

ABSTRACT

Drunk and Disorderly: A Bakhtinian Reading of the Banquet Scenes in the Book of Esther

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This dissertation advocates a reading of the book of Esther through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's literary concepts dialogism, chronotope, and carnival. The specific focus of the dialogical interactions in the book of Esther is the banquet scenes. The term *משתה* appears 24 times in the book of Esther and only 26 times in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Because nearly half of the occurrences of the term appear in the book of Esther, this frequency demands greater examination. The project analyzes each of the ten banquet scenes and suggests they function like characters that dialogue. Biblical scholars have examined the role of carnival as it relates to the book of Esther, but they have not explored the specific role of banquet scenes as participants in the narrative's dialogic conversation and in particular the implications of being Judahite in the Diaspora.

The banquet scenes, interpreted in Bakhtinian categories, reflect the social and political interests of Judahites living in the Diaspora. The banquet scenes reveal a carefully crafted narrative that ridicules a foreign empire and king but nevertheless illustrate and encapsulate how Jews can successfully maneuver life in the Diaspora. Bakhtin's concept of dialogism provides a framework by which to explore how the

banquet scenes, with their carnivalesque implications, interact dialogically with the other components of the narrative and so offer a vision of life in the Diaspora based on joy, not fear. The chronotopic ideology concretized in the banquet scenes suggests the existence of an alternative ideology for faithful Judahites living in Diaspora apart from Jebucentrism, Yahwehcentrism, Natocentrism, and Torahcentrism. The book of Esther reframes a vision of life in the Diaspora by accentuating human initiative, survival as a virtue, the possibility of achievement among gentiles, and deconstruction of the status quo.

Drunk and Disorderly: A Bakhtinian Reading
of the Banquet Scenes in the Book of Esther

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i>
AT	Alpha Text
COS	<i>Context of Scripture</i>
HB	Hebrew Bible
LXX	Septuagint
meg.	Megillah
MT	Masoretic Text
TNK	Tanakh
n.p.	not published
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
tar.	Targums
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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For all your sacrifices

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This dissertation advocates a reading of the book of Esther through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's literary concepts dialogism, chronotope, and carnival. While Bakhtin never uses the expression, literary theorists employ the term dialogism to refer to his particular view of understanding language and his program for interpreting relationships between readers and texts. The specific focus of the dialogical interactions in the book of Esther is the banquet scenes. Because the banquet scenes imply excessive drinking and eating along with the weakening of inhibitions due to inebriation, the Bakhtinian notion of carnival is an integral component of the dialogical interactions within the book. Biblical scholars have examined the role of carnival as it relates to the book of Esther,¹ but they have not explored the specific role of banquet scenes as participants in the narrative's dialogic conversation and in particular the implications of being Judahite in the Diaspora. The text's unique worldview compels discussion of the Bakhtinian term chronotope and consideration of the homology between ideological and historical features prevalent in the banquet scenes. Dialogism discerns all aspects of a narrative as

¹Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995). Craig's work was the only reference to read the book of Esther explicitly through the lens of Bakhtinian categories until André LaCocque's new work appeared. His volume came out too late for this work to thoroughly analyze his contribution. André LaCocque, *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008). See also Daniel F. Plish, "Aspects of Esther: A Phenomenological Exploration of the *Megillah* of Esther and the Origins of Purim," *JSOT* 85 (1999): 85-106; Dan Polaski, "'And Also to the Jews in Their Script': Power and Writing in the Scroll of Esther," n.p., The College of William and Mary, 2007; Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001); Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997), Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979).

constantly interacting and influencing each other. Thus as components of the story of Esther, banquet scenes are part of the dialogue. The dissertation explores the banquet scenes as contributors to the dialogical forces at work in the narrative.

The term *משתה* appears 24 times² in the book of Esther and only 26 times³ in the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Because nearly half of the occurrences of the term appear in the book of Esther, this frequency demands greater examination. This project will examine each of the ten banquet scenes in the book of Esther (the 24 occurrences of the term *משתה*) and suggest that the banquet scenes function like characters that dialogue. Bakhtin's categories chronotope and carnival enmesh with a discussion of dialogism, and this work will discuss their significance as well. The banquet scenes, interpreted in Bakhtinian categories, reflect the social and political interests of Judahites living in the Diaspora. The Esther scroll is a carefully crafted narrative that ridicules a foreign empire and king but nevertheless illustrates and encapsulates how Jews can successfully maneuver life in the Diaspora.

The narrative opens with a description of a 180 day banquet, a lavish affair hosted by the king in honor of all the governors and rulers of the empire (1:1-4). The second banquet occurs immediately after the 180 day feast when the king celebrates a seven day banquet for all those associated with the court in Susa (1:5-8, 10-21). The text records the third banquet transpiring concomitantly with the second; Vashti holds a feast for the women (1:9). Next, King Ahasuerus celebrates the crowning of a new queen by hosting

²Esth 1:3, 1:5, 1:9, 2:18 (two times), 5:4, 5:5, 5:6, 5:8, 5:12, 5:14, 6:14, 7:2, 7:7, 7:8, 8:17, 9:17, 9:18, 9:19, 9:22.

³Gen 19:3, 21:8, 26:30, 29:22, 40:20; Judg 14:10, 14:12, 14:17; 1 Sam 25:36 (two times); 2 Sam 3:20; 1Kgs 3:15; Ezra 3:7; Job 1:4, 1:5; Prov 15:15; Eccl 7:2; Isa 5:12, 25:6 (two times); Jer 16:8, 51:39; Dan 1:5, 1:8, 1:10, 1:16.

a banquet in Esther's honor (2:18). Haman and Ahasuerus enjoy a banquet together after the king signs Haman's decree to annihilate the Jews (3:15). Esther hosts banquets six (5:4-8) and seven (7:1-9) inviting both the king and Haman, and it is in this context where she finally reveals her ethnic identity and names Haman as the perpetrator of the intended pogrom. The Jews collectively enjoy the eighth banquet as they celebrate the new decree allowing them to defend themselves (8:15-17). They rejoice with two final banquets celebrating their victory over their enemies (9:17-19).

With its emphasis on banquets, the book of Esther displays carnivalistic overtones and creates a setting of lavish parties and wild abandon. As the banquet scenes embody chronotopic dialogue, so too the characters reflect literary encodings of dialogical situations. The characters Haman, Mordecai, Vashti, and Esther rise and/or fall during banquet scenes (7:1-10, 8:15-17, 1:19, 2:17-18). People groups such as the Jews and the citizens of Susa face both death and exaltation in the context of banquets (3:15, 9:16-19). These feasts subtly depict the despotism of the king and the tenuous nature of life in the Diaspora. While life in the Diaspora may be fragile, the text does not advocate returning to Jerusalem. Rather, the book of Esther offers an alternative view of life after the exile.

The dialogic conversation between the banquet scenes in the Esther scroll illuminates a unique feature of this text—it presents a different paradigm for succeeding in the Diaspora,⁴ one that is not dependent on returning to Jerusalem, worshipping in the temple, or following the strict observances of the torah. Read as dialogic, the book of

⁴The book of Esther offers a different paradigm from other Diaspora literature such as the book of Daniel where the text encourages Jews not to assimilate to Persian culture but remain focused on religious and national concerns such as dietary restrictions, observing the Torah, and returning to Jerusalem. These elements are absent from the book of Esther. See David M. Valeta, "Court or Jester Tales? Resistance and Social Reality in Daniel 1-6," *PRS* 32 (2005): 309-24.

Esther presents a strikingly different worldview of life in the Diaspora, one which embraces life among the gentiles and outside of Jerusalem.

The dissertation begins with an introductory chapter outlining the goal toward which the dissertation moves, namely, the thesis that Bakhtin's concept of dialogism provides a framework by which to explore how the banquet scenes, with their carnivalesque implications, interact dialogically with the other components of the narrative and so offer a vision of life in the Diaspora based on joy, not fear. Because of dialogism's central role in the dissertation, a portion of the first chapter will devote itself to explicating Bakhtin's epistemology as it relates to narrative. It begins with a bibliographic sketch of Bakhtin placing his theories in their historical and literary context. The chapter then proceeds to a discussion of three Bakhtinian categories. The chapter concludes with a survey of the appropriation of Bakhtin by biblical scholars and of the state of scholarship on the book of Esther.

The second chapter explores the function of banquets as social and ideological occasions in the ancient Near East paying particular attention to the depiction of royal banquets in monarchical settings. Interpreting the banquets as type scenes, this chapter examines the function and social purpose such banquets served. Did banquets reinforce social distinctions or enable participants to transcend them? What do the texts involving banquet scenes reveal about the narrator's attitude toward the participants, the king, and the politics of the empire in power? Were there different sorts of banquets and were participants expected to become inebriated? Participants in banquet scenes in the ancient Near East display a similar attitude of revelry and insouciance as the characters in the Esther scroll. Royal feasts reveal the ostentation and autocracy of the king and his

empire. The chapter delineates between public and private royal banquets and includes a discussion of divine banquets revealing ubiquitous customs such as seating arrangement, entertainment, and cost. It considers other banquet scenes in the Hebrew Bible outside the book of Esther before concluding with Bakhtin's particular understanding of banquets as a social custom.

The third chapter reads the banquet scenes in the book of Esther within the parameters of Bakhtin's three categories: dialogism, chronotope, and carnival. The ten banquet scenes are considered separately and in relation to each other. The banquet scenes reveal the narrator's assessment of King Ahasuerus, the Persian Empire, and articulate a direction for succeeding in the Diaspora. Additionally, an analysis of the banquets scenes includes conversations between characters and between the events in the life of the characters. The dissertation focuses on two characters, Ahasuerus as the representative of the Persian Empire, and Esther, the apogee of Judahite life. The banquet scenes play a pivotal role in the unfolding of the dialogical relationship between the interests of the characters. They embody more than the narrator's estimation of the king and empire; the banquet scenes concretize a strategy for flourishing in the Diaspora. The Judahite community transforms its social standing in the Persian Empire and moves from marginal to central.

The dissertation concludes by synthesizing that the book of Esther reframes a vision of life in the Diaspora by accentuating human initiative, survival as a virtue, the possibility of achievement among gentiles, and deconstruction of the status quo. It suggests a Bakhtinian reading of the book of Esther offers a new paradigm of Judahite faithfulness.

Bakhtin

Given Bakhtin's predilection for context, it seems important to include his biographical sketch. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin was born in the town of Orel, on November 16, 1895, into a noble family that had lost most of its money and land. Bakhtin, nonetheless, received the best education possible with access to European culture and thought.⁵ He had one brother and three sisters but remained distant and separate from his immediate family throughout most of his adult life.⁶ He earned a degree in classics and philology from the University of Petrograd in 1918. He worked as a schoolteacher in the small town of Nevel in western Russia during the Civil War. In the 1920s, Bakhtin returned to Leningrad with his wife and played an active role in intelligentsia circles. The Stalinist police arrested him in 1929 for his alleged activity in the underground Russian Orthodox Church, but scholars remain uncertain of Bakhtin's actual role in underground church activities.⁷ He received a commuted sentence of six years of internal exile in Kazakhstan; during this time period he produced his most famous essays on the theory of the novel. He submitted his doctoral dissertation to the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow in 1941 but was denied a doctoral degree. He taught at remote colleges in relative obscurity until the late 1950s when a group of Moscow graduate students discovered his 1929 book on Dostoevsky and pushed for the publication of a second edition. Ironically, by the time of his death in March of 1975,

⁵Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1984), 16.

⁶Clark and Holquist, *Bakhtin*, 16-17.

⁷Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), Morson and Emerson, *Bakhtin*, xiv.

Bakhtin had gained immense popularity among intellectuals and attained near cult status in the Soviet Union.⁸

Despite this biographical information, one Russian scholar avers, “Bakhtin remains homeless and unattached. It is unclear where he came from (the philosophical tradition that nourished him is yet to be clarified), where or how he lived...or even who, in fact, he is (it turns out that Kanaev, Medvdev, and Voloshinov are also Bakhtin.”⁹

While Emerson maintains scholars do know more about Bakhtin than this particular Russian scholar wants to acknowledge, much about Bakhtin outside of his professional writings remains a mystery.¹⁰ He wrote few personal letters, avoided using the telephone, disliked personal interviews, and rarely spoke of his personal experiences.¹¹

Reconstructing the context from which Bakhtin’s ideas emerge has proven much more difficult.

Reading Bakhtin can be a challenge. Largely ignored and censored under a hegemonic Soviet regime, his work did not gain recognition or momentum in the United States until the late 1970s and early 1980s when Slavonic scholars translated the Russian literary critic for English audiences.¹² Adding to the exigent task, Bakhtin’s writing reflects both dramatic and gradual metamorphoses. He rarely provides succinct definitions of his neologisms, alters his ideas while working them out, falls prey to

⁸Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, xiv.

⁹Caryl Emerson, *The First Hundred Years of Mikhail Bakhtin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3. Not all scholars attribute the work published under these additional names to Bakhtin.

¹⁰Emerson, *First Hundred Years*, ix.

¹¹Emerson, *First Hundred Years*, ix.

¹²Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, xiv.

tangents, and sometimes contradicts himself.¹³ Yet, his writings on the nature of language revolutionized the field of linguistics and literary studies placing him at the apogee of postmodern theory. A brilliant and creative thinker, his work defies truncation into a single overriding concern.¹⁴

Bakhtin introduces a new epistemology or meditation on knowledge for understanding language. His theory of language argues that individuals produce language in specific social contexts and these social contexts determine meaning. Articulating his language theory within the context of philosophy and advances in the sciences, for Bakhtin every utterance has historical and social significance.¹⁵ Arguing against Saussure's system of language theory,¹⁶ Bakhtin understands language as a "ceaseless flow of becoming."¹⁷ By this he means that language continually changes to reflect shifting historical and social milieu. Language manifests class, institutional, national, and group interests. From this perspective, no word is ever neutral.¹⁸ While language has meaning, that meaning is based on what was previously said and then reinterpreted by what follows it and is determined in part by the context of the

¹³Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 2-3.

¹⁴Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 1.

¹⁵Mikhail Bakhtin/P.N. Medvedev, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics* (trans. Albert J. Wehrle; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 120.

¹⁶See David Lodge, *After Bakhtin* (London: Routledge, 1990), 57-8, for a succinct summary of Saussure's theory of language and the implications of Bakhtin's emphasis on the social nature of language. Saussure's linguistics distinguishes between *langue* and *parole*.

¹⁷Mikhail Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (trans. V.W. McGee; C. Emerson and M. Holquist, eds; Austin, University of Texas Press, 1986), 66.

¹⁸Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 18.

participants. No word, according to Bakhtin, stands alone or is independent but depends on how it will be received by others.¹⁹ Language dialogues and changes; it interacts with what has come before it and anticipates a future response.²⁰ Context is a central feature of dialogism and language a social phenomenon.

Language is a two sided act; there is both a giver and a receiver. Dialogism emphasizes this relationship. The word originates with the addresser and is received by an addressee. Language represents shared territory; it belongs both to the speaker and the interlocutor and is the product of a reciprocal relationship between the parties.²¹

Utterances originate in specific social contexts. Language both determines and is determined by the historical components of particular utterances. The extraverbal context in which the shared word occurs functions as an important element in creating meaning.

Bakhtin identifies the following features as essential components of the extraverbal context: the common spatial purview between addresser and addressee, common knowledge and understanding of the situation, and their common evaluation.²²

Bakhtin's theory of language distinguishes him from his neo-Kantian colleagues and from the ubiquitous Saussurian theory of language. No word, according to Bakhtin, stands alone or is independent but depends on how it will be received by others.²³ He

¹⁹Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 72.

²⁰M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (eds. C. Emerson and M. Holquist; trans. M. Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 280.

²¹Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 86.

²²Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (eds. R.C. David and R. Schleifer; New York: Longman, 1998), 475.

²³Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 72.

espouses, “The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly orientated towards a future answer word. It provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction.”²⁴ Bakhtin further expounds,

Orientation of the word towards the addressee has an extremely high significance. In point of fact, word is a *two-sided* [sic] act. It is determined equally by *whose* word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the product of the *reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee*. Each and every word expresses ‘one’ in relation to the ‘other.’ I give myself verbal shape from another’s point of view, ultimately, from the point of view of the community to which I belong . . . A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor.²⁵

Bakhtin offers an example of the importance of extraverbal context in the following scenario.²⁶ Two people are sitting in a room and both are silent until one of them says “Well” and the other does not respond. For readers, this situation is incomprehensible without the extraverbal context. They can define the meaning of the adverb “well” phonetically, morphologically, and consider semantic factors but will not be any closer to making meaning out of the colloquy without additional contextual information. Bakhtin offers the following context for this example and thus demonstrates its ability to shape meaning.

At the time the colloquy took place, both interlocutors looked up at the window and saw that it had begun to snow; both knew that it was already May and that it was high time for spring to come; finally, both were sick and tired of the protracted winter—they both were looking forward to spring and both were bitterly disappointed by the late snowfall. . . Now that we have been let in on the ‘assumed,’ that is, now that we know the shared

²⁴Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 280.

²⁵Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 86.

²⁶Bakhtin, “Discourse in Life,” 474-75.

spatial and ideational purview, the whole of the utterance ‘Well!’ is perfectly clear to us and we understand its intonation.²⁷

This example illustrates the importance of context in determining meaning and that it operates as a dialogic component when readers create meaning.²⁸

Bakhtin has become increasingly popular among scholars of all varieties. As the literary theorist Paul de Mann sardonically exclaimed in a speech in the 1980s, Bakhtin’s ideas can and have been adopted and defended by a range of theoreticians.²⁹ But the Russian thinker refuses to be typecast into prescribed categories. A survey of Bakhtin’s place in literary history of the twentieth century reveals the uniqueness of his work, and his ideas distinguish him from Russian Formalism and Marxism prevalent during his time.³⁰ Unlike Formalists who remove texts from their socio-historical context, Bakhtin stresses the relationship between text and audience, articulating a connection between words and specific social contexts.³¹ Craig notes Bakhtin’s emphasis on, “language [not as] a monolithic system but a source of ideological potential with multiple possibilities in

²⁷Bakhtin, “Discourse in Life,” 475.

²⁸The relationship between Bakhtin’s notion of extraverbal context and the formalist emphasis on *Sitz im Leben* is an interesting question—one which this dissertation will not address but remains an area ripe for further inquiry.

²⁹See Craig, *Reading Esther*, 18. Modern critics argue over the exact works that should be attributed to Bakhtin with the work of Pavel N. Medvedev and Valentin N. Voloshinov sometimes considered written by Bakhtin. I will follow Kenneth Craig in asserting that the extent of Bakhtin’s authorship will probably remain ambiguous but will work from the assumption that Bakhtin influenced a circle of authors and supplied much inspiration for their work. Craig, *Reading Esther*, 14-16. See also Allen, *Intertextuality*, 15 for a succinct discussion of the difficulty in determining authentic Bakhtin works. Michael Holquist, one of the leading Bakhtin scholars, provides a synoptic reading of the Russian’s work in that he interprets all Bakhtin’s works written across a spectrum of styles, time, and names. Michael Holquist, *Dialogism* (London: Routledge, 1990), 8, 11-13.

³⁰Craig, *Reading Esther*, 16-18; Todd F. David and Kenneth Womack, *Formalist Criticism and Reader-Response Theory* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 39-50.

³¹Craig, *Reading Esther*, 17.

heterogeneous societies,” which differentiates him from Formalists. Unlike strict Marxists, for Bakhtin, “artistic discourse is not a simple, direct reflection of economic life.”³² While sharing affinities with deconstruction, such as the notion of dialogized language, Bakhtin does not neatly fit within this paradigm either as he frequently emphasizes the role of the author.³³ He stresses the social context of language as an exchange between a work and its audience and author. Bakhtin analyzes the sociological analysis of language, what he calls a “sociological poetics,” as a relationship between the creator and the contemplator, “both determining and determined by historical components of particular utterances.”³⁴ As he explains,

The internal social dialogism of...discourse requires the concrete social context of discourse to be exposed, to be revealed as the force that determines its entire stylistic structure, its “form” and its “content,” determining it not from without, but from within; for indeed, social dialogue reverberates in all aspects of discourse, in those relations to “content” as well as the “formal” aspects themselves.³⁵

Language does not reflect an abstract system of grammatical categories divorced from all contexts. Rather, language is ideologically saturated, influencing and impacting every sphere of life.

Language has meaning in relationship. Dialogism then is a constitutive element of language, and language, in Bakhtin’s view, “embodies an on-going dialogic clash of ideologies, world-views, opinions, and interpretations,” dependent on reader, author, and

³²Craig, *Reading Esther*, 17.

³³Craig, *Reading Esther*, 17-8.

³⁴Bakhtin, “Discourse in Life,” 470, 473.

³⁵Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 300.

text.³⁶ Bakhtin's epistemology of language assumes a dialogic relationship between readers, texts, and authors. Known in Russian as *exotopy* and often translated "outsideness," dialogism remains at the core of Bakhtin's understanding of language and how meaning is created.

Dialogism

Dialogism, a term Bakhtin never employs, refers to the possibility of more than one perspective or point of view imbedded within a single entity but remaining unmerged and even observing each other.³⁷ This entity contemplates the world with differing perspectives capable of an "excess of seeing."³⁸ Yet for Bakhtin, dialogism encompasses more than literature; he envisions all of life as an ongoing unfinalized dialogue taking place at all moments of one's existence.³⁹ Thus, not only is literature dialogic but also all of human experience. He explains:

The dialogic nature of consciousness. The dialogic nature of human life itself. The single adequate form for *verbally expressing* [sic] authentic human life is the *open-ended dialogue*. Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree, and so forth. In this dialogue a person participates wholly and throughout his whole life: with his eyes, lips, hands, soul, spirit, with his whole body and deeds. He invests his entire self in

³⁶Allen, *Intertextuality*, 28.

³⁷Holquist, *Dialogism*, 15. Holquist justifies the creation of another "ism" from Bakhtin's concept dialogue because he says we need a means to categorize Bakhtin's theories of dialogue.

³⁸M.M. Bakhtin, "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity," in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (ed. M. Holquist and V. Lipunov; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 22-3. See also Tull, Patricia. "Bakhtin's Confessional Self-Accounting and Psalms of Lament." *Biblical Interpretation* 13 (2005): 42-3.

³⁹Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 59.

discourse, and this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium.⁴⁰

While human experience embodies dialogue, knowledge, literature, and history do not remain dialogic. Existing forms of knowledge eventually monologize, compressing the contents of open ended dialogue and squelching the unfinalized elements.⁴¹ The unwillingness to abbreviate knowledge remains a defining characteristic of dialogism, and the unending nature of dialogue rebuffs efforts at finalization or definitive categorization. When reading literature as dialogic, several features emerge: unfinalizability, a polyphony of voices even within the same character, equal interaction between participants including authors, readers, and texts, and the expectation of a response.

Dialogism acknowledges and welcomes the contradictory voices and messages contained within a single entity or work without trying to reduce them to a common denominator. The authorial voice does not dominate in a dialogic work but instead forces readers to contend with the challenging and irresolvable interaction of diverse discourses that sometimes occur within the same speaking or thinking character. These differing perspectives contained within a single character or story illustrate the essence of dialogism. Dialogic readings refuse to assuage a text's lacunae, tensions, or inconsistencies. No single voice dictates; rather a polyphony of voices cries out each expecting to be heard. Dialogism assumes diversity and assumes there will be a response to a word. There is no ultimate or final word but each awaits the next response.

⁴⁰Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (ed. C. Emerson.; trans. C. Emerson; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 293.

⁴¹Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 60.

A dialogic sense of truth embraces a plurality of unmerged voices. These unmerged voices, “cannot be contained within a single consciousness, as in monologism; rather, their separateness is essential to the dialogue. Even when the disparate voices agree, as they may, they do so from different perspectives and different senses of the world.”⁴² In contrast, monologism:

. . . denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights, and equal responsibilities, another “I” with equal rights... With a monologic approach... the other remains entirely and only an object of consciousness... The monologue is finalized and deaf to the other’s response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any decisive force. Monologue manages without the other, and therefore to some extent materializes all reality. Monologue pretends to be the ultimate word.⁴³

Bakhtin rejects the idea of placing ontological privilege on the self versus the other; rather, his theories demand the acknowledgement of the other in order to create meaning. Bakhtin apprehends truth as the opposite of official monologism: “Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born *between people* collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction.”⁴⁴ This acknowledgement of the other figures as a distinguishing feature of dialogism.

Applying his concepts to the study of literature, Bakhtin imagines a typology of fictional discourse with three principal categories.

1. Direct speech of the author. The text presents this category as the objective voice of the narrator.

⁴²Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 236-7.

⁴³Bakhtin, *Problems*, 292-3.

⁴⁴Bakhtin, *Problems*, 110.

2. Represented speech of the characters. This category consists of direct speech or soliloquy or inner monologues articulated by characters within the text.
3. Doubly oriented or double voiced speech. This category includes all speech which references something in the world or another speech communicated by another character. This category also consists of other speech acts not articulated in the text, or what Bakhtin calls a hidden polemic.⁴⁵

These categories interact and reveal to the reader dialogic tensions within the narrative.

A single work may exhibit all three categories with each purporting a different perspective or competing ideology.

The novel, for Bakhtin, represents the apotheosis of dialogic literary creation because it embodies the ongoing dialogic clash between ideologies and interpretations.⁴⁶

Bakhtin, while retaining the author as one of the dialogic participants, limits his/her control. Morson and Emerson explain,

. . . in a polyphonic work the form-shaping ideology itself demands that the author cease to exercise monologic control...Polyphony demands a work in which several consciousnesses meet as equals in a dialogue that is in principle unfinalizable. Characters must be ‘not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse.’⁴⁷ The direct power to mean, which in a monologic work belongs to the author alone, belongs to several voices in a polyphonic work.⁴⁸

⁴⁵Bakhtin, *Problems*, 184-89; See also Lodge, *After Bakhtin*, 59-60.

⁴⁶Allen, *Intertextuality*, 21-2. According to Bakhtin, Dostoevsky best creates the polyphonic hero. Dostoevsky as author also mastered the art of employing “active double-voiced words.” An author uses this subtle technique by “working the debates inside a word so that the parodied side does not take all that abuse lying down but rather fights back, resists, tries to subvert.” Emerson, *First Hundred Years*, 128.

⁴⁷Bakhtin, *Problems*, 7.

⁴⁸Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 238-9. Morson and Emerson do not identify what makes a work polyphonic. Although Bakhtin would probably disagree because he considered novels the apogee of literature, any work can be interpreted as polyphonic.

Meaning develops between the boundary of two texts or between dialogue partners and not in a text alone or among one voice. Within the midst of the dialogue of interacting voices, new meaning is created, and “it always creates something that never existed before, something absolutely new and unrepeatable.”⁴⁹ Dialogism does not emphasize dualism or privilege one against the other. Rather, dialogism argues “Existence is not only an event, it is an utterance. The event of existence has the nature of dialogue in this sense; there is no word directed to no one.”⁵⁰

How does dialogism impact the manner in which readers approach the book of Esther or biblical texts in general? First, a dialogic reading anticipates the participation of a multiplicity of sources: authors, readers, and the text itself. The combination of these sources creates meaning and as participants change so meaning shifts. None of the participants (author, reader, text) exercises ultimate authority over the others but remains open to being shaped by dialogue between partners. Second, a dialogic reading assumes diversity and plurality and accepts the unfinalizability of reading. Dialogism condemns finalized readings. This project, for example, will not produce the definitive reading of the book of Esther; rather, it contributes a reading that joins an immeasurable list of interpretations that came before and presumes an infinite number of readings will follow.⁵¹ As readers further consider dialogic readings, the variety of social contexts or

⁴⁹Bakhtin, *Speech Genres*, 119-20, 124.

⁵⁰Holquist, *Dialogism*, 27.

⁵¹While some readers may fear unfinalizability suggests no ultimate meaning thus making all meaning obsolete or meaningless, dialogism stresses the value of all meaning and refuses to place ontological privilege on some over others. Deconstruction as articulated by Jacques Derrida both depends on and rejects Saussure’s linguistic principles of signifier and signified. Bakhtin’s rejection of Saussurian linguistics and his continued emphasis on the author and context distinguish him from the deconstructionist

languages engendered within the narrative emerges. The text encapsulates the language of exile, outsider, empire, and hegemony. Characters within the text also exchange dialogue. The intricate relationship between Mordecai and Haman especially reveals the careful orchestration of dialogue between characters. The characters express double voiced speech. Esther is both self sacrificing and vindictive. Ahasuerus is exceedingly generous and insouciantly cruel. This tension between languages illustrates an additional term related to dialogism, heteroglossia.

Dialogism relates to the Bakhtinian term heteroglossia. Heteroglossia refers to the conflict between discourses (“centripetal” and “centrifugal” or “official” and “unofficial”) within the same national language.⁵² Literally defined as “different-speech-ness,” heteroglossia recognizes the conflict between different voices and the variety of ways in which communication occurs within the same national language. Holquist claims heteroglossia is at the heart of all of Bakhtin’s other projects and therefore of utmost import.⁵³ Heteroglossia holds in tensions these notions of communication: first that in order for communication via language to work, there must be a more or less fixed system but that language participants alter and modify this system in their own particular

ideas. See Stephen D. Moore, *Literary Criticism and the Gospels* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1989), 131-142.

⁵²Pam Morris, ed. *The Bakhtin Reader* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 248. Bakhtin employs the term polyphony to describe the multiplicity of voices in a novel with Dostoevsky serving as the superlative example where dialogue between the author’s voice and the characters’ voices interact on equal terms.

⁵³Michael Holquist, introduction to *The Dialogic Imagination*, by M.M. Bakhtin (trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), xix.

contexts.⁵⁴ Next, language, for Bakhtin, is never a unitary system of norms. Rather, it constitutes an ongoing, never ending project that remains perpetually unfinished.⁵⁵

Language is always languages, and there are many ways of speaking languages; even when it is the same national tongue.⁵⁶ Holquist contends Bakhtin's sensitivity to this diversity of language experience distinguishes him from other linguists.⁵⁷

For Bakhtin, novels function as form-shaping ideologies and accentuate the concept of heteroglossia. He describes the languages of heteroglossia as a complex of beliefs where:

Each language of heteroglossia has arisen from a vast array of social and psychological experience. Its sense of the world has been shaped by the accretion and reaccentuation of contingent evaluations and perceptions of the world over time, and so the language carries with it the wisdom of its speakers' historical experience...languages of heteroglossia are best understood not as a specifiable set of propositions, but as a 'living impulse' that responds to experience and changes, and thus grows in potential.⁵⁸

Bakhtin suggests then the importance of dialogue and heteroglossia where each language has more to say when addressed dialogically from another perspective. Or, articulated another way, "To realize and develop the potential of a language, 'outsideness'—the outsideness of another language--is required."⁵⁹ When heteroglossia occurs, languages enter into dialogue and complex changes transpire. Each language sees itself from an

⁵⁴Holquist, "Introduction," xix-xx. Bakhtin's theory of language is exceedingly complex, and this work admittedly adumbrates his theories in broad, simplistic sketches.

⁵⁵Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 139.

⁵⁶Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 271-2.

⁵⁷Holquist, "Introduction," xix

⁵⁸Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 309.

⁵⁹Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 310.

alien perspective and then comes to understand how the other language views its own values and beliefs.

In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin traces the evolutionary development of the form of the novel arguing it is fundamentally heteroglot. A heteroglot novel contains a carefully orchestrated cacophony of social discourses. The shift from “polyphony” to “heteroglossia” represents a movement away from individual voices and towards social languages.⁶⁰ In a heteroglot novel, all language “is a point of view, a socio-ideological conceptual system of real social groups.”⁶¹ Bakhtin further explains:

All languages of heteroglossia...are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically...As such, these languages live a real life, they struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia. . .

At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past, between different socio-ideological groups in the present, between tendencies, schools, circles and so forth, all given a bodily form. These ‘languages’ of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new typifying ‘languages.’⁶²

What might the application of heteroglossia to the book of Esther look like?

Reading the book of Esther as a heteroglot text means considering the various languages the narrator, characters, and scenes speak within the story. Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia is an excellent metaphor for describing the complex experiences of the

⁶⁰Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 112-13.

⁶¹Bakhtin, “Discourse in Life,” 411-12.

⁶²Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 291.

Diaspora as voiced by varying elements within the story. The banquet scenes speak multiple languages: the language of royalty and excess, the language of desperation and manipulation, the language of the poor and the excluded, the language of celebration and laughter, the language of the elite and the marginal, the language of survival. Each of the feasts embodies particular languages and principles revealing to readers the complexities of Diaspora life in the Persian Empire. The banquets illuminate the values and ideologies of various multi-faceted groups.

Chronotope

Chronotope is the term Bakhtin employs to describe the spatio-temporal matrix that shapes narrative texts. A neologism he steals from Albert Einstein, chronotope literally translates “time-space.” It embodies the temporal and spatial characteristics of language. Or, in other words, chronotopes function within literature to capture and reveal to readers particular historical and biographical features of language. Chronotopes concretize the process of assimilating real historical time and space in literature.⁶³ They provide the framework and means for understanding experience.

Bakhtin relates the term to specific genre types that accordingly correspond to specific historical time periods and cultural knowledge. Chronotopes are the “form-shaping ideology for understanding the nature of events and actions.”⁶⁴ Different genres offer different concepts of history and society and relates to particular periods of history. Specific chronotopes, then, represent particular worldviews or ideologies. It is the sense

⁶³Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 84.

⁶⁴Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 367.

of time, which gives shape to the narrative. Chronotopes embody a fusion of space and time. They are:

The organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events of the novel. The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative... Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins.⁶⁵

Likewise, he visualizes human beings in relation to their temporal and spatial world. He names three generic developments of the chronotopic self in the early form of the novel and outlines the development of chronotopes in these distinct phases:

1. The Greek romance adventure novel written between the second and sixth centuries CE.⁶⁶
2. The adventure novel of everyday life characterized by two works: the *Satyricon* of Petronius and *The Golden Ass* of Apuleius.⁶⁷
3. Ancient Biography and Autobiography (biographical novel) represented by two types: the Platonic and the Rhetorical.⁶⁸

Bakhtin details several additional chronotopes that have endured as types of genres.

These include: the genres of chivalric romance and the Rabelaisian chronotope (as related to the analysis of Rabelais' novel).⁶⁹

Literature is heterochronous.⁷⁰ Multiple chronotopes co-exist within a single work; they are dialogic in nature.⁷¹ Authors and readers are chronotopic as the activities

⁶⁵Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 84; Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 187.

⁶⁶Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 86-110.

⁶⁷Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 110- 129

⁶⁸Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 130-146. See also Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 180-82, 184-87.

⁶⁹Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 150-206.

⁷⁰Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 371.

