 119–21.

¹⁹ I would not go so far as to suggest direct influence on Esther from the Greek writings, although Wills takes a step in this direction (*Jewish Novel*, 109 n. 34.).

Achaemenid period (539–333 B.C.E.). More recently, Christopher Tuplin has investigated references to Persians in the works of Greek dramatists, philosophers, and orators. (The Persian period is also the time of Socrates, Aeschylus, and Sophocles.) These authors were Athenians, further removed from Persia, and have less to say about the Persians, but even so, it is interesting to see what aspects of Persian life made an impression on them. What do they mention when they write about Persians? Here is a list drawn from Tuplin's work: They use Persian or Persian-sounding, but actually fake, names. They describe Persian costume, Persian wealth and luxury, and the pride the king takes in his wealth, heavy eating and drinking, and drinking from goblets of glass and gold. They mention tribute, law, *proskynēsis* (bowing down), the decimal organization of the Persian army, impalement, fly-whisks and fans, the King's Eye (the spy system), the good road system, eunuchs, and *paradeisos* (royal gardens).

Tuplin sums up the Athenian picture of Persia as follows:

They . . . possess a large empire . . . whose only (other) physical, floral or faunal characteristics are extremes of heat and cold, mountains, citrus fruit, camels, horses, peacocks, cocks, (perhaps) lions for hunting, *paradeisoi*, road systems measured in parasangs and travelled by escorted ambassadors and official messengers. . . . There is great wealth . . . Persians are liable to pride, hauteur and inaccessibility. . . . They enjoy a luxurious life-style (exemplified by clothing, textiles, food and drink, tableware, means of transport, fans and fly-whisks, furniture) in a positively organized, regimented fashion: but the Queens are sexually virtuous and sometimes energetically warlike. . . . Their polity is defined by a tyrannical ideology and systems of deferential behaviour and hierarchical control which deny equality . . . value mere power and are inimical to the principle of Law—except that there have been “good” Persian kings to whom some of this does not apply. Eunuchs will be encountered; and impalement or crucifixion is employed as a punishment.²⁰

This composite Greek picture of the Persians is remarkably similar to the one in Esther, which also features luxury, hierarchy, bureaucracy, wine drinking, the postal system, imperial law, bowing down, eunuchs, impalement, a royal garden, and a sexually virtuous queen. Esther's image of Persia is stereotypical. This, however, is not the end of the matter; it is only the beginning.

For one thing, behind most stereotypes is usually a fair measure of reality. In comparison to the Greeks, and to other places throughout the Persian empire, the Persian court *was* luxurious, hierarchical, and fond of wine. But the point, once again, is not that Esther's portrait of Persia is realistic, but that it is *conventional*. The author of Esther used conventional literary motifs to portray Persia—the same motifs that the Greek historiographers, dramatists, and

²⁰ C. Tuplin, *Achaemenid Studies* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1996), 164.

philosophers used. Actually, many of the customs and institutions that characterize Persia were not Persian inventions but were inherited from the Assyrians and the Babylonians (ornate palaces, banquets, reclining on couches, bowing down to monarchs, impalement). They became associated with Persia because Persia was the dominant power at the time that this type of storytelling came into vogue.

Second, to the extent that this view of Persia was pervasive throughout the Persian empire and beyond it, there is no reason to assume that the author of *Esther* lived in Susa or even in Persia proper. He could have lived anywhere in the Persian empire or even in Greece (although Greece is unlikely).

Third, to the extent that this view is the product of the late fifth and fourth centuries—the period of most of the Greek works—it lends support for dating *Esther* in the Persian period, the time that most recent scholars date the book on other grounds. To be sure, similar pictures of Persia are found in later classical sources, such as Plutarch (ca. 50–120 C.E.), so we cannot prove the dating by the use of these motifs alone. But we should consider this type of literary evidence along with the linguistic and historical evidence when dating the book.

Finally, motifs can also play a role in exegesis. Motifs have connotations; they can function like semiotic signals or codes. Knowledge of a motif's connotation can take us a long way toward decoding the meaning of a passage or episode. Common motifs are at work in the Vashti incident, in Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman, and in the ceremony of honor that Haman designed. I will illustrate the last of these.