⁷¹Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 252.

of writing and reading take place within specific contexts of time and space. Bakhtin asks readers to consider, “How are the chronotopes of the author and the listener or reader presented to us?”⁷² He answers this question by stressing the animation of texts; they are alive and represent a human voice. Readers likewise are real people who participate in the activity of reading in a specific time and place.⁷³ While the present world of the reader remains a separate boundary from the represented world of the text, the two interact. A text should not be removed completely from its context but at the same time it must speak to readers in their current contexts or it will cease to have meaning and not survive. According to Bakhtin, readers must resist enclosing a “work within its epoch” and attempting to interpret only the chronotope of the original audience. But readers also must not read the chronotope only within their present context.⁷⁴ Instead, creative understanding occurs when readers engage in a dialogic process that allows all perspectives to speak. He explains,

The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers. Of course this process of exchange is itself chronotopic: it occurs first and foremost in the historically developing social world, but without ever losing contact with changing historical space.⁷⁵

What does this discussion of chronotope mean for the book of Esther? First, the text is heterochronous. It contains various chronotopes that dialogue and these make the

⁷²Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 252.

⁷³Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 252-3.

⁷⁴Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 254.

⁷⁵Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 254.

plot possible.⁷⁶ Chronotopes emerge as a center for concretizing the time and space of the narrative.⁷⁷ As part of a biblical canon, the chronotopic ideology of the book of Esther represents a different perspective than other Diaspora texts. Second, while various chronotopes exist within the narrative, this work will focus on a dominant one: the time-space matrix of the Diaspora. How does the genre “Diaspora story” affect, interact with, and modify the story? Readers, both ancient and modern, carry specific literary expectations of what a Diaspora story should do. Does the book of Esther reinforce these expectations or does it blaze a different path? If chronotopes reveal the field of historical, biographical, and social relations, what can readers ascertain about life for the Judahites living in Diaspora in the book of Esther?⁷⁸ Conceptualizing the possibilities of action, Bakhtin argues, shapes narratives. He avers, “...each genre possesses a specific field that determines the *parameters* of events even though the field does not uniquely specify particular events...to sense a genre’s field of possibilities is part of what reading is all about”⁷⁹

Carnival

A final Bakhtinian notion, carnival, focuses more acutely on literary aspects of the narrative. Carnival is an illuminating lens through which to read the book of Esther. Assuming with Kenneth Craig that the book of Esther should be read as carnivalesque

⁷⁶Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 369.

⁷⁷Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 187.

⁷⁸Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 371.

⁷⁹Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 370, 371.

literature,⁸⁰ this work will begin with definitions and discussions of the terms “carnival” and “carnavalesque literature.” The term “carnival”⁸¹ signifies a long, complex set of traditions and rituals practiced and especially prevalent in the Middle Ages culminating in feasts and public spectacles.⁸² Belonging to the culture of folk carnival humor, carnival or folk culture manifests three distinct forms: ritual spectacles, comic verbal compositions, and various genres of billingsgate.⁸³ Ritual spectacles consist of carnival pageants and comic shows often showcased in the marketplace while comic verbal compositions include parodies in both oral and written form. Finally, various genres of billingsgate include curses, oaths, and popular blazons.⁸⁴ Encompassing diverse forms and manifestations, carnival constitutes a culture of folk humor that exists on the borderline between art and life.⁸⁵ During the celebration of carnival, life does not exist outside of the festival; there are no idle spectators but only participants. Carnival represents a particular form of popular counter culture. Bakhtin characterizes carnival as the working out of a “new mode of interrelationships between individuals”⁸⁶ and further explicates that carnival “brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the

⁸⁰Craig, *Reading Esther*, 24, 29.

⁸¹The etymology of carnival comes via Italian from medieval Latin *carnevelamen*, *carnelevarium*, from Latin *caro*, *carn*-‘flesh’ and *levare* ‘put away.’ Elizabeth Knowles, ed, *Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 123.

⁸²Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 196.

⁸³Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 196.

⁸⁴Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 196.

⁸⁵See Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 29.

⁸⁶Bakhtin, *Problems*, 123.

profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid.”⁸⁷ It demands the co-mingling of all society.

“Carnavalesque literature” exists in opposition to formal and hierarchical official culture, embraces the notion of “unity-in-diversity,” and the polyphony of many voices.⁸⁸ Carnavalesque literature, while assuming many different forms, is countercultural and refers to traditional often spontaneous cultural phenomena. It, like carnival, subverts authority and hierarchy and temporarily equalizes and eliminates social boundaries allowing free interplay between socially stratified peoples. Carnavalesque literature questions the hegemony of empire and ridicules those in power. Carnival language is a form of heteroglot language, which exists in opposition to monologism.

From within these paradoxes, carnival and carnivalesque literature emerge with their emphasis on laughter and delight in reversals. Carnavalesque literature manifests numerous characteristics. Examples include: eccentricity, free and familiar contact between people, carnivalistic misalliances, profanation, mock crowning and subsequent decrownings, the pathos of shifts and changes, joyful relativity, and parody.⁸⁹ Bakhtin notes several additional features that allow this incredible occasion of carnival to transpire. They include the concept of carnival misalliances that recreates boundaries; the occurrence of the grotesque, which allows normally profane language and behaviors to occur; the use of masks and marionettes, which allow participants to assume a variety

⁸⁷Bakhtin, *Problems*, 123.

⁸⁸See Hawthorn, *Glossary*, 29.

⁸⁹Bakhtin, *Problems*, 123-8.

of personae; ritual acts including the crowning and uncrowning of a carnival king; the role of laughter and parody, and the relationship of opposites including death and birth.⁹⁰

Characteristics and Milieu of Carnival and Carnavalesque Literature

Bakhtin postulates that carnival festivities held an important role in the life of medieval persons.⁹¹ According to Bakhtin, in order to understand the Middle Ages, one must recognize the existence of a two world condition—the official world of rules and hierarchy and then a second world outside of officialdom filled with laughter and reversals represented by carnival. In describing medieval European culture, Bakhtin identifies carnival and its unique customs as an integral aspect of medieval life. Bakhtin goes so far as to say that one cannot understand the development of European culture unless one considers the laughing people of the Middle Ages.⁹² This world of carnival and laughter is distinct from the serious world and represents a different “nonofficial, extraecclesiastical, and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations.”⁹³

⁹⁰Bakhtin, *Problems*, 123-8; Carolyn M Shields, *Bakhtin* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 102-3.

⁹¹Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (trans. H. Iswolsky; Bloomington: Indiana, University Press, 1984), 5.

⁹²Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 197-200. Bakhtin explains that the basis of laughter in the Middle Ages is completely distinct and free from religious and ecclesiastic dogmatism and mysticism and piety. This second life is organized around laughter and manifest during festivals. Bakhtin’s harsh criticism of religious life and feasts during the Middle Ages is phenomenological. Church Historians dispute his remark that “carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal” as opposed to Christian feasts that “betrayed and distorted” the true nature of human festivity.

⁹³Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 6.

For Bakhtin, a “carnival sense of the world possesses a life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality.”⁹⁴ His interest in carnival rests in medieval versions where the festivities belonged to everyone, the wealthy and the common. By the time of the Renaissance and the 17th century, Bakhtin complains, carnival no longer belongs to everyone but instead to the wealthy and social elite who invest large sums of money.⁹⁵ Bakhtin finds in carnival “a hilarious, irreverent celebration of all that was pompous, authoritarian, official, repressed, and silenced.”⁹⁶ Carnival mocks the monologic vision of everyday life and for a short time creates a utopian society celebrating the heteroglot experiences and languages of all people.

Laughter represents an important component of carnival festivities. Bakhtin explains how in the Middle Ages laughter was forbidden in all official spheres except during festival days when people enjoyed “exceptional privileges of license and lawlessness outside these spheres: in the marketplace, on feast days, in festive recreational literature.”⁹⁷ He characterizes the complex nature of carnival laughter as belonging to the people and not in response to a comic event.⁹⁸ Carnival laughter is universal in that it is directed at everyone and no one is exempt from participating. Carnival laughter is ambivalent. It is happy and light but at the same time mocking and

⁹⁴Bakhtin, *Problems*, 107.

⁹⁵Bakhtin, *Problems*, 107; Shields, *Bakhtin*, 98-9. See also Shields for a summary of the connection between carnival and the ancient Greek public square, the agora. Shields, *Bakhtin*, 102.

⁹⁶Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 21.

⁹⁷Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 71-2.

⁹⁸Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 200.

deriding. Bakhtin explains, “It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.”⁹⁹ Carnival laughter is not a thoroughly negative action, but rather seeks to renew and rebuild by rejecting the monologic voices of those in power.

Bakhtin outlines his understanding of carnival in his work, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*.

Carnival is a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act. Carnival is not contemplated, and, strictly speaking, not even performed; its participants live in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect; that is, they live a carnivalistic life. Because carnivalistic life is life drawn out of its usual rut, it is to some extent ‘life turned inside out,’ ‘the reverse side of the world.’

The laws, prohibitions and restrictions that determine the system and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety and etiquette connected with it—that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age). All distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: free and familiar contact among people. This is a very important aspect of a carnival sense of the world. People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square.¹⁰⁰

Carnival creates a temporary utopia where social classes are eliminated, hegemonic power temporarily restrained, and abstemious medieval life abandoned. Carnival turns life upside down, changes the rules, makes life unpredictable, and allows nothing to remain the same.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 200.

¹⁰⁰Bakhtin, *Problems*, 122-3.

¹⁰¹Shields, *Bakhtin*, 101.

Bakhtin connects carnival to feasting noting the relationship between carnival and feasts of the Church.¹⁰² He characterizes the feast as an “important primary form of human culture” that has always had “essential, meaningful philosophical content.”¹⁰³ Carnival feasts, as opposed to official feasts, “marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.”¹⁰⁴ Bakhtin further explains that carnival represents, “the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of non-carnival life.”¹⁰⁵ Opposed to monologic official feasts, carnival feasts are raucous, unscripted, unranked, unpredictable, and inclusive without formality. Carnival “celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order.”¹⁰⁶

For Bakhtin, equality of the masses is a particularly interesting feature of carnival. He articulates,

in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age... This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life... permitting no distance

¹⁰²Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 8. Bakhtin actually connects several church feasts with carnival including “Easter laughter,” Mardi Gras, and Fastnacht. Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 196-99.

¹⁰³Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 8.

¹⁰⁴Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10.

¹⁰⁵Bakhtin, *Problems*, 123.

¹⁰⁶Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10.

between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times.¹⁰⁷

He continues by describing the carnivalesque experience as,

opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms. All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities... We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the 'inside out'...of the 'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings.¹⁰⁸

Carnival, at least as Bakhtin recreates it, produces a temporary utopia that enables familiar contact between all people. A time of feasts and merrymaking, carnival briefly allows participants to enjoy life without social and hierarchical boundaries, free from the hegemony of church and state. Carnival embraces the diversity of human experience and embodies polyphony. It produces joy, renews and transforms. According to Morson and Emerson, Bakhtin believes he has found in the concept of carnival, a social ritual of "pure antinomianism" and with carnival laughter he has discovered an act that eternally rejects the monologized, official Truth.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10.

¹⁰⁸Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 11.

¹⁰⁹Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 92-3.

Purim: Carnival for the Jews

Similar to the Christian celebration of carnival, the festival of Purim in particular possesses carnivalistic overtones.¹¹⁰ During the Enlightenment, participants in Purim festivities commemorated the overturning of social order. Herman Pollack describes various customs and insouciant behaviors that occur only during Purim. Excessive drinking transpired and participants were encouraged to engage in riotous behavior and imbibe until *ad-lo-yodda*, they could not tell the difference between righteous Mordecai and wicked Haman (Meg. 4b). Gambling is another example of intemperate behavior not sanctioned as appropriate apart from festival holidays. During Purim:

The communal prohibition against gambling was lifted; games of chance and lottery were permitted to add to the merrymaking...during a celebration of Purim a lottery was held and a gold-plated cup was raffled as the prize. On Purim as well as on Hanukkah, popular gambling games were tick tack, heads or tails, chess, and cards. . . Of these games, tick tack was the most objectionable because it required dice. . .¹¹¹

In addition to gambling and excessive drinking, cross-dressing also transpired.

Though contrary to Biblical law (Deut 22:5) it was not uncommon on Purim for a man to dress himself in a woman's costume or a woman to disguise herself in a man's attire; and rabbinic opinion did not concur as to the permissibility of this folk practice. Some said that there is no objection if men and women disguise their appearance through dress, providing this is limited to the Purim celebration. . .¹¹²

¹¹⁰Polish, "Aspects of Esther," 100. While I will study all the banquets in the book of Esther and not just those associated with Purim, the comparisons nonetheless between the Jewish and Christian festivals are indeed remarkable.

¹¹¹Herman Pollack, *Jewish Folkways in Germanic Lands (1648-1806)* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1971), 181.

¹¹²Pollack, *Jewish Folkways*, 184.

Similar to the substitute king practice,¹¹³ Jews in Eastern Europe often elected a Purim Rabbi during Purim. This Purim Rabbi:

. . . was given complete freedom of speech, and permitted to speak as sharply as he liked about all, even the rabbi of the town, the head of the academy, or the influential men of the town. He was usually a sharp-witted person and quite a joker, and generally gave a sermon which was a satire and a parody of the Gemora [sic], on certain prayers and on other deeply-rooted Jewish institutions.¹¹⁴

Pollack also tells of a tradition in the Worms community of a special Purim celebration for the youth who would:

. . . [march] to the synagogue in a parade, wearing pointed hats and led by a member of their group who was dressed as a dunce and in jest played the part of the *knelgabay*, the attendant supervising school children. They had special privileges on this day; they could sit on the pulpit in the seats usually occupied by the elders and enjoy unlimited latitude in conducting the services...Following the Sabbath morning services the students would go to private homes, where they were invited to a Purim meal. The leaders of the community gave a *tsetil* ('note') to the students, authorizing them to collect wine from individual households. . .¹¹⁵

The comparisons between medieval and Renaissance Purim and carnival celebrations reveal numerous common features. Bakhtin depicts similar scenes of reversals, elimination of social hierarchies and boundaries, and gaiety during medieval carnival. During both carnival and Purim, the rules regarding appropriate decorum relaxed. Similar activities such as crossing dress, clothing swaps, and leadership reversals transpired during carnival as well. Prominent features of carnival include the reversal of hierarchic levels and the renewal of clothes and social image. For example,

¹¹³See Polish, "Aspects of Esther," 94-99.

¹¹⁴Pollack, *Jewish Folkways*, 186.

¹¹⁵Pollack, *Jewish Folkways*, 189-90.

the jester is crowned king, or a clownish bishop elected or even a mock pontiff appointed.¹¹⁶ As the Jewish community celebrates a festival and neglects the formal rules of engagement and social hierarchy, so participants in carnival observe temporary relief from the draconian rules of everyday life. As Bakhtin explains,

From the wearing of clothes turned inside out and trousers slipped over the head to the election of mock kings and popes the same topographic logic is put to work: shifting from top to bottom, casting the high and the old, the finished and completed into the material lower stratum for death and rebirth.¹¹⁷

As Bakhtin mourns the replacement of the utopian carnival of the Middle Ages with the bourgeois infused feasts of the late Enlightenment, by the nineteenth century some European Jews likewise fondly recalled the frivolous joys of Purims of the past. In 1888, the Viennese rabbi Moritz Güdemann published his final volume on the cultural history of medieval European Jewry. Güdemann likens Purim to the celebration of *Fastnacht* in Germany, which was characterized by excessive food, drink, and masquerade.¹¹⁸ In the late 19th century, Israel Abrahams recalls (within the polemical context of rigid Victorian ideals) that Purim represents the “carnival of the European Jews” and that “on Purim everything, or almost everything, was lawful...They laughed at their Rabbis, they wore grotesque masks, the men attired themselves in women’s clothes and the women went clad as men.”¹¹⁹ Evoking with nostalgia the Purim festivals of the

¹¹⁶Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 81.

¹¹⁷Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 81-2.

¹¹⁸Moritz Güdemann, *Geschichte des Erziehungswesens und der Kultur der abendländischen Juden* (Vienna: 1888): 3:134-35. See also Elliott Horowitz, *Reckless Rites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 248-50 for others who compare Christian pre-Lenten festivals to Purim.

¹¹⁹Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 260-62.

past, Abrahams describes Purim celebrations for the medieval Jew as “a day of mirth and sociability, of wine-bibbing and of cracking of jokes, of buffooneries and mummings, of choruses and rollicking wine songs.”¹²⁰ He mourns the loss of such occasions among his Victorian contemporaries. The traditions of carnival and Purim feasting flourished among Christians and Jews of the Middle Ages and Renaissance period. The gaiety, triumph of the underdog, and peripety depicted in the book of Esther represent ubiquitous celebratory traditions. Bakhtin traces the origins of this resistance to hierarchy and satirical condemnation of social structures to classical antiquity and the genre of serio-comical or menippean satire.¹²¹

Menippean Satire: Carnival's Roots and Connections in the Book of Esther

Bakhtin recounts the history of carnival in post-Socratic literature. Carnival has its roots in menippean satire, named for the philosopher Menippus of Gadara who lived during the third century B.C.E.¹²² The Roman scholar Varro initially uses the name “*saturate menippeae*” to categorize his work in the first century BCE but the genre may date to a student of Socrates.¹²³ Menippean satire influenced early Christian literature,

¹²⁰Abrahams, *Jewish Life*, 269.

¹²¹Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 62-3; see also Lodge, *After Bakhtin*, 58-59, Valeta, “Court or Jester Tales,” 313-14.

¹²²Bakhtin, *Problems*, 112-115. See Eugene P. Kirk, *Menippean Satire: An Annotated Catalogue of Texts and Criticism* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1980), for a good discussion of the motives and history of this genre.

¹²³Bakhtin, *Problems*, 112-13.

Byzantine literature, and literary works well through the Renaissance, Reformation, and modern times.¹²⁴ Bakhtin lists fourteen characteristics of menippean satire.¹²⁵

1. comic elements or carnival nature
2. freedom of plot and philosophical invention
3. use of the fantastic in order to create extraordinary situations to test for truth
4. a setting of slum naturalism
5. concern with ultimate questions
6. three planed setting—earth, heaven, and netherworld
7. observation from an unusual vantage point
8. moral-psychological experimentation among the characters—characters who experience unusual, abnormal more and psychic states
9. scandal scenes
10. sharp contrasts and oxymoronic combinations
11. elements of social utopia
12. variety of inserted genres within the work
13. multi-styled and multi-toned nature
14. concern with current and topical issues¹²⁶

The Esther narrative displays a number of these characteristics that are especially important to this present study.¹²⁷ These are not rigid categories and several of the events in the Esther scroll fit into multiple groups. Comic elements abound in the narrative from the lavish banquets, to the character reversals between Mordecai and Haman including Mordecai's parade through town escorted by Haman and Haman's boasting to his wife and friends about his elevated position before his defrocking and death, to Esther's ascension to the throne via a beauty contest, and to the Purim banquet scenes concluding the scroll. The narrative overflows with comic elements. Fantastical plot turns also

¹²⁴Bakhtin, *Problems*, 113.

¹²⁵Bakhtin, *Problems*, 114-19.

¹²⁶See also Valeta, "Court or Jester Tales," 313-324, for a reading of Daniel 1-6 as menippean satire.

¹²⁷Chapter three will provide a more thorough exploration of these characteristics.

transpire that test truth—for example, Esther’s banquet scene where she reveals her identity as a victim of Haman’s plot (7:3-10). The Queen opportunely divulges her identity as a Jewess and identifies Haman as the perpetrator. Ahasuerus expresses anger and surprise at Haman’s audacity--apparently forgetting his role in the intended massacre (3:11). This fantastical scene occurs during the queen’s banquet and discloses the truth of Haman’s evil plot.

Scandal scenes certainly occur within the narrative when Esther appears uninvited before Ahasuerus (5:1-2) and when the king finds Haman in Esther’s lap (Esth 7:8). Esther’s initial response to Mordecai’s request that she plead their case before the king informs readers of the risk and scandal associated with appearing unannounced before the king. Esther reminds Mordecai that Ahasuerus has not summoned her in the last thirty days and no subject may appear uninvited before him in the inner court (4:11). The text intones Esther’s unannounced appearance before the king would indeed cause a stir. Ironically, Vashti creates scandal for refusing to appear before the king while Esther invites it by appearing unbidden before the monarch. A second scandal transpires during Esther’s final banquet scene when she accuses Haman of plotting her death. The king retires to the palace garden in anger and returns to find Haman prostrate on the couch in front of Esther (7:8). Ahasuerus responds to this impropriety by executing Haman.

The narrative contains numerous contrasts and oxymoronic combinations with Haman arranging a celebration that honors his enemy Mordecai while assuming he is planning tribute for himself. In chapter six just as the king wishes to confer honor on Mordecai for thwarting an assassination attempt, Haman enters the court to request permission to impale Mordecai. The king questions Haman on how best to bestow glory

on a man who has pleased him, and Haman mistakenly believes the king desires to heap honor on him. No sooner does Haman finish outlining an ostentatious show of tribute for the fortuitous man when the king orders him to besiege Mordecai with the aforementioned glories. A second example includes Haman erecting a gallows for Mordecai whereby he instead finds himself hung upon it while Mordecai assumes his exalted position. No sooner does the king accuse Haman of impropriety and call for his death when the eunuch Harbonah exclaims, “a stake is standing at Haman’s house. . . which Haman made for Mordecai—the man whose words saved the king” (7:9). The narrative produces a quick turn, and Haman is impaled on the stake he erected for Mordecai.

Lastly, the narrative displays a multi-toned nature and concern for current and topical issues. The text provides not only a polyphony of voices within the story but also within the canonical context of the Hebrew Bible. The Esther narrative articulates a much different view of life in the Diaspora than other texts of the Hebrew Bible such as the books of Ezra and Daniel. Finally, the Esther narrative expresses concern with current issues of the time such as how to be Jewish in the Diaspora and how to successfully survive as a Jew in a dominantly Gentile culture under the control of a capricious despot. The text proposes faithful Jews need not return to Jerusalem.

Carnival functions as a centrifugal force promoting unofficial dimensions of society and life.¹²⁸ Persisting against official ideology and the powerful, carnival creates an equalizing environment for the poor, the disfavored, and the minority. It stands against the monologic voice of authority and presents a polyphony of viewpoints and

¹²⁸Allen, *Intertextuality*, 22.

ideologies that counter the status quo. Carnival provides a means in which to display otherness. Carnival draws attention to the fact that “social roles determined by class relations are *made* not given, culturally produced rather than naturally mandated.”¹²⁹ As Clark and Holquist characterize it, carnival is “a gap in the fabric of society. And since the dominant ideology seeks to author the social order as a unified text, fixed, complete, and forever, carnival is a threat.”¹³⁰ Bakhtin summarizes the experience of carnival with a paradox: carnival is “ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives.”¹³¹ Bakhtin stresses that carnival is not a literary phenomenon but rather a “syncretic pageantry.”¹³² He suggests that the language and experience of carnival creates new systems of symbols, vocabulary, discourse, and cannot be fully translated. A world turned upside down by carnival forces participants to mingle with those typically outside their social stratum and separates the barriers that keep participants and readers safe from the other.

Excursus: Bakhtin in Biblical Studies

The next section seeks to place this study in the history of scholarship on Bakhtin and the book of Esther. In the last fifteen years, Hebrew Bible scholars have discovered and increasingly employed Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories to create a theoretical framework

¹²⁹Holquist, *Dialogism*, 89.

¹³⁰Clark and Holquist, *Bakhtin*, 301.

¹³¹Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 11-12.

¹³²Bakhtin, *Problems*, 122.

for reading biblical texts.¹³³ As recent studies articulate, Bakhtin's theories about language have much to teach biblical scholars who often monologize THE interpretation or reading of a text. Dialogism recognizes that there is never a final word. The meaning of one text depends on its relationship to the other.

Biblical scholars frequently employ Bakhtin's theories and recent studies include Bakhtinian readings of nearly every book in the Hebrew Bible including: the psalms of lament, the book of Job, the Hagar and Sarah narratives, carnival in the book of Esther, Saul in 1 Samuel, biblical historiography, Lamentations, the Deuteronomistic History, 1 and 2 Chronicles, and the first six chapters of Daniel.¹³⁴ As Barbara Green articulates, however, not all scholars who employ Bakhtin's theories demonstrate a methodical understanding of them.¹³⁵ Or, as the Bakhtinian scholar Gary Saul Morson complains, the appropriation and exploitation of Bakhtin by a diversified body of scholars including structuralists, formalists, Marxists, New Critics, political activists, postmodernists, and

¹³³See Glenn Jonas, C. Mark Roark, and Dennis Tucker, "Bakhtin and the Bible: A Select Bibliography," *PRS* 32 (2005): 339-45 for a recent bibliography on Bakhtin and the bible.

¹³⁴Valeta, "Court or Jester Tales," 309-24; Craig, *Reading Esther*; Green, *Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship*; Barbara Green, *How the Mighty are Fallen: A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel* (JSOTSup 365; Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 2003); Carol A Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Walter L. Reed, *Dialogues of the Word: The Bible as Literature According to Bakhtin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); L. Juliana M. Claasens, "Laughter and Tears: Carnivalistic Overtones in the Stories of Sarah and Hagar," *PRS* 32 (2005): 295-308; Tull "Bakhtin's Confessional," 41-55; Alice Wells Hunt, "Bringing Dialogue from Cacophony: Can Bakhtin Speak to Biblical Historiography?," *PRS* 32 (2005): 325-37; "Character in the Boundary: Bakhtin's Interdividuality in Biblical Narratives," *Semeia* 63 (1993): 29-42; Carol Newsom, "Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth," *JR* 76 (1996): 290-306; Keith Bodner, "Eliab and the Deuteronomist," *JSOT* 28 (2003): 55-71; Carleen Mandolfo, "'You Meant Evil Against Me': Dialogic Truth and the Character of Jacob in Joseph's Story" *JSOT* 28 (2004): 449-65; Charles William Miller, "Reading Voices: Personification, Dialogism, and the Reader of Lamentations 1," *BibInt* 9 (2001): 393-408; Jonas, Roark, and Tucker, "Bakhtin," 339-45. The preceding list constitutes a representation of recent work by biblical scholars who employ Bakhtinian theories.

¹³⁵Green, *Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship*, 4-9.

deconstructionists threaten to make Bakhtin a cliché.¹³⁶ While it is impossible and probably inappropriate to encapsulate the use of Bakhtin by biblical scholars, his conceptions of dialogism and polyphony in particular are quite popular with scholars. The following survey reveals the diversity with which biblical scholars appropriate Bakhtin.

The editors of the journal *Perspectives in Religious Studies* devoted their Fall 2005 issue to examining the influence of Bakhtin on biblical studies. Four of the seven articles deal specifically with Bakhtinian theories and the Hebrew Bible. Barbara Green's article introduces readers to Bakhtin and articulates three general facets of his thought that are particularly useful for biblical scholars. First, Green argues all Bakhtinian reality and literary language are dialogic in nature. Thus, all who encounter literature participate in creating meaning: readers, characters, and authors. Even scenes within the text dialogue, and these components are linked in complex and innumerable ways all of which, according to Green, are begging to be investigated.¹³⁷ Second, the cultural context of a literary work cannot be separated from its literary dimensions. This point does not require meaning be dependent on authors and or cultural environment but that this facet cannot be completely ignored. Third, the Bakhtinian processes of authoring and reading are ethical acts. By this Green means that authors and readers are answerable or accountable for addressing life's urgent matters and to do so at every level

¹³⁶Gary Saul Morson, "The Bakhtin Industry," *Slavic and East European Journal* 30 (1986): 81-90; Green, *Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship*, 4-5.

¹³⁷Barbara Green, "Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Studies," *PRS* 32 (2005): 242.

of art and life and from a place of commitment.¹³⁸ Green acknowledges Bakhtin's context from behind the Iron Curtain of the USSR differs from most biblical scholars', but she nonetheless admires Bakhtin's challenge for scholars to write "what is of value and to articulate it from a place of authenticity."¹³⁹

In a subsequent article, L. Julianna Claassens explores the carnivalesque overtones of the characters Sarah and Hagar in Gen 18 and 21 who function as contrasting paired images.¹⁴⁰ Sarah, Abraham's wife, is preferred, elderly and barren while Hagar is the young, fertile Egyptian slave girl given to Abraham in order to conceive a child for Sarah. The pair represents a "two-in-one image" and the characters interconnect revealing similarities between their stories. They both resist the authoritarian structures in which they find themselves caught. God dialogues with both women after their particular voices are heard, and both stories contain dramatic changes in fortune. Sarah's laughter and Hagar's tears elicit a response from the deity and each act represents an articulation of resistance rather than irreverence or despair. God is forced to respond and the characters' situations transform. Bakhtin's carnivalistic categories encourage this reading but at the same time reveal limits. While carnival temporarily allows for the reversal of power, at the end of these stories in Genesis, the life of Sarah's son is shortly thereafter endangered and Sarah's voice disappears from the text. Hagar returns to a mistress who abuses her and by Exodus 1 Hagar's race oppresses

¹³⁸Green, "Bakhtin and Biblical Studies," 243.

¹³⁹Green, "Bakhtin and Biblical Studies," 243. See also Polish, "Aspects of Esther," 85-106, who identifies Mordecai and Haman as doppelgängers. Although Polish does not employ Bakhtinian categories or concepts directly, he makes a similar argument to Claassens'.

¹⁴⁰Claassens, "Laughter," 295-6.

Sarah's. Overall, Claassens' argues the carnival lens is useful in part because Bakhtin's categories force readers to slow down and consider the power relationships between characters.

David Valeta employs Bakhtin's conceptions of novel, genre, and menippean satire to read the first six chapters of Daniel as "finely crafted satires of resistance designed to ridicule foreign kings and empires."¹⁴¹ He identifies the genre of the first six chapters as pre-novelistic menippean satire, which through humor functions as a *piece de resistance* against oppressive political forces. Drawing on the characteristics and categories of menippean satire, Valeta reads the book of Daniel as disassembling royal power and privilege. Bakhtin's categories provide the means by which the text criticizes the foreign empire and ultimately suggests how to survive the stress and dislocation of exile. The use of Bakhtin's menippean satire takes readers beyond traditional form critical limits and offers readers new, fresh insights into the social and political world of the text.

Alice Wells Hunt employs Bakhtin's theories of polyphony, dialogism, and intertextuality in surveying the state of biblical historiography. She summarizes the positions of important figures in biblical historiography including N.P. Lemche, Thomas Thompson, and William Dever whose polemical discourse has created an atmosphere of name calling, monologizing, and gridlock. Reviewing Bakhtin's understanding of monologism,¹⁴² Hunt argues that biblical historicists must abandon their quest for monologic truth in creating universal histories of ancient Israel and move toward a

¹⁴¹Valeta, "Court or Jester Tales," 309-10.

¹⁴²Wells, "Dialogue," 330.

Bakhtinian notion of dialogic truth. For Hunt, Bakhtin's rejection of totalism and his embrace of dialogism and polyphony:

. . . provides a mandate for a diversity of histories, all in dialogue with themselves, with others, with their primary sources, and with their readers...He [Bakhtin] calls historians to acknowledge and incorporate both the diachronic and the synchronic nature of historiography, all the while understanding that all natures of historiography are polyphonic.¹⁴³

Carol Newsom is a frequent contributor to Bakhtinian studies with her work on the book of Job, Isaiah, and biblical theology.¹⁴⁴ In her reading of the book of Job, Newsom contends Bakhtin's categories of dialogic truth and polyphonic compositions provide helpful paradigms for interpreting the sharp disjunctions within the text while concomitantly allowing its unity to stand.¹⁴⁵ For Newsom, the book of Job can be read as a "dialogue of genres and 'voice ideas' in which no one voice is privileged as the voice of truth."¹⁴⁶ Newsome acknowledges that while Bakhtin's theories illuminate the structure of the book, it also reveals their limits.

Focusing on the relationship between the bible and theology, Newsom maintains Bakhtin's notions of dialogic truth and the polyphonic text offer not only exciting new venues of exploration for biblical scholars but provide a bridge to facilitate discussion between biblical scholars and theologians. The author condenses Bakhtin's dialogic sense of truth into four characteristics: dialogic truth requires a plurality of

¹⁴³Wells, "Dialogue," 336-7.

¹⁴⁴Carol Newsom, "Responses to Norman K. Gottwald, 'Social Class and Ideology in Isaiah 40-55.'" *Semeia* 59 (1992): 73-78; Newsome, "Bakhtin," 290-306; Newsom, "The Book of Job as a Polyphonic Text." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 97 (2002): 87-108; Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁴⁵Newsom, "Book of Job as Polyphonic," 87.

¹⁴⁶Newsom, "Book of Job as Polyphonic," 87.

consciousness, embodies personal qualities, refuses systemization, and is always open or unfinalized.¹⁴⁷ Newsom proceeds by sketching in broad outlines how biblical scholars might employ Bakhtin's theories and how his methods engender something with which theologians can work.¹⁴⁸

Claassens in another article continues the discussion of Bakhtin and the direction of biblical theology where she articulates five benefits dialogic paradigms offer. She contends a dialogical model of biblical theology holds much promise because it has the potential to bring together the diverse material of the Hebrew Bible. She admits, however, much work remains in retaining both the diversity and articulating a unity for the biblical material.¹⁴⁹ Second, dialogism provides theologians a bridge by which to cross the testaments. Next, a dialogic model retains the wealth of Jewish and Christian interpretations of the biblical text without privileging one over the other. Fourth, Bakhtin's model of dialogue focuses on the mundane and encourages scholars to refrain from the universal, all-inclusive categories and encourages scholars to focus on the everyday readings of texts. Lastly, Claassens maintains Bakhtin's model encourages amelioration and does not claim to be the final word on biblical theology.¹⁵⁰

Charles William Miller employs Bakhtin's paradigm of dialogism in reading Lamentations 1. Against the ubiquitous reading where the narrator speaks the third person discourse and the second speaker, symbolizing personified Jerusalem, represents

¹⁴⁷Newsom, "Bakhtin," 293, 294.

¹⁴⁸Newsom, "Bakhtin," 306.

¹⁴⁹L. Juliana M. Claassens, "Biblical Theology as Dialogue: Continuing the Conversation on Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Theology," *JBL* 122 (2003): 143.

¹⁵⁰Claassens, "Biblical Theology," 143-4.

the first person discourse, Miller suggests a reading where the narrator does not receive privileged objective status but operates instead within the poem. Miller interprets the poem as a polyphonic text composed of two unmerged consciousnesses where Lamentations 1 becomes “the locus of conflict and struggle between two equally weighted voices.”¹⁵¹ The narrator does not stand outside the poem nor receive favored ontological status. Rather for Miller, the text provokes on going dialogue not only between the voices within the poem but also with those readers outside it.

Reading in the Deuteronomistic History, Jeremy Schipper examines the exchange between Mephibosheth and David in 2 Samuel 16 and concludes the text purposefully retains ambiguity within the dialogue disallowing readers to clarify Mephibosheth’s motives and honesty.¹⁵² Using Bakhtin’s category of polyphony, the text invites readers to examine a multiplicity of interpretations and does not offer clues regarding the veracity of Mephibosheth’s speech to David.

In Kenneth Craig’s work, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque*, he suggests the book of Esther is an example of the literary carnivalesque and examines the ideology of individual words, phrases, and speech units and the appearance of carnivalesque features in the narrative.¹⁵³ For Craig, the Esther text displays Bakhtinian carnivalesque characteristics such as reversals, feasting, the open market, pregnant death, crowns, masks, fools, and collective gaiety. According to Craig, through the work of

¹⁵¹Miller, “Reading Voices,” 408.

¹⁵²Jeremy Schipper, “‘Why Do You Still Speak of Your Affairs?’: Polyphony in Mephibosheth’s Exchanges with David in 2 Samuel,” *VT* 54 (2004): 344-51.

¹⁵³Craig, *Reading Esther*, 24, 29, 47-168.

Mordecai and Esther, the narrative opposes oppression and a fixed social order.¹⁵⁴ When Craig asks questions about reading the book of Esther in light of carnival, he does so within the context of the author. He speculates, “Did the carnival impulse arise at all for the ancient author of the Hebrew Esther narrative? Did this ancient author desire to subvert and demonstrate the falsity of socially instituted ideologies?”¹⁵⁵

With his first two chapters introducing Bakhtin and carnivalesque theories, in chapter three Craig focuses on the struggle between the official and non-official community/culture (Persian versus Jewish), the frequent occurrence of lavish banquets and feasts, and events in the public square of Susa, all of which fit the nature of classic carnival.¹⁵⁶ Chapter four concentrates on peripety including crowning and uncrowning, an emphasis on the body and clothing, and masks. Chapter five addresses parody and specifically death, dying, and “pregnant death” before it considers Ahasuerus and Haman’s depiction of the role of the fool. Chapter six concludes by examining the festival of Purim.

This survey of the use of Bakhtin by biblical scholars demonstrates the popularity of and variety in which his theories have been employed. His conceptions of polyphony and dialogism remain the most prevalent among biblical scholars. This survey also reveals the elasticity of Bakhtin’s theories to a multiplicity of texts in the Hebrew Bible including questions of historiography. The growing movement in biblical studies toward postmodern methods of interpretation holds true in Esther studies. Possible avenues of

¹⁵⁴Craig, *Reading Esther*, 30.

¹⁵⁵Craig, *Reading Esther*, 37.

¹⁵⁶Green, *Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship*, 145.

further study include methodological connections between Bakhtin's theories and the ubiquitous historical paradigms for studying the bible such as form and redaction criticisms.

New Paths of Scholarship: Changes in the Last Two Decades in Esther Studies

In the last two decades, a shift has taken place in Esther studies. Scholarship produced since the 1990s reveals an increasing appreciation for the subtleties and literary art of the text and movement away from analyses concerned with moral condemnation of the book and its characters.¹⁵⁷ With the proliferation of literary theory, scholars approach the biblical text from an extensive variety of perspectives. Recent studies interpret the Esther scroll from feminist, postcolonial, sociological, structural, reader-response, deconstruction, and anthropological perspectives to name a few.¹⁵⁸ As the foci of commentaries on the book change, so interpretations of the text shift.

As work on the book of Esther progresses in new directions, scholars produce more interdisciplinary work combining interests in biblical texts with history, literature,

¹⁵⁷See Fox, *Character*, 288-303; Berlin, *Esther*; Levenson, *Esther*; Laniak, *Shame*; Beal, *Book of Hiding*; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*; Craig, *Reading Esther*; Linda Day, *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther* (JSOT Sup 186; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); Karen H. Jobes, *The Alpha-Text of Esther: It's Character and Relationship to the Masoretic Text* (SBLDS 153; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996); Charles V. Dorothy, *The Books of Esther: Structure, Genre, and Textual Integrity* (JSOTSup 187; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); see also David J.A. Clines, "Esther and the Future of the Commentary," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (eds. S.W. Crawford and L. Greenspoon; London: T & T Clark, 2003), 17-30, who describes the commentary of the future as a Poly-Commentary, a resource that that is "multivoiced, indeterminate, divergent, suggestive, and limitless—an infinite set of variations on the biblical text." 21.

¹⁵⁸Craig, *Reading Esther*; Fountain, *Literary Readings*; Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*; Fox, *Character*; Beal, *Book of Hiding*; Laniak, *Shame*; Klein, *From Deborah*; Drora Oren, "Embodiment in the Book of Esther" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Utah, 2001); Jeanette von Herrmann, "Narratological Aspects of the Masoretic Text of Esther" (Ph.D. diss., The Catholic University of America, 2004); Yona Shapira, "A Postmodernist Reading of the Biblical Book of Esther: From Cultural Disintegration to Carnavalesque Texts" (Ph.D. diss., New York: State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1996).

anthropology, and sociology. This section will describe some of the recent works on the book of Esther paying particular attention to those which impel the discipline in new directions related to this dissertation. In order to discuss the ways in which this dissertation delves into new paths of scholarly exploration concerning the book of Esther, a survey of the state of scholarship on the book is necessary.

Character studies are one avenue where scholars have focused their attention. Scholars examine the literary portrayal of various characters within the text or compare the depiction of certain characters in the three texts (MT, AT, LXX) in relationship to the authorial audience. Since the 1960s, scholars have reevaluated nearly all the characters in the narrative but especially the two queens Esther and Vashti.¹⁵⁹ Feminist studies in Esther reveal a variety of viewpoints and paradigms for reading the text. For Niditch, Esther is a biblical Cinderella story. A young maiden wins a beauty contest, marries the king, saves her people, and lives happily ever after.¹⁶⁰ In a similar vein, Mary Gendler summarizes her objections to the character of Esther:

What about Esther do I find objectionable? In most ways she sounds like an ideal woman—beautiful, pious, obedient, courageous. And it is just this which I find objectionable. Esther is certainly the prototype—and perhaps even a stereotype—of the ideal Jewish woman—an ideal which I find restrictive and repressive...the message comes through loud and clear: women who are bold, direct, aggressive and disobedient are not acceptable; the praiseworthy women are those who are unassuming,

¹⁵⁹Talmon, "Wisdom," 419-455; Jones, "Two Misconceptions," 437-447; Sidnie Ann White, "Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora," in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. P. L. Day; Fortress Press, 1989):161-177; Athalya Brenner, ed., *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith, and Susanna* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

¹⁶⁰Susan Niditch, "Short Stories: The Book of Esther and the Theme of Woman as a Civilizing Force," in *Old Testament Interpretation* (eds. J.L. Mays, D.L. Petersen, & K.H. Richards; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 196.

quietly persistent, and who gain their power through the love they inspire in men.¹⁶¹

Gendler's harsh reaction to Esther is not surprising considering the history and scholarly commentary that has portrayed Esther in the light Gendler reacts against. In 1908, L.B. Paton summarized Esther by describing her as succeeding, "not by skill or by character, but by her beauty."¹⁶² In 1971, Carey Moore assessed Esther's role in saving her people as, "Mordecai supplied the brains while Esther simply followed his directions."¹⁶³

Yet, not all scholars agree with Gendler's reading of Esther. Fox characterizes Esther as a "satirical critique of the male power structure."¹⁶⁴ While not necessarily criticizing the sexist nature of the relationship between men and women, Fox argues the Esther text criticizes male dominance as it was expressed in the Persian court and the gentile realm in general.¹⁶⁵ Bronner wants to reclaim Esther from the androcentrism that abounds in many of the previous commentaries and books.¹⁶⁶ Bronner reads Queen Esther as a brilliant woman who judiciously exercises her boldness and disobedience and displays the qualities of a wise woman.¹⁶⁷ Bronner, in arguing for a politically savvy

¹⁶¹Mary Gendler, "The Restoration of Vashti," in *The Jewish Woman* (ed. E. Koltun; New York: Schocken, 1976), 242.

¹⁶²Paton, *Esther*, 96.

¹⁶³Moore, *Esther*, lii. Moore later laments this comment and hopes it will not remain the only thing later scholars quote him as writing. Carey A Moore, "'It Takes a Village' to Produce a Commentary: A Case in Point", in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (eds. S.W. Crawford and L. Greenspoon; London: T & T Clark International, 2003), 8.

¹⁶⁴Fox, *Character*, 107, 109.

¹⁶⁵Fox, *Character*, 209.

¹⁶⁶Leila Bronner, "Reclaiming Esther: From Sex Object to Sage," *JBQ* 26 (1998): 3.

¹⁶⁷Bronner, "Reclaiming Esther," 9.

reading of Esther, suggests, “She could just as well be showing her ability to learn and listen. She could even be exercising an ability to recruit good advisors and to recognize savvy political maneuvering when she sees it—skills sadly lacking in the King himself.”¹⁶⁸

In Niditch’s essay, “Esther and the Theme of Woman as a Civilizing Force,” she employs the term “structured empathy” to describe a paradigm structure that focuses on understanding Esther in the context of early Judaism. She seeks to understand “the worldview of Esther’s author, the cultural context of the composition, and the views of women it reflected and helped to shape.”¹⁶⁹ The paradigm of structured empathy seeks to discover how Esther’s original audience would have understood the book to mean. Niditch suggests that for early audiences, Esther purveys the cultural themes of woman as culture bringer and woman as civilizing force. Within these themes, women work to tame the men whom they address, helping them learn to control their power and use it wisely.¹⁷⁰

In Lillian Klein’s book, *Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, Klein argues the theme of male fear of female sexuality and reproductive power unites many of the stories of women in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷¹ She combines feminist approaches with anthropology as she considers the cultural categories of honor and shame. The ideal biblical woman, Klein deduces, is one who is both active (resourceful) and passive (accepting male

¹⁶⁸Bronner, “Reclaiming Esther,” 5.

¹⁶⁹Niditch, “Short Stories,” 201.

¹⁷⁰Niditch, “Short Stories,” 202.

¹⁷¹Lillian Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 6-7.

authority).¹⁷² She examines the Esther narrative through the lens of honor and shame arguing that for women and in particular the Jews to survive in the Diaspora, they had to accept shame. When Vashti refuses to be shamed by appearing before her husband and his revelers, she receives punishment and shame. When Esther willingly shames herself, she receives honor. For Klein, as long as Esther publicly submits to the appearance of feminine shame, social paradigms can be circumvented and prescribed gender roles publicly observed.¹⁷³ Combining feminist and anthropological methods, Klein's work characterizes the interdisciplinary approach ubiquitous in many current works on the book of Esther.

In his book, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, Laniak approaches the text anthropologically discussing the categories of shame and honor before using these paradigms to study the Esther text.¹⁷⁴ He examines scenes of shame and honor and arranges the story into four movements of a pattern of challenge and honor: favor (chapters 1-2), crisis (chapters 3-5), reversal (chapters 6-7), and new status (chapters 8-10). He likewise emphasizes a literary reading of the text with a method traditionally outside of biblical studies.

Published the same year as Laniak's work, Beal examines the categories of gender and ethnicity in the context of the work of Luce Irigaray, Emmanuel Levinas, and H el ene Cixous.¹⁷⁵ He contends identity in the book of Esther is constantly shifting, and

¹⁷²Klein, *Deborah to Esther*, 6-7.

¹⁷³Klein, *Deborah to Esther*, 117.

¹⁷⁴Laniak, *Shame and Honor*.

¹⁷⁵Beal, *Book of Hiding*.

because Esther's identity changes readers cannot place her in one particular social location. Beal's work strives to bring interpretation of the book of Esther into dialogue with postmodern theory. The most interdisciplinary and theory laden of the books surveyed, Beal's work crisscrosses the boundaries of philosophy, literary theory, feminism, and biblical studies and presses the interpretation of the book of Esther toward innovative horizons.

In an altogether different vein, text critical work on the three texts of Esther has enjoyed a surge. A. Kay Fountain in her work, *Literary and Empirical Readings of the Books of Esther*, carefully examines the characterization of the three main characters, Esther, Mordecai, and Haman as the three texts (MT, LXX, and Greek Alpha text) portray them.¹⁷⁶ Fountain explores the effect of certain stylistic features upon the characters such as: the order of events, the pace of each narrative, point of view, and the use of the passive voice. Fountain's work moves in a new direction in the latter portion of her book. Pragmatically, she engages in literal reader response methodology. She reports the results of a survey of the three texts by readers of various genders and religious affiliations (churched or unchurched) and how they rank the characters (Esther, Mordecai, Haman, and God) based on certain traits including: justice, morality, dominance, intellect, and attitude. The results reveal no significant differences between the rankings of male and female readers but churched versus unchurched readers manifest differing perceptions of the characters.¹⁷⁷ While her empirical study poses some

¹⁷⁶A. Kay Fountain, *Literary and Empirical Readings of the Books of Esther* (Studies in Biblical Literature 43; New York: Peter Lang, 2002).

¹⁷⁷Fountain, *Literary and Empirical Readings*, 171-228.

difficulties,¹⁷⁸ her book marks an original contribution and interesting new direction to Esther studies.

In a similar vein, Linda Day focuses on the characterization of Esther in the three extant texts.¹⁷⁹ Her goal is to examine the characterization of Esther within the MT, the LXX, and the Alpha text. She concludes that there are significant differences in the characterization of Esther among the three texts.¹⁸⁰ Day's work, following the lead of Fox's with its concern for characterization, marks a new turn in Esther studies by considering characterization in more than just the MT.

Examining the three texts of Esther has become a popular scholarly project in the last two decades.¹⁸¹ Research on the Esther texts revolves around the question of the literary relationship between the three texts: the Masoretic Text (MT), the LXX version of Esther (sometimes called the B text), and the Alpha-Text or AT—another Greek version of the book of Esther that is preserved in only four medieval manuscripts.¹⁸² Jobes concludes the AT was originally a translation of a Semitic source and not a recension of a Greek parent text. Additionally, she contends the AT represents the first Greek translation of Esther possibly in Ptolemaic Egypt but was later replaced by the

¹⁷⁸David J.A. Clines, review of A.K. Fountain, *Literary and Empirical Readings of the Books of Esther*, *JSOT* 28 (2004): 84.

¹⁷⁹Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*.

¹⁸⁰The differences between the texts affect the portrayal of Esther. For example, the MT portrays a more secular Esther while the AT and LXX offer a more religious one.

¹⁸¹See Jobes, *Alpha-Text*, 195-221 and Serge Frolov, "Two Eunuchs, Two Conspiracies, and One Loyal Jew: The Narrative of Botched Regicide in Esther as Text-and Redaction-Critical Test Case," *VT* 52 (2002): 304-06 for a summary of projects on the three texts of the book of Esther.

¹⁸²Jobes, *Alpha-Text*, 1-3.

LXX translation of Esther that was produced in Jerusalem.¹⁸³ In recreating the history of the AT, Jobes conjectures the AT is the older of the two Greek versions. Its *Vorlage* was similar in many places to the MT. With the influence of the Hasmonean dynasty, the divergence of the Greek AT from the Hebrew warranted a new translation and the LXX was born.¹⁸⁴ Jobes' account of the relationship between the AT, the BT, and the MT is not, however, the consensus.¹⁸⁵

Emmanuel Tov argues the AT is a revision of the LXX amended toward a Hebrew midrash of Esther.¹⁸⁶ He does not think the AT represents an independent translation. In contrast, D.J.A. Clines rejects Tov's theory and contends the AT of Esther is a translation of a Semitic original that was different from the MT. Clines opines the LXX is a translation of an original that was nearly identical in detail with the MT. He explains the similarities between the AT and LXX versions stemming from the similarity of their respective *Vorlagen*.¹⁸⁷ Fox sees a relationship between the *Vorlage* of the AT and the MT but argues the *Vorlage* of the AT was not a direct ancestor of the MT.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³Jobes, *Alpha-Text*, 5.

¹⁸⁴Jobes, *Alpha-Text*, 223-4.

¹⁸⁵See Kristin De Troyer, "Esther in Text-and Literary-Critical Paradise," Pages 31-49 in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (eds. S.W. Crawford and L. Greenspoon; London: T & T Clark, 2003) who argues the AT was the last to develop after the MT and LXX.

¹⁸⁶Emmanuel Tov, "The 'Lucianic' Text of the Canonical and the Apocryphal Sections of Esther: A Rewritten Biblical Book," *Textus* 10 (1982): 17, 19, 21. (Whole articles pages 1-25). "Lucianic" refers to Lucian of Antioch, a Hebrew scholar and student of Greek literature, who before his martyrdom in 312 CE, is credited with producing a large scale *koinē* version of the Hebrew Bible. Charles V. Dorothy, *The Books of Esther* (JSOTSupp 187; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 18.

¹⁸⁷D.J.A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984,) 92.

¹⁸⁸Michael V. Fox, *The Redaction of the Books of Esther* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 97.

While many scholars have undertaken to understand the literary relationship between these three texts, this reader will not. This brief summation reveals the disagreement and complexity in recreating the redaction history and literary relationship of the texts. Studies concerned with examining the relationship between the three texts of Esther remain a popular avenue in Esther studies.¹⁸⁹ Connected to this project, a further avenue of study in this same vein would compare the role of banquet scenes in the three texts: AT, MT, and LXX and consider how the ideology changes as the details of the banquet scenes within the versions vary.

This survey reveals a variety of interests and work that span the broad field of Hebrew Bible studies. Unifying elements of these varied projects include the movement away from monologizing the interpretation of a text, recognition of the polyphony of voices, and the inherent value of this multiplicity. For those employing Bakhtin, there is no final reading or interpretation for meaning reveals itself in diversity. Rather, many embrace the literary artistry and explore the complex relationships between authors, readers, and texts when creating meaning. Bakhtin's emphases on polyphony and dialogism fit well within postmodern frameworks of reading biblical texts. This project situates itself within the parameters of postmodern work in Bakhtinian and Esther studies.

Summary: But Not the Last Word

This chapter outlines three Bakhtinian concepts: dialogism, chronotope, and carnival. These concepts intersect and force readers to reframe questions about the relationship between readers and texts and how meaning is created. Bakhtinian readings

¹⁸⁹See also Harald Martin Wahl, "Das Buch Esther Als Methodisches Problem und Hermeneutische Herausforderung: Eine Skizze," *BibInt* 9 (2001): 25-40.

emphasize dialogue, acknowledge the spatio-temporal matrix of language and genres, and rejoice in reversals. Bakhtin's program of reading crosses the boundaries of historical and literary criticism asking readers to contend with contextual and textual concerns. His categories and epistemological framework resist simplification.

Likewise, close readings of the Esther text reveal multiple levels of meaning and lacuna that are not easily filled in, and readers continue to construct meaning from a text that refuses simplification or a monologic voice. The Esther scroll's placement with the canon of the Hebrew Bible necessarily implies its dialogic relation to other texts as the narrative creates heteroglossia and introduces a variety of paradigms for being Jewish in the Diaspora. The book of Esther has been a threat to readers seeking a monologic reading and even center to the Hebrew Bible of which Esther does not neatly fit. In the next chapter, this work examines banquet scenes as a social phenomenon in the ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible. The occurrence of banquet scenes as a social motif and literary function is investigated.

CHAPTER TWO

Banquets in the Ancient Near East

Banquets

In order to more fully consider the banquet scenes in the book of Esther in Bakhtinian categories, we should ruminate the context of banquet scenes in the ancient world. Because Bakhtin's notion of dialogism involves context, banquet scenes as cultural phenomena will be explored. Anthropological studies of banquet scenes in the ancient Near East reveal social worlds ripe with murder, mayhem, and audacious behavior¹ Banquets are social events and thus disclose significant details about the cultural milieu and financial standing of participants. Different from daily dining, banquet scenes offer readers a glimpse into the social milieu of the powerful and economic elite of the ancient world. This chapter will examine the social context of banquet scenes in the ancient Near East, divine banquets, and additional biblical references to royal banquet scenes apart from those in the book of Esther. Because scholars know more about Hellenistic, Roman, and early Christian banquet scenes, this work chooses to examine briefly these later banquet customs as they illuminate conventions that may have been traditions among participants in ancient Near Eastern

¹Oswyn Murray and Manuela Tecusan, eds., *In Vino Veritas* (Oxford: Alden, 1995); Louis Grivetti, "Wine: The Food with Two Faces," in *The Origins and Ancient History of Wine* (eds. Patrick McGovern, Stuart Fleming, and Solomon Katz; Luxembourg: Gordon & Breach, 1995), 9-22; Piotr Michalowski, "The Drinking Gods: Alcohol in Mesopotamian Ritual and Mythology," in *Drinking in Ancient Societies* (ed. Lucio Milano; Padova: Sargon, 1994), 29-44.

banquets.² This consideration elucidates the sociological function of banquets and ubiquitous customs among banqueters, whether they be gods or mere mortals.

The consumption of alcohol is a constitutive feature of banquets. The Hebrew term for banquet, מִשְׁתֵּה, confirms this connection as it comes from the root שָׁתַה “to drink.” Drinking at banquets, Carey Ann Walsh argues, reinforces particular social boundaries of inclusion and exclusion.³ Sometimes, participants benefit from increased intimacy and trust engendered by the consumption of alcohol but at the same time they also face an increased risk of betrayal. Intoxication loosens inhibitions, and during feasts revelers navigate complex social customs and hierarchies.

Wine was a luxury only the wealthy could afford, and they imported the best brands.⁴ Those with less means imbibed on wine from the hills northwest of Assyria where inferior wines grew. Common folks satiated themselves with date wine and to a lesser extent beer.⁵ In ancient Israel, wine was a common beverage and a regular part of the diet.⁶

Regarding specific banquet customs, Shimoff provides an inclusive description of Greek banquet conventions:

²Indeed, some scholars place the composition of the book of Esther in the Hellenistic era rather than the Persian one. Berg, *Book of Esther*, (proskynesis).

³Carey Ann Walsh, “Under the Influence: Trust and Risk in Biblical Family Drinking,” *JSOT* 90 (2000): 17.

⁴See A.T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 79, for reference to Nebuchadnezzar’s “wine card.”

⁵See Xenophon. *Anab.* II. 3.14; I.5.10.

⁶Jack Sasson, “The Blood of Grapes: Viticulture and Intoxication in the Hebrew Bible,” in *Drinking in Ancient Societies* (ed. Lucio Milano; Padova: Sargon, 1994), 399-400.

. . . couches and tables were positioned around the perimeter of the room. There was also an altar or hearth, recalling an earlier era when animals would have been sacrificed to the gods. All dining couches were positioned on the same level, each guest adjacent to his fellow diner.

The guests, male citizens who were previously acquainted, were usually seated reclining in pairs or in groups of three; the most honored were positioned closest to the host. Wreaths, incense, and perfume were distributed to the guests.

The banquet was formalized and consisted of two parts; the *deipnon* (for eating) and the *potos* (for drinking). Water poured over the guest's hands signaled the beginning of the meal, which consisted of meat, bread and wine, fish, and a dessert of nuts, cake and fruit. . .

Entertainment was provided by the guests who amused each other by posing riddles, by playing *kottabos* (a drinking game), engaging in sex, conversing, and engaging in philosophical discussions; alternatively, the guests were entertained by dancers and musicians.⁷

Hellenistic banquets continue many of the same traditions of Greek banquets but the entertainment becomes more flamboyant. Hellenistic banquets provided an opportunity for hosts to insult certain guests, and clients often faced such abuse at the hands of their patrons.⁸ The victim might be assigned a low-status seating arrangement among the guests, be served a smaller portion and poorer quality of food, and experience disrespect from the host's servants who had been instructed to be insolent.⁹ Shimoff explores Greek and Hellenistic banquet traditions within the context of Second Temple Judaism

⁷Sandra Shimoff, "Banquets: The Limits of Hellenization," *JSJ* 27 (1996), 441-2. See also F. Lissarrague, *The Aesthetics of the Greek Banquet* (trans. A. Szegedy-Maszak; Princeton: Princeton University, 1982), 19-22; D. Tolles, *The Banquet Libations of the Greeks* (Ann Arbor: Edwards, 1943), 18-20; R. MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations* (New Haven: Yale University, 1974), 111-12.

⁸Shimoff, "Banquets," 443; See also Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did* (New York: Oxford University, 1988), 319.

⁹Shimoff, "Banquets," 443.

exploring the response of the rabbis to affluent Jews in Israel who adopted many of the Greco-Roman banquet practices.

Royal Banquets

Royal banquets furcate into two strands: public and private. Private banquets include celebrations where the king invites only certain guests. Examples include the royal birthday or when hosting important dignitaries. Public banquets, as the name suggests, are public affairs where all citizens are invited to participate and include the celebration of public holidays such as the New Year's Festival.

Private Banquets

During a private, royal banquet, the king invites only certain guests to dine at the royal palace with him. The number of invitees, however, can indeed be large. Even those at a private banquet do not feast with the king, and often the majority eats outside. Furthermore, Persian kings often dine alone in a separate room with a curtain separating them from their guests. The king is thus able to view his guests through the curtain while remaining unseen himself.¹⁰ During such wine banquets, a eunuch summons select nobles to continue drinking and celebrating in the king's presence.¹¹ Only on public holidays is everyone allowed to dine in the great hall with the king.¹²

¹⁰Olmstead, *History*, 183.

¹¹Olmstead, *History*, 183. Readers must exercise cautious in accepting all of Olmstead's claims about Persian banquets scenes. He occasionally supports his claims using only biblical texts as evidence.

¹²Olmstead, *History*, 183.

In addition to written records and fragments, inscriptions and reliefs from Darius' buildings at Persepolis (512-494 B.C.E.) describe lavish royal banquets and feasts.¹³ The reliefs outside the Banquet Hall depict servants carrying drinks and delicacies to guests enjoying a feast with the king. One servant lugs a lively kid under his arm with its forefeet held tightly to quiet its protests while another clutches a lamb under the arm.¹⁴ Another servant bears a wineskin on his shoulder while the rarer drinks are transported in open bowls. The scene even depicts the method by which the servants keep food warm.¹⁵ Classical sources reveal the Persians' predilection for drinking wine from opulent vessels (Herodotus 1.126, 9.80; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.8.10; Strabo 15.3.20).¹⁶ Wine and intoxication occur as common features of these banquets and ancient documents even describe whose duty it was to put the king to bed. One text portrays the king reclined on a couch with golden legs:

A high court official, the eunuch cupbearer, presented the royal beverage in a golden cup after it had been proved safe by the official taster. While the nobles drank deep of the more common wines, their master enjoyed the vintage produced from the grapes of Chalybon on the sunny slopes above Damascus. After the banquet, the royal chamberlain was honored with the duty of putting his inebriated master to bed.¹⁷

During dinner, the king's concubines entertain him by singing and playing the lyre. The royal court slaughters thousands of animals everyday, but Olmstead maintains

¹³Olmstead, *History*, 178.

¹⁴Olmstead, *History*, 182.

¹⁵See Olmstead, *History*, 182.

¹⁶*Edwin Yamauchi, Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 229.

¹⁷Olmstead, *History*, 183.

the amount is not extravagant because the majority went to pay the guard of Immortals and others employed in the royal courtyard.¹⁸

According to Olmstead, the greatest of these royal banquets of wine is the royal birthday when “the king anointed his head and presented gifts to his fellow-Persians; on such occasions, it is said, fifteen thousand might be his guests at a cost of four hundred talents.”¹⁹ Herodotus describes one such royal birthday party, which contains affinities with banquet scenes in the book of Esther. Interestingly, the royal birthday party provides the only occasion all year in which the Persian king washes his hair (Herodotus, *Hist.* IX.110). As depicted by Herodotus, Xerxes’ wife Amestris asks the king for a specific present; she wants Artaynta, the wife of Xerxes’ brother Masistes. Xerxes, constrained by “the law of the feast,” finally relents and grants Amestris her request (Herodotus, *Hist.* IX. 111).²⁰ Herodotus further references a custom of the wine banquet where any request made of the king cannot be denied (Herodotus, *Hist.* IX. 111). He does not elaborate on this wine banquet custom of granting requests except to insinuate the king cannot refuse Amestris because of this law of the feast. During Esther’s two banquets, Ahasuerus generously offers her anything up to half the kingdom similar to Xerxes’ offer to Amestris.

¹⁸Olmstead, *History*, 183. The list of animals includes: horses, camels, oxen, asses deer, Arabian ostriches, geese and cocks. Guests could bring home whatever portions they did not consume. Whatever portions were leftover from the meal went to slaves and attendants.

¹⁹Michael Heltzer, “A Propos des Banquets des Rois Achéménides et du Retour D’Exil sous Zorobabel,” *RB* 86 (1979): 103.

²⁰Amestris requests Masistes be given to her because of the sexual relationship between Masistes and Xerxes. The king makes Masistes an oath promising he will give her whatever she desires and she boldly requests the multi-colored robe Amestris had made with her own hands for Xerxes. The king vainly attempts to pacify her with cities, heaps of gold, and an army of her own, but Masistes wants nothing other than the robe Amestris has made for Xerxes. This scene thus establishes the context for Amestris’ request for Masistes. See Herodotus, *Hist.* IX. 109.

In another banquet scene in the 4th century B.C.E., Xenophon briefly describes the antics of Astyanax of Miletus when invited to dine with a satrap of Artaxerxes, Ariobarzanes. Astyanax, a three time Olympic victor, banquets with Ariobarzanes and to fulfill a boast eats all the food prepared for the banquet guests (Xenophon, *Hell.vii.1.27, 33*). Readers receive no more detail and Xenophon does not render judgment against Astyanax other than to highlight his audacious behavior.

Before the Persian Empire, the kings and elite of Assyria and Babylon participated in similar banquet scenes. A famous Assyrian relief from the 7th century B.C.E. depicts Ashurbanipal and the queen enjoying refreshments in a garden. The king reclines on a couch, a cup in his hand, with the queen sitting in a chair facing him and a cup in her hand. Servants carry trays of food and a harpist plays music in the background. One object, however, disrupts this tranquil banquet scene—a severed human head hanging from a tree. Ashurbanipal (668-627) hunted down an Elamite usurper named Teumman when he tried to seize power. After finding Teumman, Ashurbanipal had his “head cut off, slashed it, spat on it, and had it hung as a gruesome trophy on a tree even while he and the queen enjoyed a banquet.”²¹ As this relief reveals, graphic violence and brazen behavior permeate banquet scenes in the ancient Near East.

In a similar gruesome example of violence during a feast, Herodotus offers sparse details about a Median leader Cyaxares who overthrows the Scythians after twenty eight years of paying tribute. He describes how Cyaxares invites the leaders to a banquet and

²¹André Parrot, *The Arts of Assyria* (trans. Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons; New York: Golden Press, 1961), 51-52; see also Yamauchi, *Persia*, 229.

after plying them with wine, massacres the group resulting in the recovery of the Median Empire (Herodotus, *Hist.* I.106).

These examples suggest several significant features of the social milieu of royal banquets. While it was an honor to be invited to a private banquet with the king, one's attendance at this banquet did not guarantee the participant would actually feast in the king's presence. Indeed, only select few dined or drank in the presence of the king. These events were attended primarily by the social elite and military leaders and frequently included audacious and violent behaviors. Seating arrangement constituted an important social indicator—the closer one sat to the host the more honor one enjoyed. Features of the private royal banquet include sumptuous feasts, excessive drinking, and court intrigue. Fortunes rise and fall, political alliances waver, and abstemious behavior is abandoned. Banquets provide an opportunity for social upheaval and change.

Public Banquets

Public banquets offered a similar opportunity for raucous behavior. At these occasions, however, all levels of society were welcome to participate—not just the social and military elite. Occasionally, these feasts included temporary societal shifts where a substitute king assumed the throne and social hierarchies suspended.

An Assyrian wine list excavated at Nimrud during the 1957-1963 campaign contains an administrative document detailing the distribution of wine at an annual ceremonial feast, which occurred at the beginning of the Assyrian calendar year.²² This annual feast may be connected with the yearly gathering of the army.

²²“An Assyrian Wine List,” translated by K. Lawson Younger, Jr. (*COS* 3.127.278-9). A banquet scene of Ashurnasirpal II details a festive celebration in conjunction with the opening of the royal palace.

The New Year's Festival represents a major public feast by which all citizens were encouraged to engage in riotous behavior. One interesting feature of some New Year's celebrations includes the practice of adopting a substitute king. This mock king functions to ward off potential illness during the upcoming year or fulfill ill fated omens prognosticated by the diviners, which place the king in danger, by temporarily assuming the throne.²³ Concerning the role of substitute kings among the Assyrians, A. Leo Oppenheim opines,

His person [the king] was carefully protected from disease and especially from the evil influence of magic because his well-being was considered essential for that of the country. For this reason, Assyrian kings, as we know from the letters in their archives, were surrounded by a host of diviners and physicians. All ominous signs were observed and interpreted with regard to their bearing on the royal person. Complex rituals existed to ward off evil signs, and at least one instance is known in Assyria where a fatal prediction was counter-acted by the stratagem of making another person king (called *šar pūhi*, 'substitute king') for one hundred days and then killing and duly burying him so that the omen should be fulfilled but fate cheated and the true king kept alive.²⁴

G. Van der Leeuw describes an Assyrian custom whereby a substitute king enjoys the royal lifestyle before his death.

In an Assyrian pantomime there occurs a dialogue between the mock king and his lord; the pseudo-king now gives orders to his master; he desires to eat, drink, love a woman, etc. Everything is granted to him; but at the end of the story his neck is broken and he is thrown into the river; thereby he assumes the place of the god Bel, who also dies to rise again. Probably the king himself had to die originally as the substitute for the god, that is

The text describes an opulent feast. "The Banquet of Ashurnasirpal II," translated by A. Leo Oppenheim (ANET 558-60).

²³Polish, "Aspects of Esther," 91-95.

²⁴A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1964), 100.

for the country's power; and then the two 'substitutes' gradually fused into a single form.²⁵

The historian Plutarch recounts a similar occurrence during Alexander's stopover in Babylon.

. . . and one day after he had undressed himself to be anointed, and was playing at ball, just as they were going to bring his clothes again, the young men who played with him perceived a man clad in the king's robes with a diadem upon his head, sitting silently upon his throne. They asked him who he was, to which he gave no answer a good while till at last coming to himself, he told them his name was Dionysius, that he was of Messenia, that for some crime of which he was accused he was brought thither from the seaside, and he had been kept long in prison, that Serapis appeared to him, had freed him from his chains, conducted him to that place, and commanded him to put on the king's robe and diadem, and to sit where they found him, and to say nothing. Alexander, when he heard this, by the direction of his soothsayers, put the fellow to death, but he lost his spirits, and grew diffident on the protection and assistance of the gods, and suspicious of his friends.²⁶

During the Babylonian New Year's *akitu* festival not only does a substitute king assume the throne but societal hierarchies overturn.²⁷ Eliade describes the *akitu* festival and its emphasis on reversals.

. . . The first act of the ceremony represents the domination of Tiamat and thus marks a regression into the mythical period before the Creation; all forms are supposed to be confounded in the marine abyss of the beginning, the *apsu* Enthronement of a 'carnival king,' 'humiliation' of the real sovereign, overturning of the entire social order (according to Berossus, the slaves became masters, and so on) every feature suggests universal confusion, the abolition of order and hierarchy, 'orgy,' chaos. We witness, one might say, a 'deluge' that annihilates all humanity in order to prepare the way for a new and regenerated human species.²⁸

²⁵G. Van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 124-25.

²⁶Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans* (trans. John Dryden; rev. Arthur Hugh Clough; New York: The Modern Library), 852.

²⁷Polish, "Aspects of Esther," 97-9.

²⁸Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 54-5.