In ch. 6, Haman designs a special ceremony to honor someone—himself, he thinks. What kind of honor was he hoping for? Several commentaries understand that to wear “the royal robe that the king has worn” and to mount “the horse on whose head is the royal crown” is not a casual suggestion. It means that Haman wants to masquerade as the king; indeed, Haman wants to *be* the king. He already occupies the highest position at court (3:1), is the person to whom everyone else must bow (3:2), possesses the king's signet ring authorizing him to make edicts (3:10), and has been invited by the queen to two private dinner parties (5:12). It is but a small step to the kingship itself, and Haman now tries to take it. While a few modern commentaries have seen the implication of Haman's request,²¹ it can be “proved” through recourse to narrative motifs. The Bible provides indirect proof in that a person's garment represents the person and/or the position he holds. The transfer of a garment may signal the transfer of the office from one person to another. Aaron's son Eleazar dons the priestly garments of his father as he inherits the priestly office (Num 20:25–28);

²¹ See Levenson, *Esther*, 97; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 77; T. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther* (SBLDS 165; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 101.

when Elisha receives Elijah's cloak it means that he has replaced Elijah (2 Kgs 2:13–15). David's cutting off a corner of Saul's cloak (1 Sam 24:4) registers in both men's minds as the symbolic taking of the kingship. So there is an extensive biblical tradition that provides a context for Haman's request for the king's robe.²²

Greek sources speak more directly to the seriousness of wearing the king's own garment. One of the ceremonies in the initiation of a new Persian king was, according to Plutarch (*Artaxerxes* 3), the laying aside of his own personal robe and the putting on of the robe of Cyrus the Elder. In *Artaxerxes* 5 we are given to understand that it was forbidden for anyone to wear the king's robe. This is in the story of Teribazus.

Again, when he was hunting once and Teribazus pointed out that the king's coat was torn, he asked him what was to be done. And when Teribazus replied, "Put on another for yourself, but give this one to me," the king did so, saying, "I give this to you, Teribazus, but I forbid you to wear it." Teribazus gave no heed to this command (being not a bad man, but rather light-headed and witless), and at once put on the king's coat, and decked himself with golden necklaces and women's ornaments of royal splendor. Everybody was indignant at this (for it was a forbidden thing); but the king merely laughed, and said: "I permit you to wear the trinkets as a woman, and the robe as a madman."²³

From this story we see that a person could get away with wearing the king's robe only if he were considered crazy. Based on this and other stories, Helene Sancisi-Weerdenburg observed: "There is a taboo on wearing the royal robe by anyone else but the king. . . . On the level of literature the person wearing the royal robe is the king; the first act of any usurper of the throne is to put on the royal robe. It is part of the regalia with which the king is invested on his accession."²⁴

Riding on the king's horse has the same implication, as we see in 1 Kgs 1:32–49, where David orders that Solomon be mounted on the king's mule, led to the Gihon, anointed king, and then returned to sit on the king's throne. Both Esth 6 and 1 Kgs 1 describe a figure mounted on the king's animal in a public place, as if on a portable throne. The nexus between the throne and the horse

²² U. Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 219.

²³ Translation adapted from *Plutarch's Lives* (LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), 137.

²⁴ H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, "Exit Atossa: Images of Women in Greek Historiography on Persia," in *Images of Women in Antiquity* (ed. A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 29. D. L. Gera echoes this sentiment (*Xenophon's Cyropaedia: Style, Genre, and Literary Technique* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1993], 222 n. 116).

(both being extensions of the royal personage and symbols of his royalty) can be seen in *m. Sanh.* 2:5, which forbids one to ride on the king's horse, to sit on his throne, or to use his scepter.