During the Babylonian festival of Sacae, significant reversals in social hierarchies occur with the roles between masters and slaves transposed. Frazer describes a scene where

. . . [a man] was arrayed in the king's attire and suffered to play the despot, to use the king's concubines, and to give himself up to feasting and debauchery without restraint only however to in the end be strip [sic] of his borrowed finery, scourged, and hanged.²⁹

Public banquets vary from culture to culture but contain similar examples of drunken debauchery and festive merrymaking. Certain public banquets encourage role reversals where substitute kings temporarily reign and even masters and slaves reverse social positions.

In the book of Esther, all the banquets except the final two occur within the confines of the palace. In ancient Persia, however, the king often attends royal banquets given in his honor while traveling among his subjects. Banquets represent a universal practice among Persians as a means of honoring their king.

Josef Wiesehöfer in his work, *Ancient Persia*, describes the travel of Persia kings from various regions of the empire to others. He connects their travel to the climate. Cyrus, for example, journeys through his empire so that he can enjoy the warmth and coolness of perpetual springtime.³⁰ As the kings travel and meet their subjects, the Persians present them with gifts and in larger towns and cities they entertain the king and his retinue. These banquets were sometimes a financial burden on the communities but considered a duty of the citizens. According to Wiesehöfer, banquets served as occasions for the king to redistribute the goods he receives, although the recipients of the king's

²⁹James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: MacMillan, 3rd edn, 1951), 355.

³⁰Josef Wiesehöfer, *Ancient Persia* (trans. A. Azodi; London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996), 38.

gifts were typically fellow aristocratic banqueters or his soldiers.³¹ The extravagance of banquets is apparent in the following description.

And so, Heracleides continues, the ‘king’s dinner’, as it is called, will appear prodigal to one who merely hears about it, but when one examines it carefully it will be found to have been got up with economy and even with parsimony; and the same is true of the dinners among other Persians in high station. For one thousand animals are slaughtered daily for the king; these comprise horses, camels, oxen, asses, deer, and most of the smaller animals; many birds are also consumed, including Arabian ostriches- and the creature is large- geese and cocks. And of all these only moderate portions are served to each of the king’s guests, and each of them may carry home whatever he leaves untouched at the meal. But the greater part of these meats and other foods are taken out into the courtyard for the body-guard and the light-armed troopers maintained by the king.³²

This description implies the extravagance and great expense required to host a banquet for the king.

After the death of Alexander the Great, the Persian satrap Peucestas prepares a sacrificial feast in Persepolis. Diodorus describes the banquet as follows:

. . . after gathering from almost the whole of Persia a multitude of sacrificial animals and whatever else was needed for festivities and religious gatherings, he [Peucestas] gave a feast to the army. With the company of those participating he filled four circles, one within the other, with the largest circle inclosing the others. The circuit of the outer ring was of ten stades, and in it were the Macedonian Silver Shields and those of the Companions who had fought under Alexander; the circuit of the next was of four stades and its area was filled with reclining men-the commanders of lower rank, the friends and generals who were unassigned, and the cavalry; lastly in the inner circle with a perimeter of two stades each of the generals and hipparchs and also each of the Persians who was most highly honoured occupied his own couch. In the middle of these were altars for the gods and for Alexander and Philip.³³

³¹ Wiesehöfer, *Ancient*, 40.

³² Wiesehöfer, *Ancient*, 40.

³³ Wiesehöfer, *Ancient*, 107.

In his description readers see the careful planning and coordination of the banquet. Rank and social hierarchy are carefully considered, and the entire feast exhibits strict hierarchical patterns and shapes.

Dennis Smith in his work on banquets in the early Christian church proposes a new model for understanding Christian banquets—one which sees banquets deriving from a common tradition rather than diverse forms of meals.³⁴ Thus for Smith, all meals including special usage meals originate from the same common banquet tradition and banquet ideology. In particular, two features of banquets carry symbolic overtones: the custom of reclining and the custom of ranking places at the table.³⁵ Only free citizens could recline at the table with women, children, and slaves excluded. Those reclining were further delineating by table arrangement with honored guests placed in certain spots at the table.³⁶

Two other banquet features include festive joy and banquet entertainment. According to Smith, banquets symbolize a time of “good cheer” and “pleasure” and these principles governed the meal and were essential components of the banquet meal.³⁷ Wine, associated with the gods, contributed to the communal experience of the banquet. The quality of a banquet could be judged, according to Smith, on its ability to produce festive

³⁴Dennis E. Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 2-3. The old model separated meals including: everyday meals, symposia, funerary banquets, sacrificial meals, mystery meals, everyday Jewish meals, Jewish festival meals, Christian Agapē, Christian Eucharist. The new model views these distinct feasts as united by a common banquet tradition. While Smith works within the context of Greco-Roman and early Christian banquet traditions, his work illustrates several ubiquitous cultural codes related to banquet scenes.

³⁵Smith, *Symposium*, 10-11.

³⁶Smith, *Symposium*, 11.

³⁷Smith, *Symposium*, 12

joy.³⁸ Another feature of ancient banquets is the appearance of banquet entertainment. The entertainment consisted of party games, dramatic presentations, music, and philosophical conversation. According to Smith, no banquet was complete without some form of entertainment.³⁹ He summarizes the social significance of banquets by averring, “The banquet was a single social institution that pervaded the culture as a whole.”⁴⁰

Divine Banquets

Ancient texts also depict divine banquet scenes. Pope argues that the occurrence of banquets among the gods suggests an ancient tradition.⁴¹ Michalowski cites the banquet as an occasion for humans and the gods to interact.⁴² In Mesopotamian literature, the consumption of alcohol at religious festivals and secular occasions provides a meeting place for the mortal to interact with the immortal. Kings, prophets, and royal consorts enjoy alcohol with deities. As royal banquets reveal social strata and customs, divine banquets likewise illustrate social codes. Based on one’s seating assignment, readers ascertain social codes and rank of the gods.

A text recovered at Ugarit, RS 24.258, tells of a feast hosted by the father of the gods El. The gods eat and drink until they are inebriated, but El consumes to the point of

³⁸Smith, *Symposium*, 12.

³⁹Smith, *Symposium*, 12.

⁴⁰Smith, *Symposium*, 12.

⁴¹Marvin Pope, “A Divine Banquet at Ugarit,” in *The Use of the Old Testament in the New and Other Essays* (ed. James Efrid; Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), 174.

⁴²Piotr Michalowski, “The Drinking Gods: Alcohol in Mesopotamian Ritual and Mythology,” in *Drinking in Ancient Societies* (ed. Lucio Milano; Padova: Sargon, (1994), 27-44.

delirium whereby an apparition with horns and a tail confronts him and strikes him with diarrhea and enuresis. The text concludes by suggesting medication to relieve the symptoms brought on by alcoholic excess.⁴³

El offered game in his house. . .
The gods ate and drank,
Drank wine till sated,
Must till inebriated⁴⁴

Pope reflects on the oddity of the gods' inebriation, and while he argues the gods of Ugarit eat and drink at every opportunity in keeping with ancient Near Eastern hospitality, they rarely consume to the point of inebriation.⁴⁵ This text portrays the supreme god consuming alcohol in excess and details the subsequent embarrassing repercussions of his actions.

Another Ugaritic text involves Baal expressing anger at the obscene conduct of a female servant during a divine banquet. The text proclaims:

Two banquets Baal hates,
Three the Cloud Rider:
A banquet of shame,
A banquet of baseness,
And a banquet of maidservants' lewdness;
For therein shame is seen,
And therein is maidservants' lewdness.⁴⁶

⁴³Pope, "Divine Banquet," 172. See also Isa 28:7-8, which details ancient Israel's priests drinking to excess and the sanctuary covered in filth.

⁴⁴Pope, "Divine Banquet," 172.

⁴⁵Pope, "Divine Banquet," 178.

⁴⁶See Pope, "Divine Banquet," 173-4.

The text does not specify the particular conduct of the female servers, which infuriates Baal. Their actions, however, transgress a boundary and require chastisement and restraint. A further Ugaritic text describes the gods imbibing and feasting:

The gods ate and drank
Supplied were the breast suckers,
With sharp knife a cutlet of fatling.
They drank from the jars wine,
From cups of gold blood of the vine.⁴⁷

Seating arrangements for the deities appear in texts from both Ugarit and Sumer as an element of the divine banquet topos. The description of seating arrangements connotes social rank and hierarchy even among the gods. Seating proximity to the supreme god infers honor on the inferior god or banquet guest. The following translation comes from an Ugaritic text:

El sits next to Athtart,
El the Judge next to Hadd the Shepherd (RS 24.252).⁴⁸

A subsequent text from Ugarit details the placement of gods in relation to each other during a banquet occurs. In this example, Kothar appears before the gods and is seated in relation to Baal:

A chair is readied and he is seated
At the right hand of Alyan Baal,
Until the gods have eaten and drunk (CTA 4)⁴⁹

⁴⁷A. Herdner, *Corpus des Tablettes en Cuneiformes Alphabetiques: Decouvertes a Ras Shamra-Ugarit de 1929 a 1939* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1963), CTCA, 4 III 40-45, VVI 55-59; see Pope, "Divine Banquet," 174, 176.

⁴⁸See also A.J. Ferrara and S.B. Parker, "Seating Arrangements at Divine Banquets," *UF* 4 (1972): 37-39.

⁴⁹See George D. Young, *Concordance of Ugaritic* (Roma: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1956).

Two Sumerian temple hymns also contain the banquet topos of divine seating arrangements. The first one, Gudea Cylinder B, describes the installation of Ningirsu of Lagash in the temple Gudea constructs for him. Gudea prepares a banquet in honor of Ningirsu and invites the gods An, Enlil, and Ninmah.⁵⁰

For Ningirsu he (Gudea) prepared a fine banquet.
An sat at the 'big side.'
Next to An was Enlil,
Next to Enlil
was Ninmah.

The second hymn records the construction of a temple to Enlil. Enki tells his father of the completed project and prepares a large feast for him and invites Enlil, An, Nintu, and the Anunna.

In the shrine Nippur, Enki
prepared a banquet for his father Enlil.
An sat at the 'place of honour.'
Enlil was next to An.
Nintu sat at the 'big side' (of the table)
The Anunna seat themselves at their places.⁵¹

The social customs of the gods participating in banquet scenes is akin to the cultural milieu of royal banquets. Seating arrangements reveal social rank. Social status and rank, outrageous behaviors, and the potential for political advancement or failure are constitutive features of both divine and royal banquets.

Banquets in the Hebrew Bible

In the Hebrew Bible, royal banquet scenes appear in the following contexts: 1 Sam 25, 2 Sam 11, 2 Sam 13, 1 Kgs 16, 1 Kgs 20, and Dan 5. With the exception of the

⁵⁰Ferrara and Parker, "Seating Arrangements," 38.

⁵¹Ferrara and Parker, "Seating Arrangements," 39.

example in Dan 5,⁵² all the instances occur in the Deuteronomistic History and display the foibles of human kingship. These scenes depict similar social codes including rank and hierarchy and occasions for debauchery, foolhardy behavior, and social upheaval. Levenson avers intoxication and banquet scenes foreshadow doom.⁵³ While his assessment may work in some occurrences, it seems to simplistic to characterize all instances of intoxication in the Hebrew Bible. Banquet scenes reveal complex social and ideological relationships.

In 1 Sam. 25, the narrator tells readers the near disastrous encounter between David and Nabal. David requests provisions from Nabal and reminds him of the safety of his herds despite David's proximity to them. Although David's messengers arrive under a veil of friendship, their message is not one of peace. Their greeting functions as a warning and demand for protection money.⁵⁴

This implicit threat has no affect, and Nabal responds rudely and sneers at David's messengers' request calling them outlaws (1 Sam. 25:11). Nabal continues participating in his festivities with no fear of danger or retribution. Abigail, the epitome of a faithful and sensible wife,⁵⁵ rushes out to meet David immediately after she hears of her husband's behavior and flatters David into sparing Nabal and his men. Brueggemann suggests that through Abigail's eloquent words, "David recognizes for the first time how

⁵²See page 1 footnote 2 for a comprehensive list of banquets in the Hebrew Bible.

⁵³Levenson, *Esther*, 47.

⁵⁴Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Int; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), 176.

⁵⁵Adele Berlin, "Characterization in Biblical Narrative: David's wives" in *Beyond Form Criticism* (Paul R. House, ed; Winona Lake, Ind : Eisenbrauns, 1992), 219-33.

his vengefulness would have put his own future at risk . . . Had it not been for Abigail, David would have done in both Nabal and himself.”⁵⁶

Yet, when Abigail returns home from saving her husband’s life and securing their fortune, she finds her husband Nabal has thrown a party and is “celebrating like a king” (1 Sam. 25:36). The irony is that Nabal has just refused Israel’s next king nourishment and has instead exalted himself. The next morning when Nabal sobers and hears his wife’s tale, he has a stroke and remains paralyzed for 10 days before the Lord strikes him and he dies (1 Sam 25:37). As Brueggemann explains, “The narrator, Yahweh, David, and Abigail (v.26) are all agreed that Nabal should receive a deadly retaliation for acting against David.”⁵⁷ What remains to be seen at the moment when Abigail meets David is who shall perform the vindication. The Deuteronomist does not allow David to avenge Nabal but instead Yahweh punishes him. Brueggemann avers, “The story turns on the tension between David’s determination for vengeance and Abigail’s subtle persuasiveness in preventing David from being his own agent of revenge.”⁵⁸

In this pericope, readers encounter a character similar to Ahasuerus in several respects—indolent and quick tempered. Unlike Nabal, however, Ahasuerus never endures divine punishment. The narrator pokes fun at his erratic and ill advised leadership, but the book of Esther begins and ends with him in power. Esther and Mordecai in fact ensure his continued reign with their foiled assassination plot.

⁵⁶Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 179-180.

⁵⁷Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 181.

⁵⁸Brueggemann, *Samuel*, 181.

Later in the Deuteronomistic History, David hosts a banquet. In 2 Samuel 11, after David conjugates with Bathsheba and learns of her pregnancy, he summons Uriah to depart from the battlefield in order to hide his actions. Despite the banquet and ensuing intoxication, Uriah will not venture home while, “The ark as well as Israel and Judah are dwelling in temporary shelters while my lord Joab and my lord’s servants are camping in the open field. How can I go to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife?” (2 Samuel 11:11). David resorts to subterfuge and encourages Uriah to imbibe until intoxicated hoping he will eventually go home. Uriah, although intoxicated, refuses to go home and sleeps in the gate of the palace (2 Sam 11:13). A. A. Anderson notes, “Clearly David’s real motive was to get the intoxicated Uriah into Bathsheba’s bed; paradoxically it might have saved Uriah’s life.”⁵⁹ David’s banquet does not produce the desired result, and he subsequently orders Uriah’s death. Following Levenson’s intoxication leads to doom paradigm, readers should not be surprised to learn of Uriah’s demise. Levenson’s paradigm does not account for the narrative intricacies between the characters, which the narrator makes known during the banquets.

The next banquet scene in the Deuteronomistic History occurs in 2 Sam 13. After Amnon rapes Tamar, Absalom vows revenge upon Amnon and eventually lures his half brother to a banquet. Absalom orders his men to murder Amnon as soon as he gets drunk, and the events unfold just as Absalom plans. Amnon is killed when he is merry with wine. This banquet scene reveals much about royal banquets and intoxication.

In verses 23 and 24, readers learn that royal celebrations were not uncommon practices. Absalom invites his father, the king’s servants, and all of the king’s sons to a

⁵⁹A.A. Anderson, *2 Samuel* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 155.

feast celebrating the sheep shearing. This agricultural celebration must have seemed a likely time to entice Amnon into drunkenness and murder him. Although Absalom has an ulterior motive, the activity of celebration arouses no one's suspicions. Apparently, royal banquet scenes were familiar during harvest and agricultural seasons. While the feast itself is not unique, the cost involved in hosting banquets must have been enormous, because David refuses to attend claiming, "if we all came, we would be too much of a burden on you" (2 Sam. 13:25). If the financial burden for hosting a party is felt even by a king's son, then there must have been a great deal of food and drink to impose such a cost. The Persian sources describing the opulent royal banquets confirm the flagrant expense. Banquets are a luxury enjoyed by the wealthy and social elite, but they too become entangled in the social web woven during feasts.

The next example details a banquet scene between the king of the northern tribes and the social elite when Zimri murders King Elah of Israel. 1 Kings 16 begins with the prophet Jehu delivering a message to King Baasha of Israel warning that, "I [the Lord] will destroy you and your family, just as I destroyed the descendants of Jeroboam son of Nebat. Those of your family who die in the city will be eaten by dogs, and those who die in the field will be eaten by vultures" (1 Kgs 16:3-4). When King Baasha of Israel dies, his son Elah becomes king and the prophecy is fulfilled. Richard Nelson in his commentary notes that, "sin and apostasy are the recurring themes of this story resulting inevitably in deserved punishment."⁶⁰ Elah's downfall transpires during a banquet while he is drinking (1 Kgs 16:8-10). Verses nine and ten chronicle Elah's drinking at the home of Arza, the supervisor of the palace. "One day in Tirazah, Elah was getting drunk

⁶⁰Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (Int; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), 98.

at the home of Arza, the supervisor of the palace. Zimri walked in and struck him down and killed him” (1 Kgs 16:9-10). Social upheaval and reversals again occur during a royal banquet.

In 1 Kings 20, YHWH assists King Ahab of Israel in defeating King Ben-Hadad of Aram by taking advantage of intoxicated individuals. Ben-Hadad mobilizes 32 allied kings in an effort to besiege Samaria and when negotiations for a pay off falter, Ben-Hadad threatens to destroy even the dust of Samaria. As King Ahab prepares for a vastly outnumbered battle, Ben-Hadad and the other kings relax. The message to prepare for war reaches King Ben-Hadad when he “and the other kings were drinking in their tents” (1 Kgs 20:12). The king of Aram enjoys a feast with his military leaders and illustrates the common topos of kings and military commanders feasting together. King Ben-Hadad is twice described as drunk both in 1 Kings 20:12 and 16. DeVries’ condemns Ben-Hadad as “already scandalously drunk at noon.”⁶¹ The feast proves deadly and YHWH defeats Ben-Hadad. Social upheaval lingers in the context of a banquet.

The closest analogous scene to Ahasuerus’ extravagant banquet⁶² occurs in the book of Daniel. In chapter five, King Balshazzar of Babylon gives, “a great feast for a thousand of his nobles and drank wine with them” (Dan 5:1). The presence of women at the banquet introduces an exotic element to the story since customs varied as to whether they were typically invited.⁶³ While Balshazzar drinks wine, he orders the gold and silver cups, which Nebuchadnezzar took from the Temple when Jerusalem was sacked, to be

⁶¹Simon J. DeVries, *1 Kings* (WBC; Waco: Word Books, 1985), 249.

⁶²In terms of size, location, purpose, and timeframe.

⁶³John E. Goldingay, *Daniel* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1989), 108.

brought into the party so that he and the guests can drink out of them. This sacrilegious event engenders disastrous results for the king. A mysterious hand appears scribbling on the wall. None of the Babylonian diviners are able to interpret the message until Daniel arrives and reveals the impending royal coup.

In the presence of a large crowd, the king recklessly requests the religious vessels from the temple in Jerusalem. Towner notes, “The combination of drinking and praising sounds like a cultic act or libation.”⁶⁴ Towner relates an analogous act performed by another egocentric monarch. He speculates regarding Balshazzar’s motivation in ordering the sacrilegious act:

Perhaps it was merely the wild whim of a mad monarch, comparable to the surprising behavior reported of Antiochus IV Epiphanes who ‘used to drink in the company of the meanest foreign visitor to Antioch,’ and once, when bathing in the public bath with the common people, had a huge jar of precious ointment poured on his head, so that all the bathers jumped up and rolled themselves in it, and by slipping in it created a great amusement as did the king himself.⁶⁵

Impending doom, according to Levenson’s paradigm, conspicuously hangs on the horizon, and it comes as no surprise that at the “very moment” (Dan 5:5) the Babylonian nobles were toasting their idols, a human hand appears writing on the wall. Fear overtakes the group, and Daniel is summoned to interpret the dream, which predicts Balshazzar’s defeat at the hand of the Medes and Persians. Goldingay relegates the banquet to the background of the story and classifies the banquet as a case of, “revelry

⁶⁴W. Sibley Towner, *Daniel* (Int; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1984), 72.

⁶⁵Towner, *Daniel*, 72.

and excess that lead to sacrilege and idolatry.”⁶⁶ The banquet scene again exposes cultural and social practices revealing the sociological functions and topoi of banquets. This banquet scene reveals the excess of empire and royalty, the luxury enjoyed by the elite, the lack of respect for foreign subjects and their gods, and the opportunity of political advantage or defeat.

While Levenson’s intoxication equals doom paradigm provides an interesting lens through which to examine the royal banquet scenes in the Hebrew Bible, closer examination of the texts is required before readers can wholly accept his doom motif. Banquet scenes appear within a variety of contexts in the ancient Near East and Greco-Roman world as accepted occasions of merriment. Sociologically, banquets reinforce social boundaries but also allow for the creation of new ones. The act of banqueting implies wealth and/or social privilege because of the cost and extravagance of banquets. Feasts predominantly remain a luxury of the royal court. After examining ancient banquet scenes, several topoi emerge including the importance of seating arrangements, entertainment, consumption of alcohol, and flamboyant behavior. Occasionally during public feasts, role reversals occur with the temporary adoption of a substitute king or the complete overturning of social hierarchies, similar to medieval carnival festivals.

Social code plays an important role in ancient banquets. Whom one dines with reveals the social boundaries within the larger set of social networks.⁶⁷ Banquets identify

⁶⁶Goldingay, *Daniel*, 108.

⁶⁷Smith, *Symposium*, 9.

one's place within a hierarchy of social groups.⁶⁸ Banquets create bonds between diners. In the ancient world, this bonding physically occurred through the sharing of common food and from a common table or dish.⁶⁹ Commonly, participants were already bonded together through familial, friendly, civic, or religious ties although the practice of hospitality created new bonds.⁷⁰ Social stratification featured prominently in ancient banquets. The focus on banquets in the ancient Near East and other occurrences in the Hebrew Bible illustrates topoi. The book of Esther appropriates these motifs but pushes the boundaries of banquet scenes as well. Bakhtin's notions about the practice of banqueting illustrates how the narrator in the book of Esther reframes the practice.

Bakhtin and Banquets

This study focuses on banquets using Bakhtinian categories to interpret them. Bakhtin offers sociological insight into the occasion of banqueting while providing a brief history of medieval feasts. His discussion focuses on the context of Rabelais, but he makes generalizations regarding the universal nature and function of banquets in antiquity. He identifies the banquet as a location for frank discourse and truth. In discussing his work on Rabelais, Bakhtin is convinced "that free and frank truth can be said only in the atmosphere of the banquet...The banquet with its variations was the most favorable milieu for this absolutely fearless and gay truth."⁷¹ He explains, "But the

⁶⁸Mary Douglas, ed., *Constructive Drinking: Perspectives on Drink from Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1987), 8.

⁶⁹Smith, *Symposium*, 10.

⁷⁰See Andrew Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels: Early Christian Hospitality in its Mediterranean Setting* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005), on the practice of hospitality in the Mediterranean world.

⁷¹Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 285.

banquet is even more important as the occasion for wise discourse, for the gay truth. There is an ancient tie between the feast and the spoken word.”⁷²

In discussing banquets in Rabelais’ work, Bakhtin remarks that within the world of the novel banquets are not private occasions partaken of by individuals but rather popular feasts or “banquets for all the world.”⁷³ He carefully delineates between the public banquet and the private banquet and examines the implications of each. This distinction is an important one that requires further examination. The public banquet constitutes an occasion that is universally enjoyed by the populous.

Bakhtin delineates a boundary between banquet images in popular festive traditions from the images of private eating and drunkenness within early bourgeois literature.⁷⁴ For Bakhtin, images of the popular feasts symbolize the triumph of humanity’s struggle against labor and represent a move toward a positive future that changes and renews.⁷⁵ Concerning banquets, Bakhtin claims:

There were no sharp dividing lines; labor and food represented the two sides of a unique phenomenon, the struggle of man against the world, ending in his victory. . . Collective food as the conclusion of labor’s collective process was not a biological, animal act but a social event. . . The original system of images symbolized the working people, continuing to conquer life and food through struggle and to absorb only that part of the world that has been conquered and mastered. In such a system the banquet images preserve their initial meaning: their universalism, their essential relation to life, death, struggle, triumph, and regeneration.⁷⁶

⁷²Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 283.

⁷³Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 278.

⁷⁴Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 301-2.

⁷⁵Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 302.

⁷⁶Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 281-2.

His emphasis on change and renewal imagery in the public feast contrasts the solemn occasion of private banquets that promote descriptions of gluttony, selfishness, and individuality. In contrast, the public banquet is one that renews all of society and provides hope; it unites humanity in victory celebrating the joy of survival and triumph over hardship and labor. The public banquet is one that all enjoy and it crisscrosses hierarchical lines. The nature of banquets represents a victory. His thoughts on public versus private banquets in terms of hope and renewal correspond to the movement in the book of Esther from royal banquets at the beginning and feasts for all Jews at the conclusion. Purim celebrates salvation, hope, and unexpected triumph.

As Bakhtin illustrates, banquets function as important settings within narratives. This examination provides context for interpreting the banquet scenes in the book of Esther and suggests Bakhtinian categories assist readers in seeing how the narrator reframes discussions of Judahite life through dialogic relationships in banquet scenes. The banquets in the Esther scroll reveal important features about the narrator's attitude toward the king and the Persian Empire. They offer a model instructing Diaspora Jews on how to succeed in gentile realms.

CHAPTER THREE

Exposition of the Banquet Scenes in Bakhtinian Categories

This section addresses the crux of the dissertation, that is, what does a reading of the banquet scenes in the book of Esther in terms of three Bakhtinian categories dialogism, chronotope, and carnival reveal about Judahites in the Diaspora. A dialogic reading emphasizes the transgression of boundaries. As characters collide during banquet scenes, social boundaries are crisscrossed and diverse ideological perspectives exposed. An exposition of the banquet scenes illustrates these movements. A chronotopic reading of the banquet scenes concretizes the text's particular theological concerns and pushes the limits of the genre "Diaspora story." Namely, the text reframes the parameters of faithful Diaspora lifestyle to include movement away from Jerusalem, the Temple, and levitical laws. It purposefully sets Judahite life apart from direct revelation and intervention from Yahweh, and the language of banquet scenes and employment of genre demonstrate this reframing. Two chronotopes in particular, Diaspora story and banquet, shape the narrative. Carnavalesque readings accentuate reversal.

The Esther narrative is a story of survival and triumph. It tells of the near annihilation of the Jewish people by the evil villain Haman who nurses a grudge against one of the main characters, Mordecai. By happy coincidence, or divine providence depending on the reader's interpretation of the story, the heroine Esther rises from obscurity to reign as queen of the Persian Empire. Employing guile and charm, Esther exposes Haman's plot to annihilate the Jewish community, produces a counter-edict allowing the Jews to defend themselves and defeat their enemies, and helps Mordecai

assume Haman's position as the second in command in the empire. Together Esther and Mordecai institute a new Jewish festival commanding Jews everywhere to remember always the occasion of their salvation from their enemies by celebrating Purim.

The Esther narrative both comforts and challenges readers. The text refreshes in that it is reminiscent of childhood fairy tales where the beautiful young maiden becomes queen, defeats the villain Haman, saves her people, and the Jews live happily ever after. It has been interpreted as simplistic, reassuring and safe. But the story refuses to remain safe. The text rejects the confines of these boundaries. Close readings offer haunting images of the excesses of empire, grotesque beauty pageants, unchecked power, a world where terror lingers on the lips of a capricious king, and whole peoples annihilated with a single decree. Questions about the identities of the villains and heroes linger as characters blur from heroic to vengeful and victimized to victimizer. This blurring of boundaries offers a plentiful harvest of analysis for interpreters.¹ The plot is ripe with reversals, haunting questions, and shifting margins resulting in an unusual vision of life in the Diaspora.

The place of the book of Esther in the canon has sparked much debate through the years.² While the medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides considers the Esther

¹For example, the Jewish community begins as the intended victims but become the annihilators. The text initially depicts Esther as the target but by the denouement she demands the execution of the ten sons of her former executioner. She also requests a second day of destruction for the Jews against their enemies.

²Esther is the only book within the Hebrew canon not found among the texts and fragments at Qumran. In the 3rd century C.E., the Babylonian rabbi Amora Samuel claimed that "Esther does not defile the hands" (b. Megillah 7a). There is some discussion on the meaning of "defile the hands" whether it implies questions about canonical status, divine inspiration, or ability to transmit impurity. See Berlin's comments in Adele Berlin, *Esther*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xliii-xlv; L.B. Paton, *Book of Esther* (ICC; New York: Scribners, 1916), 97-104.

narrative akin to Torah, he exclaims, “When Messiah comes, the other books may pass away, but the Torah and Esther will abide forever,” few outside the Jewish community held the text in such high esteem.³ The early Christian community did not produce a single commentary on the book for seven centuries, and John Calvin never preached a sermon or wrote a book concerning the Esther text.⁴ Martin Luther’s infamous remark succinctly summarizes much of the Christian response to the Esther scroll, “I am so great an enemy to the book of Esther that I wish it had not come to us at all, for it has too many heathen unnaturalities [it Judaizes too much].⁵

The lack of reference to the divine name, the absence of common religious themes and practices such as Sabbath or festivals or dietary laws, the seemingly bloodthirsty quest for revenge, the establishment of the raucous holiday of Purim, and the general boisterous setting of the narrative combine to depict a seemingly unholy, secular tale. As one commentator notes, “There is not one noble character in the book.”⁶ J.E. McFayden remarks in his 1906 commentary, “All the romantic glamour of the story

³See Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Michael G. Wechsler, “Shadow and Fulfillment in the Book of Esther,” *BSac* 154 (1997): 275. Paton writes, “The book is so conspicuously lacking in religion that it should never have been included in the Canon of the OT, but should have been left with Judith and Tobit among the apocryphal writings.” Paton, *Esther*, 97; Franz Delitzsch exclaims, “In the book of Esther we perceive nothing of the impulses which the exile was to give to the people in the direction of the New Testament, nothing of prophetic afflation,” Franz Delitzsch, *Old Testament History of Redemption* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1881), 158-9; Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament* (trans. E Gritsch and R. Gritsch; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 188-89 for a discussion of Luther’s comments. Luther suggests Jews “love the Book of Esther which so befits their bloodthirsty, vengeful, murderous greed and hope.”

⁴The first Christian commentary on Esther was not written until 831 by Rhabanus Maurus. Paton, *Esther*, 101.

⁵Martin Luther, *Tischrede* in Luther’s *Werke* (Weimar: Hermann Bohlaus, 1914) vol 3, 3391.

⁶Paton, *Esther*, 96.

cannot blind us to its religious emptiness and moral depravity.”⁷ Unfortunately, this sentiment characterizes much of non-Jewish scholarship on the book of Esther until the mid twentieth century.⁸

Few who read the book display a neutral attitude toward the story. Readers either hate the eponymous character for her irreligious practices or her subversive demeanor, or they praise the queen as a paragon of Jewish values.⁹ M. Haller disparages of Esther’s behavior and connects it with all Jews. He snidely remarks that the book displays the “bad, even repulsive, features of this national character—above all the unrestrained vindictiveness, which with true Oriental savagery allows its imagination to swim and revel in the blood of the opponent.”¹⁰ Even now there exists a tendency among Protestants to read the Esther narrative on the fringe of the Old Testament; it is a text that seems “exotic, savage, violent, difficult to reach, difficult to map, dangerous, perhaps irredeemable.”¹¹

⁷ J.E. McFayden, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: G.H. Doran, 1906), 315.

⁸Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 6-9. Heinrich Ewald condemns the book saying, “Its story knows nothing of high and pure truths. In it we fall as if from heaven to earth.” Heinrich Ewald, *The History of Israel* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1869), 197. Paton’s International Critical Commentary contains harsh criticism of the characters and the excessive “Judaizing” found within the text. Paton, *Esther*, 96. Twentieth century scholars who condemn the book include: R.H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1941), 747; Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament, An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 511-512; Samuel Sandmel, *The Enjoyment of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University, 1972), 44. See also Carey Moore, *Studies in the Book of Esther* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1982), xxiv-xxx.

⁹Michael V. Fox, “Three Esthers” in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (eds. S. Crawford and L. Greenspoon; JSOTSup 380; London: T & T Clark International, 2003), 50-51.

¹⁰Max Haller, *Esther* (Die Schriften des Alten Testaments, 2.III; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2nd edn, 1925), 328-9.

¹¹Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 5.

Even recent critics sometimes denigrate the plot and characters in the book.¹²

Robert Alter compares the narrative of Esther to other biblical narratives, and labels the Esther scroll a “fairy tale” where, “comic art departs from historical verisimilitude in ways that pre-exilic Hebrew narrative seldom does... the story demonstrates God’s providential power in history with a schematic neatness unlike that of earlier historicized fiction in the Bible.”¹³ He accuses the Esther scroll of being no more than a, “comic fantasy utilizing pseudo-historical materials.” For Alter, the narrative art in the book of Esther does not measure up to the artistry found in other biblical texts. Yet the book of Esther does exude narrative artistry through its homologous relationship between text and context. What the narrator tells readers is as significant as what is not told and how the story unfolds. The text captures and concretizes the ideology of the narrator’s worldview and transmits this information to readers. Alter’s complaint about the “schematic neatness” of the divine plan is misguided and misplaced. A more fruitful question deals with why the narrator purposefully omits the deity and other religious practices from a text concerning *Heilsgeschichte* when these elements would have been appropriate. To complain that the divine plan works too neatly when the book of Esther does not say there is one seems undeserved.

Alter also contrasts Esther and Mordecai against the characters of Ruth and Boaz. Using the criteria of individuality and divine design, Alter declares the characters of Ruth and Boaz, “exhibit in speech and action traits of characters that make them memorable

¹²Esther Fuchs, “Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative,” in *Women in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Alice Bach; New York: Routledge, 1999): 79-82; see Fox, *Character*, 205-07, for a list of feminist scholars who lambaste the book for its stereotypical plot and patriarchal depiction of women.

¹³Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 33-34.

individuals in a way that the more schematically conceived Esther and Mordecai are not.”¹⁴ For Alter, not only is the Esther narrative drawn too simply but the characters lack depth and development. Indeed, readers know little of the inner workings of Esther and Mordecai. But the narrator’s silence does not require the characters to lack depth or development. Her command in Esth 4:16 and employment of three imperatives (כנס, הלך, צום) reveal a transformation in the new queen. She orders Mordecai and the Jews of Susa to observe a fast. His condemnation of the characters Esther and Mordecai based on the category divine design suggests a cursory interaction with the narrative. Readers can argue the text does not even employ this paradigm of divine design to tell the story. These negative assessments leave much to be desired. Their dismissal of the Esther scroll discounts the richness of the narrative and disallows readers to address the book’s complexities and abundant ambiguities.

Genre

A discussion of genre establishes the context for one of Bakhtin’s literary categories: chronotope. Chronotope is the spatio-temporal matrix that shapes narrative texts and concretize through language specific contexts. A literary chronotope intersects the axes of time and space.¹⁵ Genre corresponds to contextual timeframes and analysis of specific genre types reveals particular cultural knowledge and ideology. Each genre possesses a “specific field that determines the parameters of events” within a chronotope.¹⁶ This engenders the question: what type of literature is the book of Esther

¹⁴Alter, *Art*, 34.

¹⁵Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 84.

¹⁶Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 370.

and how does a discussion of genre impact readers' interpretations of the text? Genre criticism allows readers to compare texts and discuss the narrator's possible purposes, strategies, and ideologies. Genre classification also offers a window into audience criticism and gives current readers a sense of the ways in which the narrator supposed original audiences would read the text. A ubiquitous problem with discussions of genre is that scholars often assert *the* genre of a text and reject all others. Yet as Bakhtin surmises, no text has a single, correct genre but is heterochronous.¹⁷ The Esther scroll embodies several genre types, and biblical scholars do not agree on the category of literary genre/s the book of Esther represents.¹⁸

For example, S. Talmon advocates reading the book of Esther as a historicized Wisdom tale.¹⁹ He identifies six elements in the Esther tale linking it with Wisdom.

1. success or failure is attributed to human activity with the deity playing no role in the outcome
2. an unspecified and remote deity devoid of individual characteristics
3. the absence of any references to Jewish history
4. the lack of references to other Jews either in Yehud or elsewhere in the Diaspora
5. similarities to the Joseph novella with the common theme of a Jewish outsider rising to power in a gentile, foreign court
6. comparison of the Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus court relationship to the Ahikar-Nadin-Esarhaddon relationship in the Ahikar texts.²⁰

¹⁷Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 252.

¹⁸See Fox, *Character*, 141-152, for a list of common suggestions. This work will survey several of the more popular options.

¹⁹S. Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," *VT* 13 (1963): 427.

²⁰Talmon, "Wisdom," 430-39.

While some embrace the Esther/Wisdom connection,²¹ numerous scholars, challenge the affinities between the Esther scroll and Wisdom literature,²² and these associations between the Esther scroll and wisdom literature sometimes seem tenuous and forced. The absence of God in the Megillah does not correspond to the role of the divine in wisdom literature or in the Joseph novella. While the deity's portrayal in wisdom literature differs from presentations of God in the torah and prophets, there is not a sense of divine absence as in the Esther scroll.

Berlin identifies the Megillah as a burlesque tale whose primary purpose is to authenticate the celebration of Purim.²³ She cites the book's frivolity, bawdiness, revelry, reversals, and hyperbole as appropriate narrative elements for a story that celebrates Jewish survival, identity, and community and culminates in the raucous holiday Purim.²⁴ She connects burlesque and satire and notes how the narrative vulgarizes both the Persian Empire and the Persian court.²⁵ Berlin's analysis of the text as burlesque and comedic is helpful, but her contention that this genre classification requires readers to interpret the threat to the Jews as "not real," "outrageous," "preposterous," and "against all that we know of the tolerance of the Persian empire" seems fallacious. While the narrative

²¹Carey Moore, *Esther* (ABC; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), xxxiii; Bruce W Jones, "Two Misconceptions About the Book of Esther," *CBQ* 39 (1977): 175-7.

²²See Robert Gordis, "Religion, Wisdom, and History in the Book of Esther—A New Solution to an Ancient Crux." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981): 367-8; James Crenshaw, "Methods in Determining Wisdom Influences Upon Historical Literature," *JBL* 88 (1969): 129-42; Fox, *Character*, 142-44.

²³Berlin, *Esther*, xvi. See also Karen Jobes, *Esther* (Int; Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002), 4-5.

²⁴Berlin, *Esther*, xvi-xvii. Jones also highlights the text's humor. Jones, "Two Misconceptions," 180.

²⁵Berlin, *Esther*, xviii-xxii.

abounds with humorous reversals, impracticalities, and ostentatious revelry, the threat of annihilation lingers throughout. The danger of obliteration functions as a *mise en abyme* in the Megillah and throughout much of the Hebrew Bible. The paradox of peril for the Jews and the desperate hope that survival will arise from some place remain in dangerous tension in the Esther text. The narrator of the Esther scroll may tell the story in comedic fashion and employ a farcical tone, but the recurring threat of annihilation both past, present, and future, remains a tangible and pervasive fear.

According to Lawrence Wills, the genre of the book of Esther is wisdom court legend, and he describes this genre type as a “legend of a revered figure set in the royal court which has the wisdom of the protagonist as a principal motif.”²⁶ He studies other court narratives from the Hebrew Bible including the Joseph story and the book of Daniel as further examples of this type.²⁷ While scholars continue to discuss the viability of a wisdom court legend genre,²⁸ Day associates Wills’ work with the genre of Jewish novels suggesting the Esther tale presents “contexts, structures, situations, and characters more

²⁶Lawrence Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1990), 37. Elias Bickerman characterizes the book of Esther as a “typical tale of palace intrigue that could well find a place in the Persian histories of Herodotus and Ctesias, or in the Arabian nights.” Bickerman maintains, however the only Jewish element in the Esther narrative is the identification of Mordecai as a Jew. Elias Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 181.

²⁷Wills also examines the Egyptian *Onksheshong*, the Aramaic *Story of Ahikar*, the Croesus stories from Herodotus and from the Apocrypha Susanna and Bel and the Dragon and opines all these examples represent the wisdom court legend genre.

²⁸Peter Miscall contends little textual evidence exists demonstrating Wills’ argument for a wisdom court legend genre. Peter Miscall, review of Lawrence Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends*, *CBQ* 54 (1992):137-8.

developed than biblical short stories...[it is] an example of the popular literature that was being created for an increasingly literate citizenry.”²⁹

While some of the aforementioned options are more plausible than others, the genre category Diaspora story is an especially significant option. The book of Esther, Daniel chapters 1-6, and perhaps the book of Tobit propose a similar paradigm for succeeding in the exile.³⁰ Fox lists the following ten characteristics as indicative of Diaspora literature:

1. the setting is in the Diaspora (specifically during Achaemenid times)
2. Jews ascend to positions of the highest consequences in the royal court
3. the Jews are endangered and saved, and their enemies punished
4. Daniel, his companions, and Mordecai and Esther are threatened with death
5. the foreign kings are not hostile to Jews
6. for this reason, the opponents must use deceit and slander to get the king to act against the Jews
7. the kings believe they are responding to disobedience, not specifically against the Jews
8. the kings are unhappy to see their Jewish favorites caught in the trap
9. the kings are themselves trapped by their own decrees. They cannot automatically free the Jews
10. the kings punish the opponents of the Jews³¹

This literary genre and the texts which fall into this category address issues of particular import to Jews living in exile. Questions such as how to thrive and continue to exist outside the land without a king, without a temple, without an army, and without priests to lead worship permeate the context. The absence of these issues in the book of Esther suggests that the text envisions an alternative future in the Diaspora for exiled Jews.

²⁹Linda Day, *Esther* (AOTC; Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2005), 12. More work needs to be done defining and characterizing both Diaspora stories and Jewish novels.

³⁰Fox, *Character*, 147.

³¹Fox, *Character*, 146-7; see also Ruth Stiehl, “Das Buch Esther” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 53 (1956): 16-17.

Diaspora stories advocate paths in which Jews can succeed and survive outside of the parameters of First and Second Temple Judaism and even lead full and effective lives in the midst of gentiles and foreign empires.³²

D.B. Redford compares the Joseph novella with other texts including Daniel, Esther, and Ahiqar. He lists the following court-tale motifs:

1. the magicians as entertainer
2. the magicians as an object of ridicule
3. bumbling or timorous wise men
- 4a. 'the wise sayings of minister so-and-so'
- 4b. a legendary anecdote told by the minister
- 5a. the appearance of the wise man as savior
- 5b. the disgrace and rehabilitation of a minister³³

Collins identifies three motifs prevalent in the court tales of Daniel and Esther:

1. The tale may emphasize the wisdom or ability of the courtier.
2. The tale may focus on the drama or danger of humiliation followed by salvation. The wise man [sic] is for some reason threatened or imprisoned. However, he is eventually released and exalted more greatly than before.
3. The tale may be used as a vehicle for the message of the courtier. The message may be cast in the form of proverbial sayings or the interpretation of dreams.³⁴

Collins characterizes the authors and compilers of the book of Daniel as wise men who were, "upper-class, well-educated Jews, who found careers in government service in the eastern Diaspora. They were successful in the gentile world and stood to gain by maintaining the status quo."³⁵ According to Collins, the experience of persecution under

³²Fox, *Character*, 148.

³³D.B. Redford, *A Study of the Biblical Story of Joseph* (VTSup 20; Leiden: Brill, 1970), 94-97.

³⁴J.J. Collins, J.J. "The Court-Tales in Daniel and the Development of Apocalyptic." *JBL* 94 (1975): 219.

³⁵J.J. Collins, "Daniel and His Social World," *Int* 39 (1985): 136.

Antiochus IV provides the tradents of the court tales a basis for their apocalyptic visions.³⁶

Even with its affinities to the first six chapters of Daniel, the book of Esther presents a different view of life in exile. Its setting, ideology, structure, and characters reflect an alternative worldview; one that is not found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. While the text may fit within the chronotopic category Diaspora story, its vision does not remain within that boundary. To overlook the text's unique message would erase the rich interplay overflowing between characters and scenes. Beal articulates the interconnection between scenes and relationships while acknowledging the tension as well. He opines, "To claim that it [the Esther scroll] is organized around any single motif, theme, or set of connections is to lose this rich and complex textual interplay within the narrative."³⁷ One feature in particular marks the book of Esther as different from the Diaspora story in Daniel chapters 1-6: divine absence and the nonexistence of corresponding religious practices.

Absence of God and Other Missing Religious Themes

Reading the book of Esther through a Bakhtinian lens illustrates several key components significant in understanding the absence of the divine name and other omitted religious traditions. Interpreting the book of Esther as a chronotopic Diaspora story challenges to address the purposeful omission of God and the absence of Jerusalem, Temple, and Torah, which are common features of other Diaspora texts. While literature

³⁶Matthias Henze, "The Narrative Frame of Daniel: A Literary Assessment." *JSJ* 32 (2001): 12.

³⁷Timothy Beal, *Esther* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), xiv.

is heterochronous and resists categorization, Bakhtin argues the category “other” must exist in order to perceive oneself. He explains, “I cannot see the self that is my own, so I must try to perceive it in others’ eyes. This process of conceptually seeing myself by refracting the world through values of the other begins very early.”³⁸ This translates to the discussion of divine absence in the book of Esther in that the chronotope Diaspora story assumes certain characteristics and in particular the activity of God. Because the book of Esther excludes divine activity, it defines itself against other Diaspora stories that do. Scholars struggle to explain the absence of the divine name or presence within the Esther text.³⁹ Additions to the book of Esther in the Septuagint reflect concern over the absence of God and subsequent religious motifs by incorporating them into the text.⁴⁰ The Greek version of Esther contains six additions, three of which attempt to rectify the alleged problem of religious deficiency present within the Hebrew text. Additions A, C, and F supply the religious content, while B and E reinforce the historical nature of the book.⁴¹ The Greek version frames the story with Mordecai’s dream and interpretation, clarifies his refusal to bow before Haman (he only bows before God), reveals Esther’s disgust in engaging in sexual acts with an uncircumcised heathen, and presents Esther

³⁸Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 73.

³⁹Beginning with the rabbis, readers argued about the absence of God. See Paton, *Esther*, 101-106 for a survey of the Targumim and Midrashim and Jewish and Christian medieval interpretations relating to Esther.

⁴⁰For a fuller treatment of the Greek and other texts of Esther, see Karen Jobes, *The Alpha-Text of Esther: It’s Character and Relationship to the Masoretic Text* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996); Kristin DeTroyer, *Einde van de Alpha-Tekst van Esther* (Atlanta: SBL, 2000); Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 69-92; Levenson, *Esther*, 27-34; Charles V. Dorothy, *The Books of Esther* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997). Josephus even offers a paraphrase of the Esther narrative in his *The Antiquities of the Jews*. He stresses the congruence between Jewish values and Greco-Roman ideals. See Berlin, *Esther*, lii and Paton, *Esther*, 39.

⁴¹Levenson, *Esther*, 27-34.

obediently observing dietary laws and abstaining from palace food and wine. Overall, the Septuagint supplies readers a more evidently pious Mordecai and Esther who both pray and give credit to God for their salvation.⁴² Interestingly, the Greek text also releases the king from any wrongdoing in approving the edict against the Jews, and places the blame solely on Haman (Addition E).

Without relying on the Septuagint's additions, scholars have developed a variety of explanations to justify the seeming absence of the deity and the missing religious traditions.⁴³ Part of the book's intrigue rests in the fact that readers expect to see YHWH in the text clearly and vociferously working to save the people, but instead God does not appear. The text remains deliberately silent regarding the divine. Or, as Beal articulates, ". . . it is not simply that there was no appropriate place to include mention of God, but rather than God was intentionally written out, or perhaps veiled, from the story world of the text."⁴⁴ The narrator remembers the chronotopic motif of Diaspora story but refracts it in new directions in the book of Esther.

The book of Esther has long been the source of discussion regarding questions of divine presence and absence in the text. The Talmud records the arguments of rabbis who disagreed over the problem of missing references to the deity and religious motifs.⁴⁵

⁴²Berlin, *Esther*, xlix-lii; see also Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 169-74, who suggests the Septuagint adds religious dimensions to the biblical text in order to "assimilate the Book of Esther to scriptural norm."

⁴³See Fox, *Character*, 235-247 where he suggests the evidence for divine presence falls into four categories: allusions, coincidences, reversals, and themes; Beal, *Esther*, xix-xxii; Carol Bechtel, *Esther* (Int; Louisville: John Knox Press 2002), 7-16; Day, *Esther*, 17-22; Paton, *Esther*, 94-6.

⁴⁴Beal, *Esther*, xx.

⁴⁵Samuel argues the *Megillah* was spoken by the Holy Spirit but meant to be read and not written, probably implying Esther should be regarded as part of the Oral Law but not Scripture. A number of Mishnaic teachers then argue against Samuel contending the canonical status of Esther. See Paton, *Esther*, 101-106 for a survey of the Targumim and Midrashim relating to Esther; see also Berlin, *Esther*, lii-liv.

B. Megillah 10b-17a in the Babylonian Talmud records a midrashic exposition of the entire biblical book; incidentally, this is the only midrashic exposition of a complete book included in the Talmud.⁴⁶ The Jewish community in the Middle Ages also produced an abundance of commentaries regarding Esther debating God's role in the story.⁴⁷ Christian interpretations were generally hostile and anti-Semitic, although some likened Esther to the Virgin Mary.⁴⁸ Modern scholars continue to debate the issue of divine absence and posit several options. The dialogic discussion of God's presence in the text betrays scholars' concern to achieve canonical harmony. It begs the question—how does the book of Esther exclude God but get included in the biblical canon.

H. Steinthal calls the author a skeptic and this skepticism thus results in the lack of reference to the divine name.⁴⁹ Paton disagrees and purports that although faith in God is not clearly articulated, it is not explicitly denied or doubted. He rationalizes the absence of the divine name with a reference to the Talmudic apothegm, "A man is obligated to drink on Purim until he is unable to distinguish between 'Blessed is

⁴⁶Berlin, *Esther*, liii.

⁴⁷See Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb*, 13-62; Barry Dov Walfish, "Kosher Adultery? The Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus Triangle in Talmudic, Medieval and Sixteenth-Century Exegesis," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (eds. S. Crawford and L. Greenspoon; London: T & T Clark, 2003), 111-136; Ori Z. Soltes, "Images and the Book of Esther," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (eds. S. Crawford and L. Greenspoon; London: T & T Clark, 2003), 137-175; Scott M Langston, "Reading a Text Backwards: The Book of Esther and Nineteenth Century Jewish American Interpretations," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (eds. S. Crawford and L. Greenspoon; London: T & T Clark, 2003), 200-216.

⁴⁸Kimberly Vrudny, "Medieval Fascination with the Queen: Esther as the Queen of Heaven and Host of the Messianic Banquet" *ARTS* 2 (1999): 36-43; Judith S. Neulander, "The Ecumenical Esther: Queen and Saint in Three Western Belief Systems," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (eds. S. Crawford and L. Greenspoon; London: T & T Clark, 2003), 176-199; Leonard J. Greenspoon, "From Maidens and Chamberlains to Harems and Hot Tubs: Five Hundred Years of Esther in English," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (eds. S. Crawford and L. Greenspoon; London: T & T Clark, 2003), 217-241.

⁴⁹H. Steinthal, *Zu Bibel und Religionsphilosophie* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1890), 53-77.

Mordecai' and 'cursed is Haman.'"⁵⁰ This reference suggests to Paton that the divine name had to be omitted from the text in order for it not to be desecrated by a drunken Jew celebrating the festival.⁵¹ A. Haham notes the frequent usage of the name of the Persian King Ahasuerus while the name of God never appears. He attributes this phenomenon to authorial intentionality, which functions to demonstrate that even though the King of Persia is located at the center of the narrative, readers understand that the hidden King of Kings still controls all the events of the narrative.⁵² In a similar vein, Y. Kaufmann summarizes a popular explanation when he declares,

Biblical writers like to stamp their narratives with the imprint of a double causality—the plan of Divine Providence. The heroes of the stories are human creatures who operate out of their human impulses. Nevertheless, they fulfill the Divine intention.⁵³

For Moore, the text presupposes divine presence as revealed by the effectiveness of fasting and by implication, prayer.⁵⁴ In his early work, Gordis suggests readers in the ancient world did not need the text to specifically spell out divine activity but that the message was clearly understood—"The Guardian of Israel does not let His people perish."⁵⁵ S. Talmon connects Esther to wisdom literature to explain the absence of divine presence. He exclaims, "One is led to assume that the absence of prayer from the

⁵⁰b. Megillah 7b.

⁵¹L.B. Paton, *Esther*, 96-97; Edward Greenstein, "A Jewish Reading of Esther," in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (eds. J. Neusner, B. Levine, and E. Frerichs; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 233; see Fox, *Character*, 239 for his repudiation of this interpretation.

⁵²A. Haham, *Esther (Da'at Miqra)*; Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1973), 18.

⁵³Y. Kaufmann, *History of the Religion of Israel* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1977), 524-25.

⁵⁴Moore, *Esther*, xxxiii-xxxiv.

⁵⁵Gordis, "Religion," 364.

book is original, as is the absence of the Divine name, and that it has its reasons in the ideological setting of the book, a setting which may be discerned also in other literary compositions of the Old Testament.”⁵⁶ Gordis later refutes Talmon’s argument, which links Esther to wisdom literature, and instead proposes the missing deity best be understood as a reflection of the book’s unique genre: a Persian Chronicle.⁵⁷ Beller identifies thirteen convenient coincidences, which he claims point to divine presence active in the text:

1. Queen Vashti is deposed and Ahasuerus wants a replacement (1:19; 2:2).
2. Esther is available, a virgin who possesses the beauty and sexual charm necessary to secure the king’s favor (2:7-9, 16-717).
3. 1 and 2 set up two close relatives, both Jews, in the king’s court.
4. Mordecai happens to discover the assassination plot of Bigthan and Teresh (2:22).
5. The dates of the edict and the day of the Jew’s slaughter are separated sufficiently to allow for the plot to be discovered and overturned (3:12-13).
6. Esther gains entrance to the throne room when she might have been executed (5:2), and her request to the king is granted (5:6).
7. The king can’t sleep. He is read the court annals that happen to tell the story of Mordecai’s action protecting him from possible death (6:1-3).
8. Haman happens to enter just as Ahasuerus is deciding Mordecai’s reward. The reversal is quite striking, and it foreshadows the eventual downfall of Haman (6:4-10).

⁵⁶Talmon, “Wisdom,” 422-55.

⁵⁷Gordis, “Religion,” 375-378. Unfortunately, no historical chronicles from the Persian period survived, and we cannot compare Esther to other Achaemenid documents beside a couple Persian inscriptions. See Karl Jahn, ed., *History of Iranian Literature* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1968), 19; Edwin Yamauchi, Edwin M. “The Archaeological Background of Esther,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (1980): 102-3 lists a tally of Persian inscriptions.

9. Haman's wife Zeresh, a Gentile, gains prophetic powers and predicts Haman's death (6:13).
10. Esther's bold accusation against Haman is accepted (7:6-9).
11. Haman is executed, removing the threat against Mordecai resulting in Mordecai's installation as the king's vice-regent (7:9-8:2).
12. As queen and vice-regent, Esther and Mordecai secure the reversal edict that allows for the Jews to protect themselves against violence (8:8, 11).
13. The Jews are delivered from a threat based upon an irrevocable edict (9:2, 16).⁵⁸

Gordis contends the "absence of the name of God or, for that matter, a reference to Him in Esther is all the more striking in view of the basic theme of the book, which is the salvation of God's people."⁵⁹ For a book about the salvation of God's elect, readers expect to see references to God. Readers have long asked the question the text never does--where is YHWH? Rodriguez claims the omission of God from the text creates theological curiosity in readers. He argues,

The intentional nature of the omission forces us to look beneath the aesthetic in order to scrutinize the ideological elements. In other words, the omission, which is of a religious and theological nature, creates theological curiosity in the readers. This, it seems to me, is what the author expects the reader to experience.⁶⁰

Overall, the majority of scholars deems the book religious and argues that it contains veiled references to divine activity within the plot.⁶¹ Although careful not to

⁵⁸David Beller, "A Theology of the Book of Esther," *Restoration Quarterly* 39 (1997): 6-7.

⁵⁹Gordis, "Religion," 364.

⁶⁰Angel Manuel Rodriguez, *Esther: A Theological Approach* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Andrews University Press, 1995), 109.

⁶¹Fox, *Character*, 237. See chapter XII for Fox's survey of scholarly responses to the issue of God's silence pages 235-247.

downplay the text's silence regarding God, Fox ultimately places himself within the majority opinion by suggesting readers' scrutiny of the text is exactly what the author intended. He explicates, "The author would have us probe the events we witness in our own lives in the same way. He is teaching a theology of possibility. The willingness to face history with an openness to the possibility of providence."⁶² While the text's glaring omission of the divine name and religious elements seems deliberate, the reasons for such exclusions are not. This Diaspora story expands the chronotopic boundaries established elsewhere in the book of Daniel with its emphasis on human action and initiative and its concentration on Susa, not Jerusalem.

The issue of divine absence in the book of Esther remains integral to reading the banquet scenes. A Bakhtinian reading of these scenes expects dialogic voices. The expectation of divine presence further delineates the book of Esther from other texts within the canon when God fails to appear. This absence concretizes a unique ideology of the traditions of the book marking it chronotopically.

Elements of the Plot

According to Fox, the Esther scroll follows an obvious sequential pattern in that the story unfolds in chronological order.⁶³ Other than two slight exceptions in 2:5-7, which provides background information regarding Esther's lineage, and a proleptic comment in 9:1 the story remains true to chronological order. Fox outlines the narrative

⁶²Fox, *Character*, 247.

⁶³Fox, *Character*, 154-5.

and divides it into a beginning, middle, and end marked by shifts in subject and gaps in time. He partitions the three sections as such:

BEGINNING: setting the stage for the narrative, the events that prepare the way for Esther's rise; Esther's rise to queenship; Mordecai's service to the king. 1:1-2:13.

MIDDLE: the narrative proper: the scheme and its defeat. 3:1-9-19.

END: the establishment of Purim, with an appendix about Mordecai. 9:20-10:3.⁶⁴

Regarding time, the beginning section lasts over six years and proceeds leisurely.⁶⁵ Bursting with comedic undertones, the text opens with a description of an opulent 180 day banquet given by the king in the third year of his reign for the satraps and officials of the empire (Esth 1:3-4). At the conclusion of the 180 day banquet, the king without delay hosts a second banquet at the palace for the citizens of Susa. This second seven day banquet occurs concomitantly with Queen Vashti's banquet for the women (1:9). After Vashti's refusal and subsequent banishment, the king remembers her and in an attempt to mollify him, the king's attendants suggest an empire wide roundup of beautiful virgins from whom Ahasuerus will select a new queen. The candidates arrive and their beautification process takes an entire year. Ahasuerus selects Esther as the next monarch and he enjoys yet another banquet. This section concludes when Esther delivers Mordecai's message to the king of a discovered assassination plot planned by the king's guards.

⁶⁴Fox, *Character*, 154-155.

⁶⁵The 180 day banquet occurs in the third year of the king's reign (1:3), and Ahasuerus selects Esther to be the next queen in the seventh year of his reign (2:16). Haman casts lots to determine the day of annihilation during the king's 12th year (3:7). See Day, *Esther*, 4. Robert Gordis, "Studies in the Esther Narrative," *JBL* 45 (1976): 45. Gordis' article argues the opposite stance. He describes the narrative action as a "swift flow of action" and presents the author as stripping the plot "of all non-essentials, concentrating on events rather than on motivations, on incidents rather on descriptions of character."

The middle section transpires over the course of one year. Haman, after learning of Mordecai's ethnicity, determines to punish all Jews for Mordecai's insolence. He casts lots to determine the appropriate month and day for the persecution and then goes before the king to receive royal permission. Mordecai demands Esther intercede on behalf of her people, and she risks her life by appearing before the king unsummoned. The dramatic reversal between the characters Mordecai and Haman begins as Haman unsuspectingly advises the king on how best to honor Mordecai and then must parade Mordecai through town. Esther exposes Haman's plot, and Haman dies on the gallows he erected for Mordecai. Esther petitions the king, and Mordecai composes a counter edict allowing the Jews to defend themselves. Fighting occurs, and the Jews are victorious.

The end, in contrast to the book's earlier practice, does not date the events. Rather, it establishes the Jewish holiday of Purim and continues ad infinitum by commanding the Jewish community to celebrate the holiday every year.⁶⁶ The division of the narrative into three sections is but one manner of analyzing the plot.

Fox charts the following acts of the story:

BEGINNING

Act I: 1: 1-22

Vashti deposed.

Acts II: 2:1-23

Esther becomes queen; Mordecai uncovers a plot.

MIDDLE

Act III: 3:1-15

Haman's plan and decree.

Act IV: 4:1-17

Mordecai sends Esther to the king.

Act V: 5:1-8

Esther goes to the king; her first banquet.

Act VI: 5:9-6:14

Haman's humiliation and Mordecai's exaltation.

Act VII: 7:1-10

Esther's second banquet; Haman's defeat.

Act VIII: 8:1-8

The grant of authority.

Act IX: 8:9-17

The counter-decree.

⁶⁶Fox, *Character*, 155.

Act X: 9:1-19	The battles of Adar.
END	
Act XI: 9:20-32	The establishment of Purim.
Act XII: 10:1-3	Epilogue. ⁶⁷

While Fox's placement of the story into twelve acts does not represent the only outline of the narrative, his chart offers a helpful framework for studying the text.

Banquet Scenes in Relationship

An examination of the story's structure reveals a dependence on both banquets and reversals, both of which propel the narrative forward and serve to reveal important features of the milieu of the Persian Empire and the characters themselves. Within the book of Esther, ten banquets occur with one fast, in contrast, taking place in the middle. The King hosts three banquets: the 180-day banquet (1:1-4), the seven-day banquet (1:5-8, 10-21), and the new queen banquet (2:18). After Haman convinces the king to sign his decree calling for the annihilation of the Jews, the two men feast on a smaller scale in 3:15. The queens collectively host three banquets. First, Vashti celebrates with the women in 1:9 while the men of the palace make merry with the king. Then, Esther invites Ahasuerus and Haman for a banquet in 5:5-6 and again in 7:1-2. Finally, the Jews celebrate their victory over Haman and the intended pogrom in 8:15-17 with the institution of the new decree and again in 9:17-19 when they twice rejoice in subduing their enemies. The work of Fox, Niditch, and Levenson on the relationship of banquet scenes offers a helpful place from which to apply a dialogic reading of the text. If, as Bakhtin argues, "no living word relates to its object in a singular way," but "there exists

⁶⁷Fox, *Character*, 155-156.

an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme. . . . it is precisely in the process of living interaction with this specific environment that the word may be individualized and given specific shape.”⁶⁸

Fox creates a visual aid illustrating the relationships between the banquets, which focuses on pairs or doublings. He interprets the banquet scenes as pairs that relate to each other. Employing Fox’s chart as a guide, this work will next explore the dialogical relationship between pairs of banquet scenes.⁶⁹

Fox analyzes the banquets in terms of relational pairs. The first two banquets hosted by the king and celebrated by the Persians in the royal court precede the last two where the Jews observe the festival of Purim. The first banquet is for all the officials throughout the empire and the ninth for all the Jews throughout the empire. Both the first and ninth banquets focus on those living outside Susa. Whereas the empire officials travel to Susa to banquet, the Jews living outside Susa do not. Those in Susa participate in the second banquet while likewise the Jews residing in Susa enjoy the final banquet.⁷⁰ The emphasis in these two feasts rests on those within the city limits. These banquets speak the language of privilege. The narrator makes a distinction between those within the confines of Susa and those outside of it. When the last two banquets are read in relationship to the first two, complex changes occur. Each group becomes conscious of

⁶⁸Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 276.

⁶⁹Fox, *Character*, 157. The lines on the right side of the chart mark Levenson’s changes. He amends Fox’s chart by regrouping the banquets into four categories: a, b, c, d as illustrated by lines on the right hand side. His emendations are somewhat confusing and serve to muddy readers’ understandings of the banquet structure in the text. See Levenson, *Esther*, 5-6 for an explanation of his chart and subsequent explanations.

⁷⁰Fox, *Character*, 156-7; Levenson, *Esther*, 5-6.

the other and can no longer talk about its perspective as the only plausible one.⁷¹

Language becomes self conscious because “it has seen itself from an alien perspective and has come to understand how its own values and beliefs appear to the other language.”⁷² Boundaries play an important role in the narrative delineating insiders and outsider both within the royal court and Persian society. The characters traverse these boundaries, however, as a result of banquet scenes.

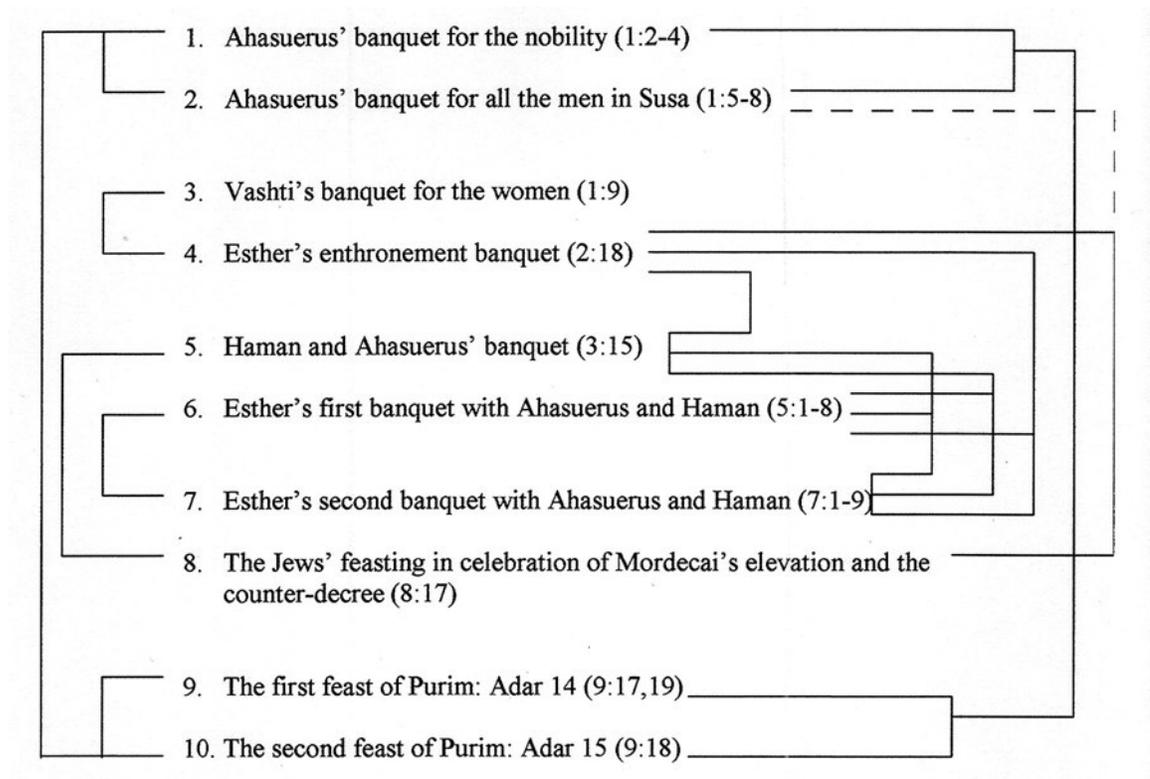


Figure 1—Michael V. Fox’s Chart on Banquet Relationships

⁷¹Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 310.

⁷²Bakhtina, *Dialogic Imagination*, 332; Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 310.

The first two banquets reveal the conspicuous consumption of the king.⁷³ The length of the celebration, the description of the palace and court, and the excessive merrymaking color Ahasuerus and his empire as excessive. While the Jews do not display their wealth in the concluding two banquets, they do use feasts to disclose to the public their victories and continued survival.⁷⁴ They number the dead but take no booty. They give gifts to the poor. The narrative commences with the Persians feasting but concludes with the Jews celebrating. The outsiders traverse the boundaries and metamorphose into insiders.

Fox connects the third and fourth banquets in that Vashti's refusal to leave her banquet and appear before the king paves the way for Esther's ascension to the throne and the celebration of her enthronement banquet. Vashti's loss of esteem and reversal of position enables Esther's ascension. The orientation of their language and subsequent banquets is "contested, contestable, and contesting."⁷⁵ Their banquets dialogue with, anticipate each other, and have meaning in relationship to one another. While both feasts involve a queen, Vashti hosts her banquet but Ahasuerus throws the enthronement feast for Esther. Vashti loses her position at a banquet while Esther's is accentuated. The narrator assigns no direct speech to either queen during these two banquets. Readers know nothing of either Vashti or Esther's inner thoughts.

The counterpart to the fifth banquet, when Haman and Ahasuerus feast to commemorate Haman's annihilation decree, is the eighth banquet where the Jews feast at

⁷³Clines, *Esther*, 36.

⁷⁴Fox, *Character*, 158.

⁷⁵Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 332.

Mordecai's elevation and the counter degree allowing them to defend themselves. As Haman celebrates a feast with Ahasuerus to observe the assumed defeat of Mordecai and the Jews, the Jewish community later rejoices at his demise, their salvation, and Mordecai's advancement into Haman's role. The peripety of these banquets highlights the comedic tone of much of the text. These banquets reveal contrasting sets of social beliefs and ideologies, and its characters speak various languages, which when read in dialogue form new meaning.⁷⁶ This fifth banquet reveals another irony in that while Haman and the king feast, the Jews concomitantly fast (4:16-17). The fast serves to distinguish the Jews from their Gentile leaders. In fact, all of Susa responds in confusion to the king's decree while the king sups oblivious to the turmoil outside palace.

Esther's two feasts, banquets six and seven, can be interpreted together. They receive sparse attention from the narrator although in them Esther exposes Haman. In her first banquet, she defers her request and invites Haman and the king to another feast where she finally reveals the motivation for her hospitality. The pendulum of power swings away from Ham and toward Esther.