While modern exegetes come slowly to appreciate the daringness of Haman's request, ancient interpreters seem to have known it all along. In Addition E of the Septuagint, 16:12–14 has the king accuse Haman of wanting to “deprive us of our kingdom.” (This is reflected also in Josephus, *Antiquities* 11.6.12.) Several midrashim make explicit that Haman was asking for the kingship. In the biblical account, 6:8 says “Let them bring royal apparel that the king wore and the horse that the king mounted, and on whose head the royal crown was set” (ואשר נתן כתר מלכות בראשו). Modern exegetes understand that the crown was on the horse's head, but earlier exegetes interpreted the phrase to mean that the crown was on the king's head, as reflected in the KJV: “Let the royal apparel be brought which the king useth to wear, and the horse that the king rideth upon, and the crown royal which is set upon his head.” Verse 9 says, “And let the apparel and the horse be given into the charge of one of the king's noble officials.” The crown is not mentioned in v. 9 (or in v. 11). What happened to it? *Pirke Rabbi Eliezer*, an eighth-century midrashic work, provides the following scenario:

Haman said in his heart: “He does not desire to exalt any other man except me. I will speak words so that I shall be king just as he is.” He said to him [Ahasuerus]: “Let them bring the apparel which the king wore on the day of the coronation, and (let them bring) the horse upon which the king rode on the coronation day, and the crown which was put upon the head of the king on the day of coronation.” The king was exceedingly angry because of the crown. The king said: “It does not suffice this villain, but he must even desire the crown which is upon my head.” Haman saw that the king was angry because of the crown; he said: “And let the apparel and the horse be delivered to the hand of one of the king's most noble princes.”²⁵

According to this midrash, Haman realized that he had gone too far in his initial request so he immediately modified it, omitting the mention of the crown.

The notion that Haman wanted to be king has an even funnier sequel in ch. 7. There is one additional sign that someone is trying to usurp the throne, and we know it from the Bible and from Greek sources. It is the taking of the king's wife or concubine.²⁶ Haman never tried to do this, but it is exactly what Ahasuerus accuses him of in 7:8: “Will he even ravish the queen with me in the

²⁵ G. Friedlander, *Pirké de Rabbi Eliezer* (New York: Hermon, 1965), 403.

²⁶ 2 Sam 3:7; 16:21–22; 1 Kgs 2:15–17, 22; and see Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 116 with n. 36. For Greek sources, see Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 26.2. For a false accusation of a sexual advance, see Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 5.2.28.

house?" This line is funny enough if one interprets it merely as a sexual advance, for sexual impropriety is certainly a motif in this book. This king who is now protecting the honor of his wife Esther is the same king who cared so little for the honor of his wife Vashti. But the king's accusation takes on even more meaning and coheres better with the plot if we see it in the context of Haman's desire for the kingship.²⁷ Ahasuerus, perhaps naively or perhaps not, is accusing Haman of wanting to replace the king—an act of treason. Ahasuerus has identified the right crime for the wrong reason. As is fitting for a comic farce, the villain gets the punishment he deserves for something he did not do. At the same time, the false accusation also contributes to the ironic reversals so integral to the story. Haman's own destruction is based on a false accusation, just as his attempt to destroy the Jews was based on a false accusation.²⁸ Haman had accused the Jews of treason, and now he himself is accused of treason.²⁹

To sum up: I raised and left unresolved some general questions about historiography and fiction, mainly because Esther is so rarely cited when they are discussed, and I think it should be. My main point is that Esther typifies storytelling about Persia from the Persian period. It takes some of its motifs from biblical literature, and it partakes of many others from the broader literary world of its time, preserved for us most abundantly in the Greek writings. We should, therefore, use these Greek writings in connection with Esther for literary purposes, not for historical purposes. In a way, the story of Esther is nothing more than a conglomeration of common motifs associated with the Persian court, woven throughout the equally conventional story lines such as the wise courtier in a foreign court, the contest between courtiers, and the woman who saves her people. The wonder is that from all this standard literary fare could come such a clever and funny entertainment.

²⁷ So *Midrash Leqah Tov*; see S. Buber, *Sifrei De-'aggadata'* (Vilna: Romm, 1886), 108: "Woe from the outside, woe from the inside. Before he intended to wear the royal apparel and the royal crown . . . and now he seeks to ravish the queen."

²⁸ See Laniak, *Shame and Honor*, 115 n. 33.

²⁹ See Berlin, *Esther*, 39–40.