The narrative structure of pairs or doubling occurs not only at a structural level, but the style and language of the story itself with its extraordinary number of verbal dyads reveals an emphasis on doubling.⁷⁷ Greenstein identifies over 24 doublets in the first chapter: "Ahasuerus, the same Ahasuerus"; "from India to Nubia" (1:1); "his officials and his courtiers"; "Persia and media" (1:3, 4, 19); "the noblemen and the

⁷⁶Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 312.

⁷⁷Levenson, *Esther*, 10-11; Greenstein, "Jewish Reading," 238-9; Jack Sasson, "Esther," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (eds. R. Alter and F. Kermode, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 335.

governors” (1:3); “the vast wealth of his kingdom and the resplendent glory of his majesty”; “a long period, a hundred and eighty days” (1:4); “high and low” (1:5); “each and every man” (1:8); “the seven eunuchs in attendance serving” (1:10); “the peoples and the officers” (1:11); “the king become highly incensed, and his rage burned within him” (1:12); “the sages learned in precedents”; “law and justice” (1:13); “ministers...those with access to the king’s presence” (1:14); “the king and the ministers” (1:16); “contempt and rage” (1:18); “another woman, one more worthy” (1:19); “the king and the ministers” (1:21); “each and every province”; “each and every people”; and “shall be master of his household and speak the language of his people” (1:22).⁷⁸ For Greenstein, the doublets highlight the double themes conveyed throughout the scroll: the tension of dual loyalty between being a good Jew and a good citizen of the empire and the reversal of Jewish and Persian positions, at least on Purim.⁷⁹ The dyads manifest at the structural and linguistic level these two themes and illustrate Esther’s heteroglossia—she speaks various languages.⁸⁰

Sasson explains the doublets by likening the tone of the narrator to that of an archivist who in using verbal dyads employs the official language of the court.⁸¹ The repetitive language belies the author’s familiarity with official Persian speech and court etiquette. Likewise, Niditch observes the text’s penchant for chains of synonyms that

⁷⁸Greenstein, “Jewish Reading,” 238-9.

⁷⁹Greenstein, “Jewish Reading,” 237.

⁸⁰See Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 356.

⁸¹Sasson, “Esther,” 335.

articulate the same thing two, three, or four times.⁸² She notes the lists of seven eunuchs and seven counselors (1:10, 14); and repetitive expressions such as “destroy, slay, and annihilate” (3:13, 7:4, 8:11); “fasting, weeping, wailing, and ...sackcloth and ashes” (4:3); “light, joy, happiness, and honor” (8:16).⁸³

This parallel language suggests to Niditch that the book of Esther should be interpreted within a broader range of traditional style literature, or literary topoi, celebrating the underdog and trickster.⁸⁴ Likening the Esther text to the Joseph novella, Niditch identifies four major plot moves within the Esther narrative that correspond to a formulaic narrative typology: the story of Vashti’s banishment, the story of Esther becoming queen, the story of Mordecai’s salvation of the king, and Esther’s saving Mordecai and her people.⁸⁵ She charts the four turning points of the plot employing the following graphic illustration:

Vashti’s Banishment

<i>Generic</i>	<i>Morphological</i>	<i>Typological</i>
Problem	Threat to status quo	Queen refuses to appear before king
Plan	Exercise of wisdom	Courtiers advise banishment
Resolution	Threat eliminated	Queen banished (new problem)

The Rise of Esther

<i>Generic</i>	<i>Morphological</i>	<i>Typological</i>
Problem	Status quo upset	First wife banished

⁸²Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1987), 131.

⁸³Niditch, *Underdogs*, 131.

⁸⁴Niditch, *Underdogs*, 127.

⁸⁵Niditch, *Underdogs*, 131-2

Plan	Search	Beauty context to find a new one
Resolution	Restoration of status quo	An underdog selected to become new wife

Mordecai Saves the King

<i>Generic</i>	<i>Morphological</i>	<i>Typological</i>
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Problem	Threat (to status quo)	Plot to kill king
Intervention	Exercise of wisdom	Wise man spies on perpetrators and reports them
Resolution	Threat eliminated	Perpetrators hanged

Esther Saves Mordecai and the Jews

<i>Generic</i>	<i>Morphological</i>	<i>Typological</i>
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Problem	Threat	Evil courtier seeks to eliminate rival and rival's nation and convinces the king to assist him
Intervention	Exercise of wisdom	Queen cleverly reveals matters to king and changes his mind
Resolution	Elimination of threat	King's orders altered, perpetrator hanged, and enemies defeated in reversal of evil courtier's plans ⁸⁶

For Niditch, the repetitive doublets and typological plot reveal the main thrust of the narrative with its emphasis on the underdog.⁸⁷ Her reading focuses on the chronotopic motif of the underdog as a remembered genre.⁸⁸ Niditch's work on folklore and typology opens new and fascinating avenues of study. The book of Esther employs the formulaic topoi of the triumph of the underdog but it also details the achievement of the marginal Jewish community in Diaspora. The book of Esther relates the journey of the Jewish

⁸⁶Niditch, *Underdogs*, 133, 135, 137, 138.

⁸⁷Niditch, *Underdogs*, 132.

⁸⁸See Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 243-4 for an analogous example of "the road" as a chronotope.

community from outsider status to acknowledged, accepted, and powerful members of the king's empire.

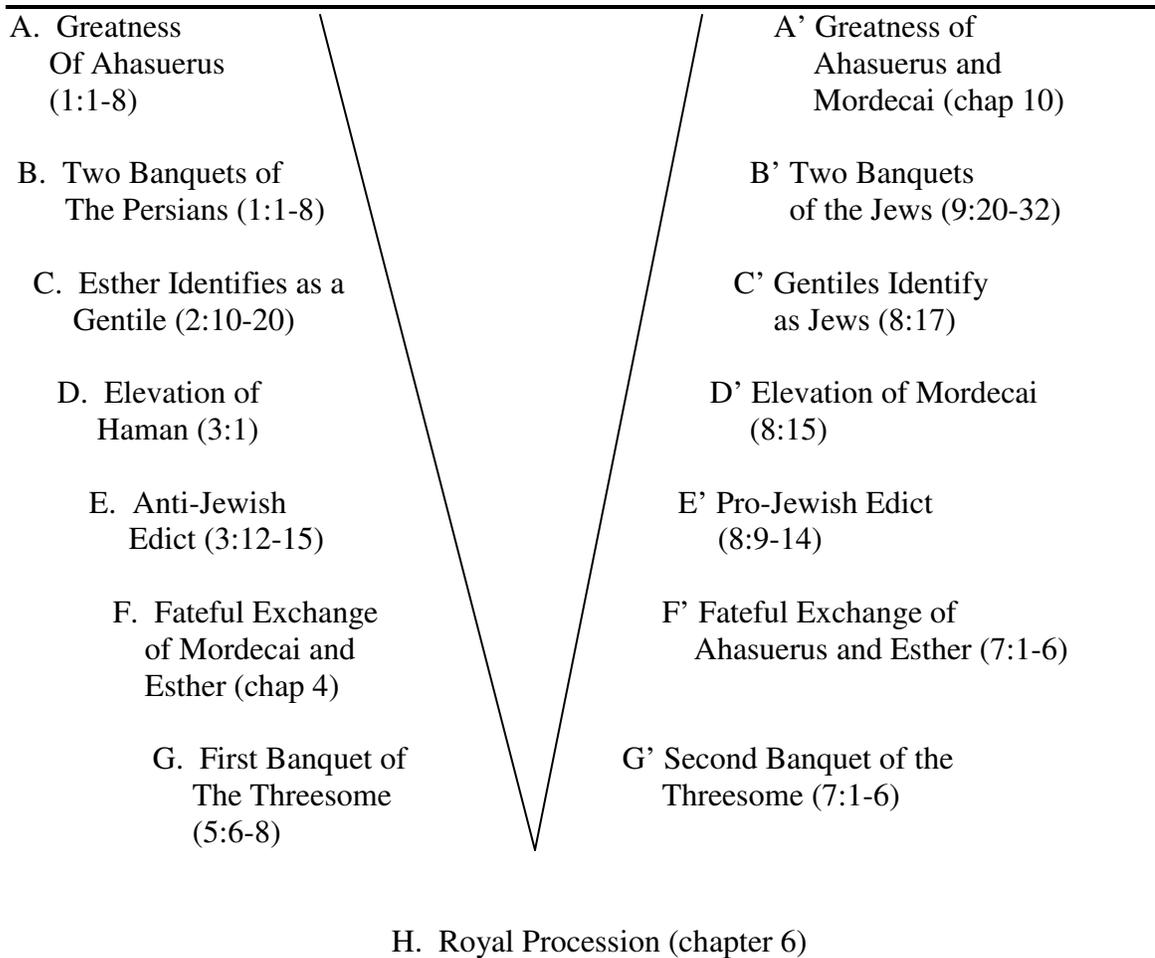


Figure 2—Jon Levenson's Chart on Banquet Relationships

Levenson suggests an alternative method of charting the banquet scenes in the book of Esther that centers on the dramatic reversal between Haman and Mordecai culminating in Mordecai's parade through town (Esth 6).⁸⁹ He creates a symmetrical, chiasmic structure contrasting the change of fortune prevalent throughout the narrative.

⁸⁹Levenson, *Esther*, 8-9. See also Berg, *Esther*, 103-113 who argues the narrative is structured as chiasm at the center of which is the royal procession of Mordecai (Esth 6).

While he admits the symmetry is not perfect, his chart engenders interesting observations and provides a helpful framework in exploring dialogical relationships between characters and the carnivalesque peripety that ensues.⁹⁰ In his interpretation, the emphasis on chapter six and the reversal between Mordecai and Haman functions as a turning of the narrative.⁹¹

Levenson begins with a comparison between the beginning of the text and the story's denouement. The narrative commences with a lavish and ostentatious description of Ahasuerus' banquets in the court that establishes the greatness of the king. The text concludes with statement on the greatness of both the king and Mordecai and references their deeds as recorded in the annals of the kings of Media and Persia (10:1-4). A and A' contrast the greatness of Ahasuerus at the beginning with the prominence of Ahasuerus and Mordecai at the end. The inclusion of Mordecai is remarkable. He begins the story a marginal member of a disenfranchised group within the empire. Although he saves the king's life (Esth 2:19-23), he receives no official praise or commendation. The narrator makes clear his disenfranchised status as an exiled person when Mordecai refused to bow before Haman for no explicit reason. By listing Ahasuerus and Mordecai together at the denouement, the narrator suggests readers see them as coexisting, as contending voices that now dialogue.⁹² His ascension to Haman's position at the scroll's conclusion illustrates the carnivalesque aura of the narrative. His association with the king boasts of

⁹⁰Levenson, *Esther*, 7.

⁹¹Narratives can have more than one turning point and can display multiple structures. See Fox, *Character*, 153. See Levenson, *Esther*, 8.

⁹²Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 90-1.

his newfound status in the empire but begs the question—does a Jew want to be connected with a gentile king like Ahasuerus?

Chapter ten opens with the king imposing tribute on the mainland and islands, וישם המלך אחרורוש מס על הארץ ואיי הים. While this taxation may display the power and prosperity of the king's reign,⁹³ the act of raising taxes rarely earns a ruler accolades. This taxation reverses the remission granted in 2:18 at Esther's coronation feast. Although the text describes the king's deeds as mighty and powerful, וכל מעשה תקפו, וגבורתו, the king himself does not warrant such praise (10:2). Given the narrative's holistic depiction of the king as lazy and inept, it seems unlikely the narrator would sing his praises at the denouement.

The noun תקף appears three times in the Hebrew Bible in Esth 9:29, 10:2; and Dan 11:17. In Esth 9:29, the term is used to confirm the full authority of Purim in a second letter containing Esther's support. תקף appears in Dan 11:17 in the context of the apocalyptic visions when a king tries unsuccessfully to prevail against another king. The noun form comes from the verb תקף, which occurs only four times in the Hebrew Bible: Job 14:20, 15:24; Eccl 4:12, and 6:10. The occurrence in Job 14:20 appears in the context of Job's despondent prayer and relates the frailty of humanity and God's ability to overpower them. In Job 15:24, Eliphaz responds to Job explaining that anxiety prevails over the wicked. In Eccl 4:12, the text praises the benefits of friendship, one of which is a friend can help another who is overpower. In Eccl 16:10, תקף occurs as a *kethib/qere*; the verse describes humans an unable to prevail against those who are stronger. תקף in Esth 10:2 implies the king's authority and ability to prevail rather than

⁹³Berlin, *Esther*, 94.

according praise to his character. Its association with Mordecai implies his ability to prevail and thus the Jewish community's. Mordecai speaks with the language of authority—not only over his family but over the Jewish community and Persian empire. This scene confirms Mordecai as a heteroglot character.⁹⁴

Likewise, while the king advances Mordecai and lists his rank as next to the king *כי מרדכי היהודי משנה למלך אהשוורוש*, and his fellows Jews highly regard him, the narrator does not inform readers that Mordecai is popular or well regarded by the Persians (10:2-3). The appearance of his name alongside that of the king emphasizes Mordecai's accrued power and his elevated status to the highest levels within the Persian court. Yet, the narrator offers no assurances that it will remain as such or that the Persians respect Mordecai the Jew. His identification as a Jew sometimes coincides with his name (Esth 5:13, 6:10, 8:7, 9:29, 9:31, 10:3). His ethnicity remains tied to his name; he is Mordecai the Jew not simply Mordecai. At the conclusion of the story, the Jews experience success and reprieve from their oppressors, but the narrator offers no guarantees this peace and prosperity will continue even with Mordecai in a position of leadership. The narrator has already revealed Ahasuerus' capricious nature, and Mordecai's continued favor in the eyes of the king is not secure. The marginal Jewish community, however, endures and overcomes incredible obstacles.

The dialogic symmetry proceeds by comparing the two banquets of the Persians with the two banquets of the Jews. In B and B', while the Persians initially celebrate, the text concludes with the Jews making merry. The participants change but the location

⁹⁴See Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 93-4 for a summary of Bakhtin's thoughts regarding characters and their dialogic voice.

remains the same. This story commences and concludes in Persia with no mention of the Jews living elsewhere. Despite the decadence of the Persians and their king and the uncertainty of life in the Diaspora, the Jews in the Esther narrative choose to live and die in Persia, not Yehud. This comparison merges the disparate groups and suggests faithful Jews can be fealty citizens of the Empire.

In C and C', Esther initially hides her Jewish ethnicity and identifies herself as a Gentile (2:10). She hides her status as an "other" in order to part of the mainstream. Near the end of the narrative, however, many Gentile citizens of the empire convert to Judaism because of their fear of the Jews, *ורבים מעמי הארץ מתיהדים כי נפל פחד היהודים* (8:17). Ironically, an ethnic identification that once had to be hidden now causes others to fear and convert.⁹⁵

In D and D', two contrasting characters receive elevation. In Esth 3:1, Ahasuerus promotes Haman and seats him higher than any of the other officials, *אחר הדברים האלא גדל*. The text describes Mordecai's elevation in a less explicit but perhaps more poetic manner. He departs from the king dressed in royal robes of blue and white, a crown of gold, and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool, *ותכריך בוץ וארגמן* בלבוש מלכות תכלת וחור ועטרת זהב. The text suggests Mordecai has assumed a high station in the king's court. The two enemies reverse social positions—Haman dies by the king's command and Mordecai assumes his position at court. In carnivalesque language, Haman is uncrowned and Mordecai crowned. The one who sought to kill is killed and the one who mourned in

⁹⁵Berman likens Esther's acknowledgement of her Jewish ethnicity with the process of coming out among gays and lesbians. Joshua Berman, "Hadassah Bat Abihail: The Evolution From Object to Subject in the Character of Esther," *JBL* 120 (2001): 647.

sackcloth and ashes now rejoices in fine accouterments. At the heart of Mordecai's ascension is the pathos of shift and change, the joyful relativity of hierarchical positions.⁹⁶

E and E' relay the initial edict calling for the massacre of all the Jews and then the second counter edict allowing the Jews to "destroy, massacre, and exterminate" any who attack them and also plunder their enemies' possessions (8:11). In a paradoxical blurring of identities, the Persians transform into the victims and the former targets, the Jews, become the victimizers. Much ink has been spilt explaining the action of the Jews. Were they defending themselves against their enemies and potential attackers, or do they exhibit a spirit of retaliation and excessive, nationalistic revenge? For Jones, the repetition of superfluous synonyms, להשמיד להרוג ולאבד, exposes the comedic tone of both the edict and its counterpart.⁹⁷ Haman utters these verbs to describe what will befall the Jews, Esther repeats them, and then they appear again in the counter-edict (3:5-6; 7:4; 8:11). The beauty of the Esther text is that the narrator does not give a clear indication of how serious readers should take these edicts. The tangible threat of pogroms for the Jewish communities living in Diaspora suggests there was more reality than comedy in Haman's declaration. The question of the Jewish response remains unanswered. The description of the killing of the Persians is both implacable and justifiable. It is comedic and likely grossly exaggerated⁹⁸ (over 75,000 Persians die), but also shocking and

⁹⁶See Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 124.

⁹⁷Jones, "Two Misconceptions," 178.

⁹⁸See Berlin, *Esther*, 87.

appalling (9:16).⁹⁹ The language remains unfinalized and reveals an openness to surprise, potentiality, and freedom. Bakhtin summarizes this notion about the openness of literature and the world when he exclaims, “Nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world; the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future.”¹⁰⁰

In the next chiasm on the chart, F and F', Mordecai presses Esther to appeal to the king on behalf of her people (Esth 4). This scene is balanced by Ahasuerus and Esther's exchange in chapter seven where Esther finally reveals her request and Haman's plot against the Jews. According to Levenson's diagram, as Mordecai convinces Esther to take action and approach the king so Esther convinces the king to alter his previous edict. Mordecai is successful in persuading Esther to petition the king, but Esther's request of the king is less clearly triumphant. The text does not explicitly depict Esther's pleas as changing the king's mind. He becomes enraged after she speaks and retires to the palace garden, but it is Haman's prostration before the queen that seals his fate—not Esther's accusation.¹⁰¹ The king burns with anger but seems unaffected by her declaration of being Jewish. In fact, Esther has to petition the king a second time to force him to allow a counter edict (8:3-6). Esther does not initially succeed in appealing to the king's sense of justice. Rather, the king desires to punish Haman's alleged sexual transgression. The

⁹⁹See Jones, “Two Misconceptions,” 177-81.

¹⁰⁰Bakhtin, *Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 166.

¹⁰¹Gordis, “Religion,” 387.

king grants Esther her counter-edict of defense as insouciantly as he approved her obliteration the first time.

G and G' represent the first and second banquets Esther hosts for Ahasuerus, Haman, and herself. The first banquet contains little activity while the second secures Haman's fate. The movement between the two records a turning point in the narrative. Esther and Haman's sphere of influence with the king reverse as Esther commands the more powerful role.

The apogee of perepity occurs in chapter six with Mordecai and Haman's parade procession through the city of Susa.¹⁰² The narrator reinforces the theme of status reversal with Zeresh's speech prognosticating Haman's ultimate defeat, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will never overcome him, You shall collapse altogether before him" (Esth 6:13). The spouse of the chief villain recognizes the futility of Haman's plot and utters one of the more explicitly theological statements in the narrative. Zeresh's role as the one who articulates the *Heilsgeschichte* is apropos given the carnivalesque nature of the text. Zeresh knows the Jews cannot be overcome. The verb employed in this verse, יכל, is reminiscent of תקף. Haman does not know what Zeresh and his advisors know, and this naiveté foretells his downfall.¹⁰³

Levenson, Fox, and Niditch offer helpful means of viewing the structure of the narrative. Their charts illuminate interesting comparisons, reveal the narrative's intricacies, and interpret the banquet scenes as the basic structure around which the narrator builds the story. The homology of text and context, however, requires readers to

¹⁰²Levenson, *Esther*, 7.

¹⁰³See Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 164.

press further. What do the banquet scenes tell readers about the Persian king, his empire, or the Jewish response to surviving and succeeding within it?

The Esther narrative is a rich trove of possibilities. The complex interactions between the characters and the banquet scenes engender questions about the diversity of postexilic life, faith, and the realities of living under the hegemony of empire. How should the Jewish community relate to the gentiles who govern them? Niditch suggests the Esther tale advocates the following plan:

. . . to build homes, raise families, be good citizens, but more . . . becoming a full part of the system, all the while acknowledging the stupidity of those who run the system . . . one deals with life in exile as members of an insecure, sometimes persecuted minority by steering a course of survival somewhere between co-option and self-respect and by holding to the conviction that to be wise and to be worthy are the same.¹⁰⁴

An examination of the relationships between the banquet scenes and the characters in the text reveals a complex web of interconnection. Beal discusses at length the role of the other, the themes of carnival and masquerade, and the blurring of identities. He contends the distinctions between us and them that appear throughout the scroll delineate boundaries and yet blur them as well.¹⁰⁵ The Jews living in Susa are aliens in a foreign land, a people without rights under the whim of an absolute monarch. They live in the Diaspora and are a people without a home who live on the margins; however, the Esther scroll delights in reversals. The pendulum swings between annihilation and excessive merriment during banquets. Vashti loses her throne during a royal banquet at the king's palace, Haman and Xerxes commemorate the installation of

¹⁰⁴Niditch, *Underdogs*, 144-5.

¹⁰⁵Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 2-4.

the decree to kill all the Jews with a banquet, and the Jews celebrate during Purim their near obliteration and subsequent execution of others. Queen Esther, a near victim of genocide, becomes an architect of another massacre of revenge and retribution (Esth 9:13-15). As Beal observes, these ambiguities between those in power and those on the margin inevitably lead to political transformations.¹⁰⁶ Banquet scenes reveal the complex interplay between characters within the narrative that enable these transformations.

In examining the work of Rabelais,¹⁰⁷ Bakhtin depicts the medieval/Renaissance world of carnival as an occasion of wild abandonment where the everyday woes of peasant life are temporarily forgotten. How then does the Esther scroll manifest the ideologies of carnival? How do the Bakhtinian categories dialogism and chronotope impact interpretations of the book of Esther? If medieval carnival parodies the official hierarchy and customs of the Holy Roman Empire, the Catholic Church and the bourgeoisie, the book of Esther parodies the strict restructuring of Jewish life portrayed in the book of Ezra and the Torahcentric path of surviving exile in the book of Daniel.¹⁰⁸ If the book of Ezra demands strict observance of Torah and the putting away of foreign wives, the book of Esther is the antithesis. If the pious Jews in the book of Daniel continue adhering to dietary laws and refuse to acquiesce to Gentile customs even in a

¹⁰⁶Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 2.

¹⁰⁷Readers should note that Bakhtin's connection between Rabelais and carnival is not without detractors. See Samuel Kinser, *Rabelais's Carnival* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 248-260. Kinser asserts that carnival inversions can scarcely be found in either Rabelais's text or the behavior of people during carnival in the Middle Ages.

¹⁰⁸See Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (OTL; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988), 54-59 for a discussion of Ezra in Jewish tradition and how Jewish communities have interpreted him. A dictum by R. Eleazar concerning Ezra's concern for ethnic purity produced much discussion among third and fourth century scholars. R. Eleazar claimed that "Ezra did not go up from Babylon until he had made it like pure sifted flour," (b.Kidd. 69a-b).

foreign land, pious Jews in the book of Esther compromise and adapt to life among gentiles. In the Esther scroll, banquets and intoxication frame the narrative, roles are reversed, and survival and success within midst of the exile is the only way of life presented. Human initiative and cunning ensure salvation; the name of God does not even appear. The book of Esther offers a strikingly different view of life after the exile—one which embraces the Diaspora. Banquet scenes illuminate this heteroglossia, the social antagonism between the worldview offered by the book of Esther and the one offered by other Second Temple literature. This subversive word, offered by the Esther text, rallies against hierarchy and social stratification.

Individual Banquet Scenes

This section will examine the ten banquet scenes and explore how Bakhtin's notions of dialogism, chronotope, and carnival impact readings of the book of Esther. When readers open the book of Esther, they come upon a "sea of booze" and apprehend that "drinking parties are what float the plot."¹⁰⁹ Beal astutely observes that in this story banquets are connected to national politics¹¹⁰ and provide the settings for significant plot developments.¹¹¹ The book opens and closes with feasts. Banquets enclose the narrative providing structure and framework and function as a chronotope facilitating encounters, illustrating historical space, and revealing multiple languages.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 15.

¹¹⁰Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 15.

¹¹¹Berg, *Book of Esther*, 31.

¹¹²See Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 243 for his word on the chronotope of encounter.

The 180-Day Banquet

The first of the ten banquet scenes is undoubtedly the most lavish and turgid. The narrative begins with King Ahasuerus hosting a 180-day feast for all the nobles of the 127-province empire (1:1-4). Most scholars question the historicity of this 180-day banquet and view these verses as hyperbolic.¹¹³ The narrative infers a number of speculations for the reason opportuning a six-month party. Whether to flaunt his wealth and power, to gain political support for his rule, or because the king enjoyed making merry, the narrator's decision to commence the Esther story with a 180 day banquet is indeed significant.¹¹⁴ The narrator invites readers into the world of the Persian king. Significantly, the narrator does not introduce Esther or Mordecai, the heroine and hero, immediately or the underdogs, the Jews, with whom readers are expected to sympathize. Instead, readers meet Ahasuerus at his first banquet. This introduction presents the chronotope of the banquet scene, which will communicate many of the significant events of the narrative.¹¹⁵

While not much specific activity occurs in these first four verses that span 180 days, the expectation of action begins to mount. Readers meet the ruler of Persia, the sovereign under whom the Jews must live and survive. Readers can observe him, even if only briefly before the primary action begins. The text characterizes the king as a ruler

¹¹³Levenson questions the accuracy of the time frame of the banquet and speculates about how the empire was functioning if all the rulers were banqueting for six months. "Who was minding the store during this drinkfest of half a year's duration?" He compares it to Judith 1:16 where the Assyrian army enjoys 120 days of revelry, or even the Assyrian emperor Assurnasirpal's feast with 69,574 attendees. Levenson, *Esther*, 45. Fox calls this feast, "a legendary hyperbole showing the awe of Persian wealth and luxury." Fox, *Character*, 16.

¹¹⁴Levenson, *Esther*, 45.

¹¹⁵Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 250.

who is erratic, ostentatious, and one who enjoys a good party.¹¹⁶ This 180 day party sets the tone for the narrative, and the depiction of Ahasuerus serves as an introduction to his character.¹¹⁷ It also reflects the social conditions of life in the Persian Empire. The king, in essence, symbolizes and represents the empire. His behavior and actions create the milieu in which citizens prosper and flourish or are defeated and vanquished. Banquets are important in the text because banqueting is important to Ahasuerus. By opening the narrative with an ostentatious banquet, the text emphasizes the banquet setting and suggests readers should expect reoccurring feasts. The extravagant description of the feast shows all that the Jews will have to overcome—their victory over genocide will be against all odds. The first banquet reflects the opulence and power of the Persian Empire and its king

This first banquet, though lasting 180 days, occupies only four verses within the narrative (Esth 1:1-4). Readers learn of the king, and the text is careful to clarify the identity of the monarch: King Ahasuerus that is the king, who reigns over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia, ויהי בימי אחשורוש הוא אחשורוש המלך מהדו ועד כוש שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה. The narrator portrays Ahasuerus with a chronotopic mask of a fool.¹¹⁸ Ahasuerus represents the conventions against which the Jews will fight to overcome but then the system into which they are subsumed. The targums assert the following opinion regarding the identity and character of Xerxes:

¹¹⁶Levenson, *Esther*, 45.

¹¹⁷See Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 178-87 for his discussion of the series of eating and drinking and drunkenness. Bakhtin claims almost all the themes of a novel come about within the context of this series.

¹¹⁸See Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 162-65 for his understanding of masks and the fool.

The son of Cyrus, King of Persia, son of Darius, King of Media. He was the Xerxes who commanded to bring wine from 127 provinces for 127 kings who were reclining before him, that every man might drink of the wine of his own province and not be hurt. He was the Xerxes whose counsel was foolish, and whose decree was not established. He was the Xerxes, the corrupt king. He was the Xerxes who commanded to bring Vashti, the queen, naked before him, but she would not come. He was the Xerxes, the wicked king, the fool, who said: Let my kingdom perish, but let not my decree fail...He was the Xerxes who killed his wife for the sake of a friend. He was the Xerxes who killed his friend for the sake of his wife. He was the Xerxes.¹¹⁹

The context of the first banquet is comedic and ripe with purpose. This initial banquet introduces readers to Ahasuerus' character will be and to the comedic tone of the narrative. While readers may express awe at the grandeur of a long party, they cannot view the king as a credible ruler. The narrator invites readers to imagine an ostentatious scene where the exigent ruler of the world's largest empire enjoys a 180 day feast with all the nobles of his lands. Anyone of import in the empire is present at this banquet including military officials revealing the king's supreme confidence in the security of his empire.¹²⁰ Readers surmise the ineptitude, the farcity, and the lavishness of the king and subsequently his empire in this first banquet. This banquet occurs in the third year of his reign; it does not commemorate a lifetime of service to his people (1:3). Instead, the motivation for this lavish banquet is to "display the vast riches of his kingdom and the splendid glory of his majesty" (1:4), בהראתו את עשוד מלכותו ואת יקר תפארת גדולתו.

The Hebrew word for "glory" or "honor" is יקר and it occurs ten times in the book of Esther (1:4, 20; 6:3, 6 (two times), 7, 9 (two times), 11; and 8:16). In the Esther text, "honor" connotes the "public display and consolidation of power over against another's

¹¹⁹Tg. *Esth.* I.

¹²⁰Beal, *Esther*, 5-6.

humiliation and/or subordination.”¹²¹ Beal suggests the narrator’s use of יקר reveals the king’s desire for public recognition of his status and power over against the public’s subordination. Yet, because Ahasuerus represents the fool, he does not attain honor.

By placing this banquet at the beginning of the narrative, the narrator invites readers to read the subsequent banquet scenes in dialogue with this one. Time and space achieve comedic high during this half year party. While none of the banquets will last as long in terms of sheer days, the final banquets establishing Purim shall never cease and the memory of them never perish, וימי הפורים האלה לא יעברו מתוך היהודים וזכרם לא יסוף מזרעם. This act of remembering commemorated through a banquet scene experienced by the underdogs adumbrates Ahasuerus’ status as a fool. The book ends with the Jewish community surpassing Ahasuerus’ initial banquet because theirs will continue in perpetuity and not for only six months. Ironically, the king’s desire for honor and the banquets he celebrates which proclaim his honor, do not achieve the long lasting status or greatness of the banquets celebrated by the group he nearly allows to be destroyed.

The Seven-Day Banquet

Immediately following the 180 day banquet, Ahasuerus arranges another seven-day banquet for the officials and servants of the palace from the greatest to the smallest (1:5-8, 10-21). Vashti celebrates concomitantly with a banquet of her own for the women of the palace and these two are intertwined. As if a six-month banquet was not enough time for revelry, this second seven day banquet demonstrates Ahasuerus’ desire for amusement and continues the banquet setting, heightening the expectance of action

¹²¹Beal, *Esther*, 6.

and transformation. The aim of this second banquet again emphasizes the king's greatness and honor over all of the empire and social order.¹²² The second banquet dialogues with the first.

The narrative action accelerates during this banquet scene as does the text's continued characterization of the king and his empire. If the first banquet expresses the opulence of the empire through its length, the second does so by its description of the accouterments and drinking. Fox remarks, "The exclamatory listing creates a mass of images that overwhelm the sensory imagination and suggest both a sybaritic delight in opulence and an awareness of its excess."¹²³ Verses six and seven describe the majesty and opulence of the Persian court with its "hanging of white cotton and blue wool, caught up by cords of fine linen and purple wool to silver rods and alabaster columns; and there were couches of gold and silver on a pavement of marble, alabaster, mother of pearl, and mosaics" (Esth 1:6).¹²⁴ Even the drinking glasses receive notice as "golden beakers, beakers of varied design" (Esth 1:7) Status is visibly evident in the descriptions of the kingdom, palace, and guests. If readers were not impressed with the initial 180 days of banqueting, then the description of the regal Persian court in Susa in verses six and seven finishes the task. The banquet scene reflects the experience of banqueting in the ancient world.¹²⁵

¹²²Beal, *Esther*, 7.

¹²³Fox, *Character*, 16.

¹²⁴See Paton for a linguistic and historical survey of the decorations and furnishing listed. Paton, *Esther*, 135-40.

¹²⁵See Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 366-67 for an explanation of how chronotopic literature works out the detailed possibilities of events and experiences in time and space.

The narrator includes with the palace depiction a short verse explaining the king's policy on drinking alcohol. The text explains, "Drinks were served...according to the bounty of the king. Drinking was by flagons, without restraint; for the king had given orders to all the officials of his palace to do as each one desired," והשתיה כדת אין אנס כי כן (Esth 1:7-8). The text reveals the king's love of wine as he invites banquet participants to imbibe as much as they please. The law for the week is for each man to fulfill his own desire; restraint is against the law.¹²⁶ With carnivalesque delight, participants may imbibe and celebrate as much as they desire. Yet, the social boundaries between the king and his subjects remain firmly entrenched. While the woes of everyday life may be forgotten in the spirit of the banquet scene, disobedience to the king's directives continue to carry substantial consequences. The narrator expands the chronotope of banquet by depicting the king as a fool. At this banquet, however, something significant occurs that puts Ahasuerus' honor and status as ruler to the test and changes the narrative pulse of the story: he calls for the queen and she does not come. At the height of his success and with his heart merry with wine, Ahasuerus finds himself in the humiliating position of having his own wife refuse his invitation.

This banquet scene reveals several interesting components about the king's character and his command over the empire. The narrator takes great care in listing the names of the seven eunuchs attending the king. The narrator's purpose in employing this

¹²⁶Beal, *Esther*, 8.

officialese language is unclear,¹²⁷ but the text reveals the king and the court's great interest in protocol. Ahasuerus' motives in calling for Vashti to appear before the crowd of men are unspecified although readers can easily imagine a tawdry scene of drunken men demanding the appearance of a beautiful woman wearing her crown. The absence of women at the king's second banquet enhances the possibility that Ahasuerus' parties were little more than bachelor parties, Or as Levenson describes them, "stag parties, with all the licentiousness and disrespect the term implies."¹²⁸ As the banquet displays the king's honor, so Ahasuerus desires to display the beauty of his wife, which reflects on his own greatness as well. While all the banquet participants are able to drink as much as they chose and remain within the law, "Vashti's own lack of compulsion in obeying a royal summons is very much against the law."¹²⁹

Vashti's refusal incenses the king and dishonors him. The impressive banquets and display of Persian court wealth disappear with Vashti's humiliating behavior. With Vashti's refusal, the narrator moves the story outside the banquet chronotope—readers expect audacious behavior at feasts but not the queen's disobedience to the king. Ahasuerus' actions illustrate his desire to follow protocol. He consults his sages inquiring of the appropriate legal response to Vashti's disobedience. Readers are again given the seven names of the king's closest advisors. Memucan advises the king and transforms a private embarrassment into a public humiliation of the king. Memucan

¹²⁷It may reflect the narrator's experience with other Diaspora stories or knowledge of the Persian court. Bakhtin might call this use of language the "representability of events." Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 250.

¹²⁸Levenson, *Esther*, 46.

¹²⁹Berg, *Book of Esther*, 36.

interprets Vashti's actions as subversive; her refusal threatens the sexual-political order.¹³⁰ What should have been a private matter becomes public with the royal decree and the subsequent declaration of male authority in every home in the provinces insinuated by the removal of Vashti. This new decree means to drown out Vashti's subversive disobedience by requiring all women in the empire to give יקר to their husbands (1:20). The device of not understanding, perpetuated here by the king, exposes the king as a fool and his policies as vulgar conventions.¹³¹ Yet this decree also broadcasts the queen's actions into the home of every family in the empire, humorously requiring every woman to honor her husband because the queen refuses to honor hers.

This scene illustrates the absolute and capricious nature of the king. He yields unconditional power and control and while the context of the banquet and Vashti's banishment is comical, the king is publicly humiliated after all, the scene remains tinged with fear. Ahasuerus can and will do as he pleases and not even the queen is exempt from his unpredictable behavior. This sort of conduct makes all citizens possible victims and creates an environment of anxiety and apprehension. This is the atmosphere in which the Jews must co-exist.

Vashti's Banquet

Meanwhile, while the king and the men of Susa celebrate together, Vashti also hosts a banquet for the women in the palace. Persian custom did not demand separate

¹³⁰Beal, *Esther*, 13.

¹³¹See Bakhtin, *Dialogical Imagination*, 164.

banquets for men and women,¹³² and thus the narrator's removal of the women from the scene is a narrative necessity not a society one. Beal suggests the separation functions to keep the women subordinate.¹³³ Yet, they are neither included nor completely excluded; they banquet in the king's house but not in his presence. Their exclusion can function as a means of control and subordination but it also allows them relative freedom from him.¹³⁴ The targums creatively imagine the actions of the women at their banquet:

She [Vashti] gave them dark wine to drink, and seated them within the palace, while she showed them the wealth of the King. And she asked her, How does the King sleep, and she told them everything that the women wished to know. She showed them the King's bedroom, and how he ate, and how he drank, and how he slept (*Meg.* 12a).¹³⁵

The separation of Vashti's banquet from that of the king's offers another boundary that Esther will cross. The new queen banquet in *Esth* 2:18 does not specify separate feasts for men and women. Additionally, Esther hosts Ahasuerus and Haman at two banquets later in the narrative. The text does not record Vashti, a seeming insider with her status as queen, banqueting with the king. Rather, an outsider from the community of exiles will traverse these boundaries.

Readers can only speculate as to why Vashti refuses the king's order. Scholars from the ancient rabbis to the present suggest a variety of reasons for Vashti's feast and subsequent disobedience. The LXX intimates the feasts were coronation feasts, but the

¹³²See Herodotus ix.110, Plutarch, *Artax.* V.

¹³³Beal, *Esther*, 8.

¹³⁴Beal, *Esther*, 8.

¹³⁵*Tg. Esther. II.*

Masoretic text does not explain why Vashti refuses to appear (LXX 1:5).¹³⁶ Elias Bickermann suggests, based on Greek evidence, that by going to the king's party, Vashti would lose respect and lower herself to the position of a concubine.¹³⁷ Talmudic tradition suggests Vashti is the granddaughter of King Nebuchadnezzar; another rabbi opines she is summoned on the seventh day because she forced Jewish women to strip naked on the Sabbath and work (*b.Meg.* 12b). The targums insert this passage on Vashti:

In whose days the work upon the house of our great God ceased and was interrupted until the second year of Darius, on account of the advice of the wicked Vashti, the daughter of Evil-Merodach, the son of Nebuchadnezzar. And because she did not permit the building of the house of the sanctuary, it was decreed concerning her that she should be put to death naked; and he [Xerxes] also, because he gave heed to her advice, had his days cut short and his kingdom divided; so that, whereas before all peoples, races, languages, and eparchies were subject to his authority, they now served him no longer because of this. But after it was revealed before the Lord that Vashti was to be slain, and that he was to accept Esther, who was of the daughters of Sarah, who lived 127 years, a respite was granted to her.¹³⁸

In some medieval Christian allegorical interpretations, Vashti symbolized the Synagogue, the disobedient woman replaced by the faithful wife Esther, or the Church.¹³⁹

Vashti's banquet only receives one sentence in contrast to the king's verbose description, but Vashti's actions introduce an interesting paradox Esther will illustrate when she becomes queen. Vashti refuses to appear when summoned and is removed

¹³⁶ Berg, *Book of Esther*, 34; Bardtke, *Das Buch Esther*, 278.

¹³⁷Elias Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 185-6. Bickermann surveys

¹³⁸*Tg. Esth. I. Meg. 12b* intimates Vashti refuses because she has grown leprous or because the angel Gabriel caused her to grow a tail. Josephus contends Vashti is mindful of Persian customs, which do not allow strangers to look upon wives.

¹³⁹See Marie-Louise Thérél, "L'origine du theme de la 'synagogue répudiée,'" *Scriptorium* 25 (1971): 288-89.

while Esther appears unsummoned and is spared and ultimately rewarded. Vashti's refusal pushes the banquet chronotope in new directions.

The suggestion for punishing Vashti comes from one of the king's advisors Memucan. His advice, ironically, intensifies the situation and makes it an empire wide situation rather than a quiet domestic one. He misinterprets the information and reads it as a, "universal crisis, a rebellion against the sexual and social order, a violation of the harmony of every home and marriage."¹⁴⁰ The narrative thus far accords with the chronotopic ideology of a Diaspora story. Readers have not yet been introduced to any Jewish characters and the gentiles receive little commendation. The Persian king and his empire are opulent, excessive, and downright tawdry. The ideology and boundaries of a Diaspora story soon change, however, with the introduction of Esther and her banquet.

New Queen Banquet

Esther's first banquet as queen occurs in 2:18. As the new queen of Persia, Ahasuerus honors Esther with a banquet. This royal celebration helps erase the last memory when all the palace officials were again present but Queen Vashti refused the king's request. Esther's banquet confirms a new direction in the narrative and introduces new hope for the Jewish population living in Diaspora.¹⁴¹ The context leading up to Esther's ascension is paradoxically both comical and frightening. The king hosts a beauty pageant and selects the woman who most pleases him to be the next queen. Each woman receives a whole year's worth of cosmetic treatments before appearing before

¹⁴⁰Fox, *Character*, 21.

¹⁴¹ Fox, *Character*, 38.

Ahasuerus. The narrator even specifies with comedic lucidity that each received six months of oil of myrrh followed by six months of perfumes and cosmetics. While the narrator's tone drips with humor in describing the ostentatious and outlandish beauty regiment the women undergo, readers are at the same time reminded of the helplessness they face in the harem. They do not choose to enter the king's beauty pageant. Instead, the palace officials assemble the women. The text employs the niphal infinitive construct קָבַץ to describe the gathering of the women implying they assemble not of their own will or doing. The narrator again illustrates the danger of living in Persia and under the command of king Ahasuerus. One never knows and cannot object when the king demands one's beautiful daughter for his harem.

The text later relays the significance of the one encounter with the king when it explains that after each woman's one night with the king, she would move to the second harem and not go before the king again unless he summons her by name. The stakes are indeed high, and the king's absolute rule not questioned. Esther, however, pleases the king and becomes the next queen. This banquet foreshadows Esther's future climactic banquets and also the Jewish celebration of Purim where gifts are also exchanged, even as the king in 2:18 gives his people gifts. Fox suggests that the author of the text "is hinting that when things go well with the Jews, others benefit too."¹⁴²

While the LXX attempts to render the missing religious elements, the MT leaves the narrative pleasantly ambiguous. Readers do not know Esther's feelings about her time in the harem, her feelings toward the king, or how she manages to keep her Jewish identity secret and yet still remain firmly attached to the Jewish community. Unlike

¹⁴² Fox, *Character*, 38.

Daniel and his companions, in the MT, Esther does not demand dietary accommodations, follow any Jewish laws, pray, mourn for Jerusalem and the temple, or express concern about her relationship with a gentile king. The chronotopic depiction of Jews in the book of Esther radically alters the genre Diaspora story.

Ahasuerus and Haman Celebrate

The fifth banquet occurs in Esther 3:15, and the narrative depicts an absurd, terrifying scene. Haman, having just persuaded the king (without any trouble) to wipe out an entire group of people, sits down with the king to drink while the news of the new edict travels the city of Susa creating confusion. In this banquet scene, the king does not celebrate a banquet on a grand scale but instead the two men sit down to drink and feast. Unlike the LXX which removes any blame from Artaxerxes and his role in the decree (Addition E, Esth 16), the MT does no such justifying. This edict is written by the king's scribes, in the king's presence, with the king's name, sealed with the royal ring, and then proclaimed everywhere throughout the kingdom (Esth 3:12-13). While the narrator may construe Ahasuerus as a lazy, inept, oriental despot, he remains a frightening figure, one who is willing to eradicate a particular population within his empire without inquiring of their crime or identity.

Banquets, and in particular drinking, function both as opportunities for transformation and as resting points within the narrative. After Haman secures the edict of extermination, his anger cools, the crisis is resolved, and he and king can relax confident that the social order is once again secure.¹⁴³ The banquet creates a boundary

¹⁴³Beal, *Esther*, 56.

delineating the king and Haman from those on the periphery. The scene recalls the one in Genesis 37:25 where Joseph's brothers sit down to eat after throwing him into the pit in which they expect him to die or in 2 Kings 9:34 when Jehu tramples Jezebel with his horses and sits down to eat and drink.

Dialogically, this banquet marks a contrast with those that preceded it. It is not a large, festive occasion like the four earlier ones but is small and intimate. It reinforces the alliance between Haman and the king, for only the two of them celebrate while all of Susa is thrown into turmoil. The banquet fortifies Haman's elevated status and places Esther, Mordecai and the Jewish community in opposition to those in authority. In accordance with the preceding banquets, however, this banquet does signify a celebration of hegemony and social control. As the 180 day feast displayed the prestige and power of the king, the seven day banquet along with Vashti's feast for the women continued the ostentation and grandiose showcase of the monarch's command of the Persian Empire. Vashti's refusal to appear threatened the king's control of his empire, but his advisors salvage the situation and engender a new, more obedient queen whose beauty is celebrated with a banquet re-establishing the king's status and power. This feast between Haman and the king likewise temporarily protects the empire from potential dissidents and removes the threat of social disorder. Haman and the king attempt to monologize truth; they try to "remove the voices," "carve out abstract concepts and judgments from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness."¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴See Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 57, for their summary of Bakhtin's notion of monologization.

Berlin remarks that Ahasuerus is not evil but simply inept.¹⁴⁵ Levenson notes when the king agrees to annihilate the Jews, he does so with, “the same permissiveness and lack of standards...handing him his signet ring without so much as a word of interrogation or a moment of deliberation (3:9-11).¹⁴⁶ The narrator does not tell readers if Ahasuerus bothers to consider the consequences of his actions. Rather with his ring given, the matter is finished and the celebrating begins. He rejects Haman’s promise of money and idly hands over his signet ring and orders the annihilation of a group of unknown, disobedient citizens.

This reader disagrees with Berlin’s assessment of the king. Hannah’s Arendt’s characterization of Adolf Eichmann as embodying the “banality of evil” seems to fit Ahasuerus as well. He terrorizes his subjects and agrees to eradicate a whole group of people without asking any questions or learning their identity. He agrees to exterminate his own citizens without hesitation. Living under the hegemony of Persian rule, the text implies, is dangerous and arbitrary. Ahasuerus tries to monologize language.

With the declaration of this decree, the entire city of Susa becomes chaotic. The future changes, people are frightened and uncertain, and their worldview is no longer the same. As the city and the couriers buzz with activity, Fox describes the actions of Haman and Ahasuerus, “they coolly and callously sit down to feast...Xerxes, having turned the whole matter over to the vizier, is simply enjoying one of his regular dinners.”¹⁴⁷ The scene contrasts the law givers and their addressees. The Hebrew verb,

¹⁴⁵Berlin, *Esther*, 5.

¹⁴⁶Levenson, *Esther*, 46.

¹⁴⁷Fox, *Character*, 55.

בוך often translated as “thrown into confusion,” is a niphil passive in Esth 3:15. It connotes chaos or wandering about in confusion.¹⁴⁸ While Haman and the king assume the situation has stabilized and is resolved, with carnivalesque delight the opposite turns out to be true. The city wanders about in confusion as Haman and the king banquet.

Esther’s Banquets

The boundary established in Haman and Ahasuerus’ banquet in chapter three begins to unravel during Esther’s banquets. One of the outsiders has joined the insiders. Esther enjoys what Bakhtin calls a “surplus of seeing.”¹⁴⁹ She is simultaneously a paradox of two conditions that are inseparable and ineluctable¹⁵⁰—she is a member of both the social elite and the marginal community. Esther prepares two banquets for Ahasuerus and Haman in 5:4-8 and 7:1-8. These act as a contrast to an earlier banquet the king arranged in her honor and the one celebrating the pogrom; the situation reverses and Esther now serves as hostess to the king and his counselor. As Berg sardonically observes, “Now, ironically, Esther’s feast honors the king, with the monarch’s principal officer and servant as a guest.”¹⁵¹ The attempt to monologize truth fails, and Ahasuerus unwittingly does not know what Esther knows—Haman has put her at risk and thus endangered the kingdom and crown. In Esth 5:4-8, the queen risks her life, finds favor with the king, and after receiving a promise of up to half of the kingdom, beguilingly

¹⁴⁸Beal, *Esther*, 56. See also Exod 14:3 and Joel 1:18.

¹⁴⁹See Michael Holquist, ed., *The Architectonics of Answerability* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 175.

¹⁵⁰Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 71.

¹⁵¹Berg, *Book of Esther*, 34.

invites Ahasuerus and Haman to a banquet that day. After she makes her request, the king once again responds instantly. He replies, “Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther desires” (5:5). Fox observes, “Xerxes responds with such alacrity that he does not even pause to say yes.”¹⁵² Despite the angst Esther expresses in chapter four about the dangers of approaching the king unsummoned, chapter five relates none of her thoughts or feelings.¹⁵³ She remains consistent with the meaning of her name, אֶסְתֵּר, and hides her emotions.

By contrast, the narrator continues the calculated depiction of Haman in these scenes and the chronotopic portrayal of Ahasuerus. The king readily agrees to attend Esther’s feast and commands Haman to “hurry and do Esther’s bidding” (Esth 5:5). The narrator tells readers that Haman leaves Esther’s banquet, שָׂמַח וְטוֹב לֵב, until he encounters Mordecai in the palace gate. The narrator reveals Haman’s feelings and lays bare his emotions: he is enormously pleased at having dined with the king and queen but then is filled with rage after seeing Mordecai (Esth 5:9).

Within these banquet scenes Haman swings from the heights of honor and prestige as the king’s ultimate office (Esth 5:9) to the depths of dread and despair as the king’s despised and condemned (Esth 7:7-10).¹⁵⁴ The narrator foreshadows a dangerous

¹⁵²Fox, *Character*, 69.

¹⁵³In the LXX, Esther bring two attendants for support and collapses as she approaches the king, LXX Esth 5:2-3, 7. Interestingly, Fox correlates the date of Esther’s appearance before the king to that of Passover, and he notes the parallel between Esther 5:2 and Exodus 12:36, which records the LORD’s work in securing for the Hebrews the favor of the Egyptians. In 5:1, Esther adorns herself with מַלְכוּת, which translates royalty or royal attire. Fox references Rabbi Hanina who interprets the absence of a Hebrew work for robes in 5:1 to mean that the “Holy Spirit clothed her so that she spoke through prophetic inspiration.” Fox, *Character*, 89. For more information on the connection between Passover and Purim, see Wechsler, “Shadow, 276-77; Michael G. Wechsler, “Critical Notes: The Purim-Passover Connection: A Reflection of Jewish Exegetical Tradition in the Peshitta Book of Esther,” *JBL* 117 (1998): 321-25.

¹⁵⁴Beal, *Esther*, 73.

turn of events for Haman with the phrase, וטוב לב. Just as the king's heart is merry with wine when he requests Vashti appear before the banquet participants (1:10), Haman leaves Esther's first banquet with a טוב לב.¹⁵⁵

Ahasuerus remains the idle, gentile monarch. He arrives at the banquet, offers Esther half his kingdom, and does not even respond when Esther invites him to a second banquet the next day. He remains both frightening and ridiculous. He is the absolute leader of the empire and holds the power of life and death with his decrees. Yet, the narrator paints him in drab colors. He banquets, drinks wine, and enjoys himself. He does not think, adjudicate, or establish policy; rather, he responds, he monologizes, he finalizes.¹⁵⁶

After he is satiated with wine, the king offers Esther for a second time what she wants. The king's motives remain unclear, but he asks Esther for her request and offers to fulfill her desires even up to half of the kingdom. She responds by surreptitiously inviting them to a second banquet the next day. The king appears relaxed and compliant. One can wonder, along with the king and Haman, why Esther does not make her request known, for the king has already promised her essentially whatever she pleases. Yet, she chooses to delay her request until the next day. Perhaps she does not trust the king to keep his promises or worries that with his malleable personality he will revoke his word upon the advice of his counselors. The rabbis suggested a number of possibilities for Esther's reticence, the most likely being: she was setting a trap for Haman (R. Eleazar),

¹⁵⁵Beal, *Esther*, 74.

¹⁵⁶See Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 59-60 for a description of monologization and truth as dialogic.

that she wanted him present for an accusation (R. Jose), that she wanted to prevent the possibility of Haman forming a conspiracy with the king (R. Meir), and that she knew Xerxes was an erratic ruler.¹⁵⁷ Levenson suggests several options for Esther's delay: perhaps Esther loses her nerve at her first opportunity to accuse Haman, and then is forced to invite them to another banquet, or she delays her request until the king is well under the influence of wine to ensure his good mood and willingness to comply with her wishes, or perchance Esther, by inviting Haman to another banquet, seemingly honors him just before she "fattens him for the kill."¹⁵⁸

The targums suggest even the Jewish community questioned Esther's delay in requesting deliverance from the king and inviting him and Haman to a second banquet.

And from the day in which Esther invited Haman to the banquet the children of Israel were distressed, saying thus among themselves: We expect daily that Esther will ask the King to put Haman to death, but instead of this she invites him to a banquet. . .¹⁵⁹

Whatever her reason, Esther's first banquet for Ahasuerus and Haman heightens the suspense and anticipation of Esther's request and forces readers to wonder how she will reveal her demand and how the king will respond. While Haman's motives remain clear, the narrator continues to veil Esther's motivations and inner thoughts. This short scene injects hope into the story. Esther interrupts the insiders' party. Her heteroglossia rebuffs official efforts at monologism.

¹⁵⁷b. Meg. 15b.

¹⁵⁸ Levenson, *Esther*, 90-91.

¹⁵⁹*Tg. Esth. I.*

The interlude between Esther's two feasts reveals a turning point in the narrative. In a carnivalesque spirit, Mordecai is exalted and Haman brought low. Haman leaves Esther's banquet and upon seeing Mordecai, becomes enraged, or חמה. The same term appears in Esth 1:12 and describes the king's anger toward Vashti and again in Esth 3:5 when Haman initially encounters Mordecai. The first time Haman becomes infuriated because Mordecai will not bow or do obeisance before him (Esth 3:2-3). This time, however, Haman is furious because Mordecai refuses to rise before him.¹⁶⁰

In response to his anger, Haman comedically approaches the king to request permission to kill Mordecai, mistakenly interprets the king's query about honoring a faithful servant as applying to himself, and must parade Mordecai through town exalting him just as he wished to be exalted. This unexpected reversal between the characters heightens the narrative tension. As chapter six concludes, Haman's wife Zeresh predicts his downfall. She tells him, "If Mordecai, before whom your downfall has begun, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him, but will surely fall before him" (6:13). Appropriately, just as she concludes her speech, the king's eunuchs arrive to whisk Haman away to Esther's banquet. Barely has the prognostication left Zeresh's mouth, and her husband is beckoned to fulfill it. The use of the infinitive absolute construction, "you will surely fall," or in Hebrew גפול תפול, implies a sense of certainty in this prediction.¹⁶¹

Esther's second banquet in 7:1-2 begins much as her other one did. They eat, drink wine, and again the king presses Esther for her request. This time, however, Esther

¹⁶⁰Beal, *Esther*, 74.

¹⁶¹Beal, *Esther*, 86.

reveals her supplication and Haman's fate is sealed. Yet again, the king reveals his temper and erratic behavior. Haman and Ahasuerus do not know what Esther and readers know.

Esther's banquets invite readers to participate in an intimate banquet scene. Esther joins Haman and Ahasuerus, and this threesome unsettles readers who know what Esther is supposed to ask the king. The banquet commences with familiar, formulaic utterances: the king asks Esther's her request and promises her half the kingdom. She adroitly frames her request around the significance of the deed, noting that had she and her people merely been sold into slavery, she would not have troubled the king over such a trifling matter. The last half of the verse does not read smoothly in Hebrew.

כי נמכרנו אני ועמי להשמקד להרוג ולאבד ואלו לעבדים ולשפחות נמכרנו החרשתי כי אין הצר שוה בנוק המלך (Esth 7:4). Paton complains that most translators add the phrase "but I cannot keep silent," which does not appear in the text.¹⁶² He also protests the translation of צר as "calamity," a meaning the term never assumes in the book of Esther, and the translation of נזק as "annoyance" when it typically means injury. His conclusion remains insufficient as he exclaims the text is simply corrupted and no satisfactory emendation can be found.¹⁶³ Ironically, Haman who throughout the narrative desires a lofty position in the court finally receives the highest of all positions, impaled atop a stake fifty cubits high.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶²Paton, *Esther*, 261.

¹⁶³Paton, *Esther*, 262. See Beal, *Esther*, 90; Paul Haupt, "Critical Notes on Esther," *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* 24 (1907/8): 186; Frederic Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (WBC; Dallas: Word Books, 1996), 427-8; and Levenson, *Esther*, 100, for a survey of the translation options and difficulties with this verse.

¹⁶⁴Beal, *Esther*, 88.

When the king asks Esther who is responsible for this situation, the queen adeptly identifies Haman as the perpetrator and glosses over the king's role in authorizing the decree. Esther exclaims, "The adversary and foe is the wicked Haman," איש צר ואויב המן הרע הזה (Esth 7:6). This scene engenders much instability in the political realm of the empire and higher court for the queen has identified herself as one marked for annihilation by the decree of the king and his closest advisor.¹⁶⁵ After hearing Esther's impassioned plea and condemnation of Haman, he quickly retreats to the palace garden in anger, forgetful or refusing to acknowledge his role in the decree. The LXX carefully absolves Xerxes of all guilt and places the edict solely on Haman (Addition E). The MT does not allow the king this luxury, however, and readers remember the king's ease in allowing the obliteration. Upon re-entering the banquet room, Ahasuerus fills with rage as Haman lay prostrate before Esther. The text employs the verb נפל in depicting Haman's prostration. Bakhtin's sense of a grotesque body fits the depiction of Haman as the text debases and degrades him both physically and metaphorically.¹⁶⁶ This term also occurs in Esther's entreaty before the king in 8:3. The use of this verb suggests Haman's position is indeed one of supplication.¹⁶⁷ The king cannot apparently adjudicate the difference between supplication and seduction, and immediately stipulates his death.

During this banquet scene, Esther's words overturn the stability of the empire and the relationship between this triangle of characters. Esther, whom Haman and the king

¹⁶⁵Beal, *Esther*, 91-2.

¹⁶⁶Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 204-06.

¹⁶⁷Beal disagrees and argues the text is purposefully ambiguous. While there should be a ל preposition before Esther's name as in Esth 1:9, the text can be read either as Haman falls on the couch, on Esther, or possibly both. Beal, *Esther*, 93.

assumed was an insider, turns out to be an outsider and a double voiced character, while Haman whom the king presumed was an insider transforms into an outsider and is exposed as an advocate of monologism. In carnivalesque fashion, the ostensible social order has reversed.¹⁶⁸

Esther's banquets dialogue with the ones preceding and emphasize the possibility of abrupt changes in social and political power. As Vashti swiftly loses her position during a banquet, so Haman falls from favor. As the Jews faced annihilation and extermination and then Haman and Ahasuerus celebrated, so after Esther's banquet the Jewish community experiences hope for a reprieve and salvation. The banquet scenes reveal the political stratagems and possibilities for social upheaval. Banquets impress upon readers the arbitrary and malleable nature of the king, the king who holds the power of life and death, of survival and extinction. Indeed, the text does not clarify the motive for the king's decree against Haman. Is Haman put to death because of his decree against Esther or because of his assault against the queen?¹⁶⁹ The text remains ambiguous.

A chronotopic interpretation of Esther's banquets scenes reveals the danger and tension implicit with living in the Diaspora. Esther must disobey official protocol and approach the king unsummoned, an activity that carries the possibility of death. She must inform the king who thinks of her as an insider, at least by virtue of being the queen and a respected member of the royal court, that she is in fact an outsider; she has a surplus of seeing.¹⁷⁰ Esther traverses the boundaries of the exile and concomitantly coexists in two

¹⁶⁸Morris, *Bakhtin Reader*, 203.

¹⁶⁹Beal, *Esther*, 93.

¹⁷⁰Emerson and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, 71.

worlds: one of privilege and one of the margins. She keeps her identity a secret and moves within the limits of the powerful. But she also remains firmly entrenched within the periphery, as Mordecai reminds her in Esth 4:13-14 when he exclaims, “. . . Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter while you and your father’s house will perish.” Esther experiences the difficult paradox of possessing two identities and ideologies and expresses double voiced discourse.¹⁷¹ She is both a Jew and thereby in exile and an outsider and the queen, an honored member of the king’s household and inner circle. The question Esther ultimately faces is whether she can indeed be both a Jew and a member of the gentile court. In this sense, she faces similar struggles with the characters of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the book of Daniel. Analogous features of the chronotopic genre Diaspora story appear in both the book of Esther and the book of Daniel. The book of Esther, however, pushes the boundaries of Diaspora story further than the book of Daniel. Esther, like Daniel and the other young Jews, will survive in the Gentile court. But neither Esther nor her Jewish compatriots will long for Jerusalem or a Torahcentric way of life. They will instead forge a new path for Jews living in the Diaspora.

The Jews Celebrate

This Diaspora story has a happy ending but not in the same sense other Diaspora stories achieve resolution with the God of Israel intervening in a magnificent display of

¹⁷¹Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 184-89.

power. While the narrative opens with a display of the king's wealth and power, its denouement revels in the salvation of the Jews and their surprising rise in status. In Esther 8:15-17 readers observe the Jews rejoicing in the new decree and dramatic reversal of fortune secured by Esther. The text records the joy of the people upon hearing news of the king's edict, Mordecai's elevation, and their change in status, והעיר שושן צהלה ויקר ושמחה ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה וששן ויקר. The description of Mordecai's apparel and accouterments emphasizes his elevated position. He wears a "royal robe of blue and white and the great crown of gold, and he wore an outer cloak of fine linen and purple," בלבוש מלכות תכלת וחור ועטרת זהב גדולה ותכריך בוץ וארגמן (Esth 8:15). Mordecai undergoes dialogic transformation from ostracized citizen to member of the king's inner circle. The narrator suspends socio-hierarchical inequality and Mordecai joins Esther as a dual citizen—a Jew and a member of the gentile court.¹⁷² Levenson notes the similarity between the garments and colors mentioned in Esther 8:15 and the priestly vestments recorded in the Torah (Exod 28:6).¹⁷³ Bardtke interprets Mordecai's description in the text as symbolic of a secular priest.¹⁷⁴ Mordecai's depiction symbolizes the friability of life in the Diaspora, for he undulates from near extermination to exaltation by the king in only one chapter. As the king earlier elevates Haman, so with his downfall, Ahasuerus lifts up Mordecai. The capricious king holds the power to both exalt and annihilate. Xerxes tells both Haman and then Mordecai to do "as is good in your eyes" (3:15, 8:14).

¹⁷²Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 122-23.

¹⁷³Levenson, *Esther*, 116.

¹⁷⁴Bardtke, *Das Buch*, 374.

By offering his signet ring and authorizing them to write laws, he is in essence allowing them to function as king. He crowns and uncrowns.

Mordecai's honor impacts more than just him. As Mordecai receives veneration, so the Jews envision themselves achieving honor and safety within their communities. Hence their rejoicing is not just for Mordecai and the counter decree but for the change of fortune and the promise of a better life to come. What may seem as a premature celebration, Fox opines, "The Jews now see embodied in Mordecai's glory...an infallible sign that the Jews will eventually triumph conclusively."¹⁷⁵ As Mordecai receives honor from the king, so the Jews envision themselves achieving honor and safety within their communities.¹⁷⁶ While life under Ahasuerus and the Persian Empire can be fragile, the text intones that the Jewish community can thrive and succeed in Diaspora. Esther 8:17 records the joy of the people upon hearing news of the king's edict and their immediate celebration of a feast and a holiday, שמחה וששטן ליהודים משתה ויום טוב.¹⁷⁷

The text records the city of Susa rejoicing at the news of the new decree, והעיר שושן צהלה ושמחה ליהודים (Esth 8:15). While verse sixteen explicitly states the Jews are filled with joy and gladness and honored everywhere, ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה וששן, ויקר, verse fifteen intimates everyone in the city is happy with the new decree, Jews and Gentiles. As the entire city was thrown into chaos at the news of Haman's first decree (Esth 3:15), so the entire city rejoices with their salvation. This inclusion of all citizens

¹⁷⁵Fox, *Character*, 104.

¹⁷⁶Levenson, *Esther*, 116.

¹⁷⁷ Herodotus 8.98-99 records the response of citizens of Shushan upon hearing messages delivered via the Persian post. See Berlin, *Esther*, 79-80.

of Susa in both the confusion and the celebrating engenders questions and blurs the boundaries of Diaspora literature and of the categories of insiders and outsiders.

First, where and who are the enemies of the Jews? If all of Susa delights in the king's new decree, who are the 500 enemies killed in 9:11-12 and the 300 additional killed on the next day (9:15)? What about the 75,000 foes reportedly killed (Esth 9:16)? While the historical accuracy of the number is indeed doubtful, its role in the text raises disturbing questions. Are readers supposed to rejoice over the vast number of people killed? The narrator is careful to note that the Jews do not plunder their enemies. Furthermore, does Esther's request to impale the ten sons of Haman after they are already dead intimate negative attributes to her character? Does Esther's request for a second day of retribution portray her in an unfavorable light? Do the intended victims, the Jews, become the victimizers and enact the sort of ruthless behavior Haman intended for them? The narrator attributes dialogic features to Esther and to the Jewish community who exhibit double directed discourse.¹⁷⁸ The Jewish community's response to the king's counter decree earned the book the label of nationalistic,¹⁷⁹ a pejorative and unfounded characterization. But it does not nullify the observation that the boundaries between

¹⁷⁸Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 186.

¹⁷⁹Fox captures the consensus of modern scholars regarding the counter edict and the Jews' subsequent actions in Esth chapters eight and nine. He explains that the narrator does not exude hatred toward all gentiles or project a narrow nationalistic message. Esther and Mordecai follow the proper channels in obtaining official permission; they do not merely tell the Jewish community to defend themselves but acquire the king's consent. The text, according to Fox, does not promote vengeance, brutality, or vindictiveness. Rather, the community responds in self defense. Fox does allow that the moral ground is shakier on the second day of killing (Esth 9:5, 12, 15). See Fox, *Character*, 217-226. Levenson articulates a similar argument suggesting readers interpret the action of the Jews as a "defense of self-determination in a time of exile." Jon Levenson, "The Scroll of Esther in Ecumenical Perspective," *JES* 13 (1976): 440. Thirty years ago, scholarly consensus went against readings akin to Fox's and many scholars criticized the text as "vengeful, blood-thirsty, and chauvinistic in spirit," see Moore, *Esther*, xxx, 80; Robert Gordis, "Studies in the Esther Narrative," *JBL* 95 (1976): 49-53; Paton, *Esther*, 274.

insiders and outsiders, victims and victimizers get blurred at the end of narrative.¹⁸⁰ Does the narrator condone the community's response as an act of self defense and preservation, or has the Jewish community become too assimilated, too like their Gentile neighbors, especially since the counter decree produces new converts? The Jews' celebration and rejoicing causes many other citizens to fear them and convert (Esth 8:17). The same king, whose first decree nearly enacts extermination, ironically produces converts with his second one.

Integrated into the narrative sequence during the important plot twists and reversals, banqueting occurs in chapter eight in the context of the miraculous reversal of Haman's decree. Esther does have to beg the king a second time to issue a counter decree to save her people; after Haman is defrocked the king does not fulfill Esther's request.¹⁸¹ Finally, the king gives permission for the Jews to assemble, fight for their lives, plunder, and exterminate (Esther 8:11). Paton suggests that given the two contradictory edicts from the king, one ordering attacks on the Jews and the other ordering Jewish attacks on anti-Semites, "lively times are to be anticipated."¹⁸²

Once again, banquet scenes mark a shift in the narrative action. When disaster averts, a situation reverses and changes, banqueting occurs. The question lingering in readers' minds is this: where is Yahweh? The text intentionally leaves the question unanswered. The narrator could easily have inserted Israel's God into the narrative but

¹⁸⁰See Beal, *Esther*, 102.

¹⁸¹Clines notes the seventy day interval suggests a sense of perfect completion in the reversal of fortune and "would have struck a cord with every attentive post-exilic reader of the book" in that the seventy days symbolizes the seventy years of exile. David J.A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 316; Beal, *Esther*, 95.

¹⁸² Paton, *Esther*, 283.

does not do so, even in places where it would seem obvious and appropriate.¹⁸³ Levenson sees a parallel between the response of Susa's community and the response of a worshipping community who learns their sacrifices have been accepted.¹⁸⁴ This reader remains unconvinced that the text draws clear conclusions about the role of Israel's God within the narrative. Rather, the chronotopic peculiarities of this Diaspora story suggest a shift in the ethos of certain Diaspora Jews, which allowed them to envisage a unique vision of faithful life.¹⁸⁵

Employing Bakhtin's categories to this banquet provides several interesting observations. Dialogically, this banquet forces readers to ask difficult questions about the boundaries between the Jewish exiles and their gentile neighbors. It pushes the genre of Diaspora literature in that the Jews experience not only success in Persia but the hope of continued victory and survival. Living in Diaspora does not provoke only fear but can produce joy. Finally, this banquet delights in carnivalistic reversals. The Jewish community receives royal sanction to defend and protect itself, Esther remains the queen, and Mordecai receives an incredible promotion.

¹⁸³The LXX does make these theological insertions.

¹⁸⁴Levenson, *Esther*, 116.

¹⁸⁵See Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 84-5 for Bakhtin's description of genre and generic distinctions.

Establishment of Purim: Banquets Nine and Ten

The book of Esther and the festival of Purim are inextricably intertwined.¹⁸⁶ Whether the narrative existed in some form prior to its connection with Purim is debatable, but the connection between the text and communal holiday is inextensible. Greenstein claims there is practically no circumstance where Jews would even hear the text apart from a “carnival-like Purim scene.”¹⁸⁷ Esther 9:1-16 describes the Jews’ miraculous annihilation and defeat of their enemies and the definitive defeat of Haman by killing his ten sons. The narrator again marks the dramatic reversal of fortune with banquets. Berg observes that “From its beginning, the Book of Esther anticipates its conclusion in the two-day festival.”¹⁸⁸

Bakhtin’s celebration of unfinalizability fits well with the Jews remarkable transformation from marginal community to accepted and elevated members of society. He remarks,

For nothing absolutely conclusive has yet taken place in the world, a penultimate word of the world and about the world is always being prepared and always slowly changing, the more is more or less open and free within limits, everything comes from the past and is reworked in the present as we live into an open future.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶Fox notes that Esther 9:15 and 9:18 provide the basis for an etiology of Shushan Purim and the festival of Purim, which occurs a day later. Fox, *Character*, 122. For more information on the possible origins of Purim including possible Babylonian, Persian, and Elamite roots see Polish, “Aspects of Esther,” 91-105; Joshua Ezra Burns, “The Special Purim and the Reception of the Book of Esther in the Hellenistic and Roman Eras,” *JSJ* 37 (2006): 4-7; Moore, *Esther*, xlv-xlix.

¹⁸⁷Greenstein, “Jewish Reading,” 226.

¹⁸⁸Berg, *Book of Esther*, 40.

¹⁸⁹Morson and Emerson project Bakhtin would respond with this sentiment regarding Goethe. Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 419.

The final two banquets occur as the Jewish community celebrates their survival and the defeat of their enemies. Polish observes that while readers might expect the near tragic instance of Purim to create a solemn attitude of remembrance and thanksgiving, instead:

Jews are enjoined to engage in near riotous behavior and to indulge in intoxicants to the point of *ad-lo-yodda*—the incapacity to make distinctions. In particular, they are enjoined to imbibe to the point where they ‘cannot distinguish between the pious Mordecai and the wicked Haman.’¹⁹⁰

The Palestinian Talmud adds the following phrase: “Cursed is Zeresh, Blessed is Esther, Cursed are all the Wicked, Blessed are all the Jews (*Tosafot to b. Megilla 7b*).

Carnivalistic behavior characterizes the festival of Purim as the rabbis encouraged excessive drinking, gift giving, merriment, and riotous behavior (*Meg 4b*).¹⁹¹ While the text itself does not provide specific instructions on how the festival should be celebrated, additional literature reveals long standing traditions with the public reading of the text functioning as the central focus of the holiday.¹⁹²

In the two festival celebrations of 9:16-19, readers observe the Jews rejoicing in the new decree and then in their victory over their enemies. As Berg notes, the festival of Purim, “commemorates the reversal of the expected fate of the Jews and radical transformation of a powerless people into one which inspires fear.”¹⁹³ Haman and his ten sons experience the extermination they had planned for the Jewish community.

¹⁹⁰Polish, “Aspects of Esther,” 91. See also *Meg. 4b*.

¹⁹¹See also Pollack, *Jewish Folkways*, 184-90 for a record of Jewish celebrations of Purim.

¹⁹²Burns, “Special,” 5.

¹⁹³Berg, *Book of Esther*, 34-35.

For Berlin, the Esther scroll's inclusion in the canon likely resulted from the celebration of Purim. She explains, "It seems likely that Esther was included in the Bible because of the celebration of Purim. The converse is also probable: if we did not have the Book of Esther we would not have Purim."¹⁹⁴ The inclusion of Purim into the Jewish calendar is indeed surprising. The queen of Persia, a Jewish exile, along with Mordecai her relative, dictate the institution of a new holiday. Or as Burns explains, "the Queen of Persia appears to supersede the authority traditionally invested in the Temple authorities in Jerusalem."¹⁹⁵ While Ezra and Nehemiah exert only limited control over the province of Yehud, inexplicably Esther mandates a new festival that extends to every city, province, and language (Esth 9:21-23).

Brevard Childs assesses the canonical function of 9:20-32 and explores the implications of the letters written by Esther and Mordecai as they institutionalize the Purim festival. Childs highlights the cultic significance of Purim noting the use of the *piel* form of *qûm* in vv 21, 27, 29, 31, and 32 as "binding" for every subsequent generation to commemorate the festival.¹⁹⁶ The official letters also set the appropriate time to celebrate the festival. The Jews in the provinces observe Purim on the 14th day of the month while the Jews in Susa celebrate on the 15th day of Adar. The establishment of

¹⁹⁴Berlin, *Esther*, ix. An intensely popular holiday, not all Jews accepted Purim. The Qumran community did not include the festival on its calendar and the book of Esther is notoriously the only text from the Hebrew Bible not found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. James C. VanderKam, *Calendars in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Measuring Time* (London: Routledge, 1998), 72.

¹⁹⁵Burns, "Special," 12.

¹⁹⁶Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 603.

the dates confirms the normative season in which all Jews will observe Purim.¹⁹⁷ The letter dictates that every generation, every family, every province, and every city shall observe Purim (9:30). The Jews are likewise charged to keep the memory of Purim alive among their descendents and never to allow the festival to cease being observed (9:28). Furthermore, Esther and Mordecai's letters declare the appropriate manner in which Purim is to be celebrated. Verse 23 prescribes that Purim be "days of banquets and joy," where participants send gifts to one another and to the poor.

The joyful, carnivalesque celebration of Purim offers a setting where Jews suspend their social inferiority and celebrate their Jewishness.¹⁹⁸ While Burns likens the celebration of Purim and subsequent victory over imperial persecution to the Maccabees' victory over the Seleucids,¹⁹⁹ the comparison raises questions. The Maccabean celebration ultimately rejoices in Jewish independence and autonomy. It focuses on Jerusalem, the Temple, piousness, and purity. Purim and the book of Esther are unconcerned with all of these facets. Instead, the Esther text highlights human initiative and ingenuity and raises questions about divine absence and the role of God, or lack thereof, within the text. Concerning the establishment of Purim, Abraham Cohen proposes that the conclusion of the story offers an ultimate celebration honoring divine activity.

In the words of the megillah, *pur hu hagoral*, i.e., the *pur* is the lot, and it is the symbol of chance-fate...God acts behind the veil of causality and chance, on behalf of the people of Israel. It is specifically to accentuate

¹⁹⁷Childs, *Introduction*, 603-4.

¹⁹⁸Burns, "Special," 13.

¹⁹⁹Burns, "Special," 14-6.

this point that the name of God is not mentioned in the megillah, while all the events are ‘cast’ to give the appearance of chance-occurrences, or purim.²⁰⁰

Likewise, Duguid suggests Purim “challenges its observers to see beyond the visible and recognize the redemptive hand of God in the hidden workings of history.”²⁰¹ Why does the narrator go to such lengths to keep Yahweh’s redemptive activity hidden?²⁰² Why not proclaim God’s faithfulness and salvation? Rather than illustrating or insinuating divine presence, the book of Esther remains decisively ambiguous about divine presence. Instead, the Purim banquet scenes highlight human initiative.

The connection between feasting, merrymaking, and social reordering appears at the end of the narrative just as it emerged at the beginning. Banquets envelope the narrative and operate as a narrative propellant and mediator of change. The narrative opens with a riotous banquet celebrated by the king and the officials of his empire and closes with the celebrations of the marginal Jewish community who defy the odds and conquer their enemies. The festival of Purim functions as the apogee of the Bakhtinian categories of carnival,²⁰³ dialogism, and chronotope. It celebrates the reversal of social order, it dialogues with other holidays within the canon, and it widens the boundaries of

²⁰⁰Abraham D. Cohen, “‘Hu Ha-goral’: The Religious Significance of Esther,” (Judaism 23 (1974): 89.

²⁰¹Iain Duguid, “But Did They Live Happily Ever After? The Eschatology of the Book of Esther,” *WTJ* 68 (2006), 94.

²⁰²Weiland proposes four possible motives for keeping God out of the text: the hidden nature of divine providence, the historical situation of captivity, heightened rhetorical irony, the necessity of human action and responsibility. Forest Weiland, “Literary Conventions in the Book of Esther,” *BibSac* 159 (2002): 429.

²⁰³In line with the playful spirit of Purim, Jewish tradition records the idea that Mordecai and Esther were actually a married couple before Esther has relations with Ahasuerus and becomes the new queen of Persia. See Barry Dov Walfish, “Kosher Adultery? The Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus Triangle in Midrash and Exegesis,” *Proof* 22 (2002): 323.

Diaspora literature to include a festival instituted by Diaspora Jews who operate on the periphery of their society and outside the normative, Jerusalem centered faith of Yehud.

The Main Characters

This chapter has thus far examined the role of banquets in the book of Esther in terms of Bakhtinian categories. The next section explores the relationships of two main characters in the narrative, Ahasuerus and Esther, from the same Bakhtinian paradigms of dialogism, chronotope, and carnival. Ahasuerus will be examined because as the king, because he represents the empire. If the book of Esther articulates a vision of succeeding in the empire, then accessing the king's character is significant because he is a microcosm of the empire. Esther's character will also be considered because her character functions as the exemplar of how Jews can succeed and prosper in Diaspora. Both characters participate in double voiced discourse, that is their orientations point toward a foreign manner of seeing. Ahasuerus does not know or recognize this alien perspective and portrays the fool for it.²⁰⁴

The question, how do the characters function to make a piece of literature work, is both a daringly simplistic and impossible question to answer.²⁰⁵ Fox allocates three and half pages to a discussion of the nature and definition of a character and the process of reading, which he describes as, "...a bunch of pieces, which we must join together into a

²⁰⁴Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 190-91.

²⁰⁵While a spectrum of responses exists, this work will follow Stanley Fish's interpretive paradigm that readers bring interpretive strategies with them to the text and that these strategies are learned and shaped by interpretative communities. Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the Variorum," in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (eds. Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer; fourth edition, New York: Longman, 1998), 182-196.

person...But an amazing thing happens: through reading, a person is created (or re-created) who can then even possess a measure of autonomy and exist apart from the text."²⁰⁶ Readers need only to examine the assortment of reactions to the characters of Esther and Vashti within the book of Esther to confirm this variety.²⁰⁷ Reading the narrative and in particular the relationships between characters through a Bakhtinian lens reveals complex connections and a precarious social environment. Authority is examined and questioned, the boundaries between Yehud centered Judaism and Diaspora based Judaism appraised, and the line between Jews and Gentiles tested.

The banquet scenes allow for character transformations as the pendulum of power swings from the *fait accompli* to the underdog. Authority decentralizes, and with the exception of Xerxes, none of the characters remain in the same position as when the story begins. From the first 180-day banquet, which results in Vashti's deposal, to the final one that establishes the festival of Purim, the characters of the Esther tale must adjust to changes in their environment and exiguous resources. None of the characters exist in an axenic bubble, but instead interact and commingle. The relationships between characters and the unexpected transformations that occur reveal much about the narrator's perspective on the Persian Empire, the Persian king, and life in the Diaspora.

²⁰⁶Fox, *Character*, 6-9.

²⁰⁷Fox, *Character*, 1. In one sentence Fox provides three variegated responses to the characters within the text: chastised for moral failings, scolded for sexism, or condemned for flatness and simplicity. See also Paton, *Esther*, 96; Alice Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: 1988), 216; and Moore, *Esther*, LIII.

Ahasuerus

Extrabiblical sources reveal additional information about Ahasuerus.²⁰⁸ Although identified as Artaxerxes in the Septuagint, Josephus, Jewish Midrash, the Peshitta, and a majority of scholars comfortably identify Ahasuerus as Xerxes.²⁰⁹ The historical Xerxes ruled the Persian Empire from 486–465 B.C.E. as their fifth king.²¹⁰ Herodotus describes Xerxes as “tall and handsome...of all those tens of thousands of men, for goodliness and stature there was not one worthier than Xerxes himself to hold that command” (Her. 7.187). The only additional biblical reference to Xerxes outside of Esther occurs in Ezra 4:6 where the Jews write him a letter of accusation against their neighbors.

Of all the characters in the Esther narrative, Ahasuerus undergoes exiguous transformation and receives minimum character development. The narrator depicts the king in such a manner that leaves few ambiguities: he is a lazy, insouciant, capricious despot.²¹¹ In a sense, he functions under the Bakhtinian framework of a fool, for if not for the danger inherent in living under such an autocratic ruler, Ahasuerus would be a purely

²⁰⁸Twenty one Old Persian inscriptions concerning Xerxes exist but many of these are not very informative as they are word for word duplications of inscriptions concerning Darius. Yamauchi, *Persia*, 188-9.

²⁰⁹Yamauchi, *Persia*, 187; Levenson explains the name “Ahasuerus” as how Hebrew speakers heard the Greek name Xerxes, Levenson, *Esther*, 23-4.

²¹⁰Levenson, *Esther*, 23. Scholarly opinion remains divided whether readers can claim a historical kernel of accuracy to the Esther tale. See Levenson, *Esther*, 23-7; Fox, *Character*, 131-40 for a list of the obstacles in accepting the historicity of the text. See Yamauchi, “Archaeology,” 103-12; Gordis, *Megillat Esther*, 8; Moore, *Esther*, xxxv; Moore, “Archaeology,” 79, for explanations why the narrative should be accepted as historically accurate.

²¹¹In his dissertation, Dickson claims the narrative describes Ahasuerus as possessing the following traits: flexibility, sensitivity, emotionally controlled, selfless, tempered by feeling, concern for the facts rather than making rash decisions, appreciating others, rational. He argues the negative portrayal of Ahasuerus stems from the text’s frequent connection to wisdom with its genre dominated characterization of *dramatis personae*. He also suggests Ahasuerus may symbolize Yahweh in the story. His reading remains firmly in the minority. Charles Richard Dickson, *The Role and Portrayal of the King in the Esther Narrative: A Narratological-Synchronic Reading of the Masoretic Text of the Esther Narrative* (diss; University of Pretoria; South Africa, 2000).

comedic character.²¹² Levenson describes Ahasuerus as a “spoiled playboy, a person who overindulges in physical pleasures and lacks a moral compass.”²¹³ Fox characterizes the king as a spoiled ruler who governs by impulse and emotion; he is “lumpish, childish, apathetic, and pliable” and “all surface.”²¹⁴ Yet, the Hebrew word מֶלֶךְ and its related derivatives occur 45 times in the first chapter of the book revealing the narrator’s emphasis on the king.²¹⁵ The narrator describes the king’s glory with the phrase כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּת, used only in Esth 1:4 and Ps 145:11 where it expresses God’s glory.²¹⁶ Duguid argues this phrase establishes a contrast between Ahasuerus and Yahweh with the king personifying the visible, impotent buffoon in opposition to Yahweh who is silent but effectively working to save the people.

In an effort to better interpret the narrator’s depiction of Ahasuerus, this study will analyze the king’s direct speech within the text. Bakhtin describes the direct speech of characters both as a referential object toward which something is directed and representative of the point of view of its own referential object.²¹⁷ Direct speech has two speech centers—that of the author and the character. These centers are dialogic and communicate to readers semantic authority and differing perspectives.²¹⁸ The king

²¹²Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 162-65.

²¹³Levenson, *Esther*, 46.

²¹⁴Fox, *Character*, 176.

²¹⁵Duguid, “Happily,” 88.

²¹⁶Duguid, “Happily,” 88.

²¹⁷Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 186-87.

²¹⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, 186-87.

articulates sixteen instances of direct speech in the narrative. The following outlines those occurrences.

1. Esth 1:15 “What can be done, according to the law, to Queen Vashti, who has not obeyed the command of King Ahasuerus conveyed by the hand of the eunuchs?”
2. Esth 3:11 “The money and the people are yours to do with as you see fit.”
3. Esth 5:3 “What troubles you, Queen Esther, And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be granted you.”
4. Esth 5:5 “Tell Haman to hurry and do Esther’s bidding.”
5. Esth 5:6 “What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.”
6. Esth 6:3 “What honor or advancement has been conferred on Mordecai for this?”
7. Esth 6:4 “Who is in the court?”
8. Esth 6:5 “Let him enter.”
9. Esth 6:6 “What shall be done for a man the king desires to honor?”
10. Esth 6:10 “Quick, then. Get the garb and the horse as you have said, and do this to Mordecai the Jew, who sits in the king’s gate. Omit nothing of all you have proposed.”
11. Esth 7:2 “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.”
12. Esth 7:5 “Who is he and where is he who dared do this?”
13. Esth 7:8 “Does he mean to ravish the queen in my own palace?”
14. Esth 7:9 “Impale him on it!”
15. Esth 8:7-8 “I have given Haman’s property to Esther, and he has been impaled on the stake for scheming against the Jews. And you may further write with regard to the Jews as you see fit. Write in the king’s name and seal it with the king’s signet, for an edict that has

been written in the king's name and sealed with the king's signet may not be revoked."

16. Esth 9:12 "In the fortress of Susa alone the Jews have killed a total of five hundred men, as well as the ten sons of Haman. What then must they have done in the provinces of the realm? What is your wish now? It shall be granted you. And what else is your request? It shall be fulfilled."

The sixteen occurrences of direct speech reveal the narrator's ideological portrayal of Ahasuerus. He embodies both the absolute monarch with supreme control of his empire and the portrait of a malleable ruler whose opinion sways with those in his company. Paton famously complains "there is not one noble character in this book" and describes Xerxes as a "sexual despot."²¹⁹ He orders the extermination of a group within his empire and then allows members of the doomed group to respond as they please to their enemies, even killing his own vizier and awarding his property to them. Ahasuerus both initiates carnivalesque reversals and defies them. His words possess the power to displace and elevate, to annihilate and to resuscitate. Other characters in the story exchange positions within the social hierarchy of the Persian court, but the king does not.

The relationship between Ahasuerus and the other characters in the narrative is paradoxical; it is both complex and simplistic. In part, there is nothing secret or hidden about the king; his emotions lay exposed on the surface and are easily swayed by those seeking to gain his favor. His eunuchs in chapter 1, his servants in chapter 2, his vizier in chapter 3, and his queen in chapters 5-9 are all able to manipulate the king's desires to fit their own.²²⁰ He is a man driven by impulses. Navigating the difficulty waters of the

²¹⁹Paton, *Esther*, 96.

²²⁰Fox, *Character*, 171.

Persian court and its king requires intelligence and manipulation. Haman, Esther, and Mordecai exhibit great concern for official protocol. Remaining on the agreeable side of Ahasuerus requires skill and proficiency.

Fox mentions five characteristics prominent in the king's nature that affect the outcome of the story including: honor, generosity, authority, irresponsibility, and laziness.²²¹ The first appears quickly for as the narrative opens Ahasuerus holds a feast for the nobles and officials. After this opulent display of wealth, he holds another seven-day feast for the palace servants and officials where his honor may once again be put on display. This makes Vashti's refusal injure all the more in that her actions threaten his display of honor. Fox notes that, "the Persian court conceives of honor not only as ostentatious wealth, but also as the ability to constrain obedience."²²² When Vashti does not obey her husband's command, his honor is endangered. Likewise, the eunuchs advise the king to create a law forcing all wives to honor their husbands.

Readers observe, however, that the king must buy his honor. Ahasuerus is an odd paradox of generosity and murder. His festivals are extravagant and outrageous. First there is a 180-day feast, which is immediately followed by a seven-day banquet for the palace servants and officials. Verse five mentions that all servants and officials were invited to the second feast, those from the greatest to the smallest. The king invites all those associated with the palace and government. Ahasuerus refuses Haman's gift of money (10,000 talents) in exchange for granting his request (Esth 3:9-11). This action hardly reflects well on the king, but he does not sell a group of his citizens to be

²²¹Fox, *Character*, 172-76.

²²²Fox, *Character*, 172.

slaughtered on the basis of financial gain. Later, when Esther appears before the king, he twice offers her whatever she wants up to half his kingdom. Ahasuerus awards Esther Haman's property and allows her to publically hang his sons.

Ironically, although the king shows concern with managing his authority and power, those around him actually make decisions and write laws officially by "the word of the king" (3:15; 8:14). The king is irresponsible. He is a puppet, ably controlled by those around him who have their own agendas: Memucan in 1:20 with his empire wide decree, Haman with his destruction of the Jews, and Esther and Mordecai with their salvation of the Jews and subsequent reversal of power. Fox exclaims, "Thus the all-powerful Xerxes in practice abdicates responsibility and surrenders effective power to those who know how to press the right buttons—namely, his love of 'honor,' his anxiety for his authority, and his desire to appear generous."²²³

Lastly, the king displays his laziness by allowing other people to think for him. He asks his advisors for advice without considering the problem himself. In chapter one when he is furious with Vashti, he immediately questions his advisors who suggest making her disobedience into an empire wide issue, and in effect proclaim the king's inability to make his wife comply apparent to the whole kingdom. Ahasuerus never bothers to make inquiries. He promptly decides to dispose of the Jews, he accepts Esther's banquet invitations, he unknowingly humiliates Haman, and then he decides to eliminate Haman. Even when Esther begs the king to undo Haman's evil decree, he calmly tells her that he can do no more and leaves her and Mordecai to establish a solution (8:3-5). His insouciance renders him pliable to the desires of those around him.

²²³Fox, *Character*, 173.

Chronotopically, what does the image of Ahasuerus suggest about the narrator's view of authority? The text parodies Persian authority. Ahasuerus hosts a drinking party where there are no limits on drinking but issues an edict commanding all wives to obey their husbands when one, his own wife, does not. Mordecai offends one law and Haman subsequently seeks to execute all Jews.²²⁴ The bureaucratic language places the text within the confines of the court, official protocol, and the traditional style writing found in the Joseph novella.²²⁵ The contrast of Ahasuerus' behavior in Esth 3:15 with that of the city of Susa's encapsulates his character:

The courtier's went in haste at the king's command
and the decree was issued in Susa, the capital.
The king and Haman settled into drinking
while the city of Susa sat dumbfounded. (Esth 3:15)

The king's apathy and narcissism to his own edict stand in marked contrast to the frantic response of his citizens. Niditch characterizes the king as one who "eats, drinks, and follows willy-nilly the advice of others."²²⁶ The opposite of wise king Solomon, Ahasuerus plays the fool whose insouciance threatens his own empire. As Greenstein observes, the first move he makes on his own is to choose Esther.²²⁷ If Ahasuerus concretizes the representation of a gentile monarch, his actions throughout the narrative reinforce the unflattering picture. While the Jews within the world of the narrative must

²²⁴Greenstein, "Jewish Reading," 227-8.

²²⁵Niditch, *Underdogs*, 128-30. Niditch describes the language and style of the book of Esther "baroque" and "hyperbolic."

²²⁶Niditch, *Underdogs*, 133.

²²⁷Greenstein, "Jewish Reading," 230.

survive under the authority of Ahasuerus, the text suggests they can successfully navigate the system to accrue success and achievement for the community.

Despite the questionable portrayal of Ahasuerus' character, the narrator never directly condemns or mocks the king outright. As Fox explains, "Rulers like Xerxes of Esther were a fact of life; they constituted the world through which Jews had to make their way."²²⁸ Nor does the narrator suggest the community create a new life back in Yehud. Rather, the book of Esther deftly suggests how the community can thrive under the sobering likes of Ahasuerus.

Esther

Readers know precious little about the eponymous character in the text. She remains the most elusive character, for her thoughts remain hidden and unrevealed as opposed to those around her. The dialectic between readers who interpret the eponymous heroine as an intelligent, cunning woman who craftily manipulates her environment to save herself and her people and those who interpret Esther as a passive, patriarchal, duty-bound female remains fervent.²²⁹ An unlikely replacement for Vashti, her status could not be any lower as a female, Jewish, exile, orphan. She is an "archetypal dependent...a

²²⁸Fox, *Character*, 176.

²²⁹Paton famously characterized her in the following, "Esther, for the chance of winning wealth and power, takes her place in the herd of maidens who become concubines of the King. She wins her victories not by skill or by character, but by her beauty. She conceals her origin, is relentless toward a fallen enemy, secures not merely that the Jews escape from danger, but that they fall upon their enemies, slay their wives and children and plunder their property. Not satisfied with this slaughter, she asks that Haman's ten sons may be hanged, and that the Jews may be allowed another day for killing their enemies in Susa. The only redeeming traits in her character are her loyalty to her people and her bravery in attempting to save them." Paton, *Esther*, 96.

female symbol of disenfranchisement and dependence... a living metaphor of Jewish life in the Diaspora.”²³⁰

As this project surveys Ahasuerus’ direct speech to assess the narrator’s ideological portrait of life in the Diaspora under a gentile, so this work will consider Esther’s direct speech, for she represents the apogee of the Jewish community’s response to the threat of Ahasuerus. She is the heroine while Ahasuerus the fool. Articulating only eight occurrences of direct speech, it is indeed difficult to evaluate Esther’s character.

1. Esth 4:11 “All the king's courtiers and the people of the 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. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. Now I have not been summoned to visit the king for the last thirty days.”²³¹
2. Esth 4:16 “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!”
3. Esth 5:4 “If it please Your Majesty,” Esther replied, “let Your Majesty and Haman come today to the feast that I have prepared for him.”
4. Esth 5:7-8 “My wish,” replied Esther, “my request -- if Your Majesty will do me the favor, if it please Your Majesty to grant my wish and accede to my request -- let Your Majesty and Haman come to the feast which I will prepare for them; and tomorrow I will do Your Majesty's bidding.”

²³⁰Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 59.

²³¹Esther’s messenger, functioning as the queen’s mouthpiece, delivers this speech to Mordecai. Because it uses the first person pronoun “me,” it can be inferred as Esther’s direct speech.

5. Esth 7:3-4 “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 bondmen and bondwomen, I would have kept silent; for the adversary is not worthy of the king's trouble.”

6. Esth 7:6 “The adversary and enemy,” replied Esther, “is this evil Haman!”

7. Esth 8:5-6 “If it please Your Majesty,” she said, “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 countermanding those 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!”

8. Esth 8:13 “If it please Your Majesty,” Esther replied, “let the Jews in Susa be permitted to act tomorrow also as they did today; and let Haman's ten sons be impaled on the stake.”

Esther communicates eight instances of direct speech, or half the number allotted to Ahasuerus. Esther’s silence during the first third of the narrative is significant. Hathach, acting as her messenger, actually articulates her first episode of direct speech in chapter four. The narrator allots her no lines to comment on her family, her relationship with Mordecai before entering the palace, or her response to the king’s edict and subsequent abduction and life in the palace. The narrator even keeps her reaction to becoming Persia’s next queen a mystery.

Niditch complains that Esther’s silence keeps her firmly entrenched in the chronotopic category of wisdom heroine. She intones:

Like Judith or an Abigail, Esther dresses for success; she speaks in sweet words of flattery and is self-effacing in demeanor...Like these women, she employs wine and good food to set up her situation, reaching a man through his stomach. In short, she is an altogether appealing portrait of women’s wisdom for the men of a ruling patriarchy, but hardly an image

meaningful or consoling to modern women...This sort of tale is about maintenance of status quo, about working from within the system, and serves to reinforce such values. Esther contrasts with the rash Vashti, who would insolently and overtly dare to challenge a king in direct contradiction to the advice of folk wisdom.²³²

Niditch's assessment of Esther, although interesting, is not all together satisfying. She typifies Esther as a wisdom heroine and as such a personification of the system, and its benefits. In contrast to the wisdom heroine, Niditch suggests tricksters "embody chaos, marginality, and indefinability;" they work against the establishment.²³³ While Esther may employ manipulation, flattery, and other indirect methods as tools in her arsenal, her character and this text hardly represent maintenance of the status quo. Esther risks her life, provides salvation for herself and her people without the counsel of Mordecai, and procures retribution against Haman's sons and the enemies of the Jews (Esth 9:10-16). She participates in initiating a new holiday and offers her full command as queen to enforce its celebration throughout the Jewish community (Esth 9:29). She enlarges the chronotopic category of wisdom heroine. Her beauty and charm seduce not only the eunuch Hegai but also the king. Esther functions as a paradigm for Jews in the Diaspora living in fragile positions within gentile empires.²³⁴

²³²Niditch, *Underdogs*, 139.

²³³Niditch, *Underdogs*, 141.

²³⁴Sidnie White Crawford, "Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora" in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy Day; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 161-77.

The Conclusion Unravels

At the end of this reading of the banquet scenes in the Esther narrative the following questions linger: why if King Ahasuerus is capricious and erratic, if his rule and his empire inspire anxiety and unease, is there no mention of returning to Jerusalem? Why does the text open and conclude in Persia, celebrating survival, success, and even perhaps hope for a future in the Diaspora?

The Esther text invites readers to explore a variety of perspectives as the relationships between characters and situations fluctuate and reverse. The book's emphasis on reversals²³⁵ encourages readings from both the top and the bottom of society. The book of Esther embodies dialogism, for at its structural level, the text is part of a canon.²³⁶ It promotes different meanings and interpretations for readers when read in context with the other material of the Hebrew Bible, especially texts whose settings address the Diaspora. The book of Esther presents a vision of Jewish life quite different from other works within the canon.²³⁷ The pejorative label secular is often ascribed to the text and its inclusion in the canon reduced to the need for justification of the holiday Purim.²³⁸

²³⁵Berg, *Book of Esther*, 106-13; Levenson, *Esther*, 5-12; Fox, *Character*, 158-163.

²³⁶While Brevard Childs' theories of canonical criticism present numerous concerns especially regarding a definition of canon and whose canon (i.e. Hebrew Bible, Christian Old and New Testament, Septuagint), nonetheless, the Esther story still appears within a collection of other canonical works. The book's relationship to the rest of the canon should be considered. Readers in biblical studies may see correlations between Bakhtin's notion of dialogism and Brevard Childs' canonical criticism. See Childs, *Introduction*, 57-60 for his discussion and delineation of canon and the canonical process.

²³⁷See Valeta, "Court or Jester Tales," 309-24; Arndt Meinhold, "Die Gattung der Josephgeschichte und des Esther-buches: Diasporanovelle: II," in *Studies in the Book of Esther* (ed. Carey A. Moore; New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1982), 284-305; Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 54-69.

²³⁸Berlin, *Esther*, xv-xvi; Heinrich Zimmern, "Zur Frage nach dem Ursprunge des Purimfestes," in *Studies in the Book of Esther* (ed. Carey A. Moore; New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1982), 147-159;

This monologic view of the text does not do the narrative justice. Indeed, the celebration of Purim is a significant aspect of the book but is not its' only redeeming quality. Rather, the Esther scroll offers a strikingly different vision of life in the Diaspora. The inclusion of the Esther scroll within the canon offers an alternative way of being Jewish in the Diaspora where Jerusalem, the temple, Jewish festivals, and even the Torah are not emphasized. There is, according to the Esther narrative, more than one way to be Jewish. But by reading the Esther narrative as dialogic, we cannot say that the text's vision of Second Temple Judaism is the prescribed way of Jewish life. Rather, it is in dialogue with other texts of the canon. Even the book of Esther itself rejects a single view of life in the Diaspora but embraces a range of views.²³⁹

Laniak talks about the Diaspora as demanding from its participants a peripheral identity.²⁴⁰ He summarizes the message of the book of Esther in this manner:

. . . it is possible to survive here, out on the edges of our world, at the center of our enemy's universe. We can exist not just temporarily or until we return to Yehud, but indefinitely. Esther is, however, a celebration of more than survival and existence. The story describes a state of legitimacy, success, and prosperity in Persia (Esth 10:3). The result is an affirmation of Jewish peoplehood apart from a homeland, without a sense of peripherality, and is radically *Volkcentric*. The faith that is promulgated in this story is one that is not limited by regional or even ethnic boundaries. At a time when others would move back to the geographical center of their threatened world and cling to a rebuilt

J.C.H. Lebram, "Purimfest und Estherbuch," in *Studies in the Book of Esther* (ed. Carey A. Moore; New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1982), 205-19; Henri Cazelles, "Note sur la composition du rouleau d'Esther," in *Studies in the Book of Esther* (ed. Carey A. Moore; New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1982), 424-36.

²³⁹The denouement of the book of Esther with its injunction to observe the festival of Purim appeals to the traditions of Judaism.

²⁴⁰Timothy Laniak, "Esther's Volkcentrism and the Reframing of Post-Exilic Judaism," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (eds. S.W. Crawford and L. Greenspoon; London: T & T Clark, 2003), 79.

Jerusalem as their only hope for ethnic survival, Esther mediates salvation at the center of the threatening world. As a byproduct of saving her people, their community swells with converts from the Persian Empire (Esth 8:17).²⁴¹

Literary figures like Esther who live in the Diaspora exist at the boundary between two worlds: the Jewish world with Jerusalem as its center and the Persian world where she is currently located. What makes the book of Esther so strikingly different from other material in the Hebrew Bible is that this narrative begins with a description of the opulence of the Persian court and ends with the Jews still in Persia. The only incidental reference to Jerusalem appears in Esth 2:5-6 when the text tells readers Mordecai was from the family of Kish who had been exiled away from Jerusalem. The narrative offers a lavish depiction of the splendor of the Persian but not as motivation to rebuild the temple. Narrative resolution occurs with the safety of the Jews in Persia assured, not with their return to Yehud.

Given these considerations, what then are the implications for Judahites living in Diaspora? The chronotope Diaspora story and the chronotopic motif of banquet create expectations, which the narrator fulfills but also refracts. Ahasuerus plays the role of the fool and Esther the heroine reversing notions about the role of kings and marginalized citizens. Esther expresses double voiced discourse and analyses of her and Ahasuerus' direct speech reveal their dialogic conversations. The particular ways in which this vision impacts Diaspora Jews living outside the land will be articulated in the next chapter. The ways in which the narrator of the book of Esther reframes the vision of

²⁴¹Laniak, "Esther's Volkcentrism," 80-1.

faithful Judaism dialogues with the notions purported in other texts such as the books of Daniel and Ezra.

CHAPTER FOUR

New Paradigm of Judahite Faithfulness

Analysis

The question of what it means to be Judahite in the Diaspora is multi-faceted. According to Niditch, in the book of Esther, to be a Jew is to possess marginal status.¹ It means living on the boundaries, on the margins of society. It means struggling between the extremes of total assimilation and complete separation as various factions threaten your ethnic and cultural identity. But, does the narrator of the book of Esther depict life in Susa as such dialectic extremes? What do other Diaspora texts such as the book of Daniel suggest as the model for Judahite life? Pragmatically, being a Jew in Diaspora requires a reformulation of Judahite identity since the community is no longer autonomous and a portion of the community remains outside of the land. This begs the question: what are the definitive religious features of the community and do those in Diaspora adhere to those characteristics or adapt them?

Laniak explains that in much of the *Nevi'im* hope for those in exile centers on several concepts: a rebuilt temple, a purified priesthood, an anointed Davidic ruler, a renewal of the covenant, and return to *Eretz* Israel.² The *Ketuvim* likewise describe the process of renewal for the exiles returning to the land: rebuilding walls, reinstatement of holidays and rites, rereading and reaffirming the Mosaic Law. He thus identifies four

¹Niditch, *Underdogs*, 136.

²Laniak, "Esther's Volkcentrism," 78-79.

primary features of Judaism in the Diaspora: Jebucentrism, Torahcentrism, Natocentrism, and Yahwehcentrism.³

Jebucentrism focuses exclusively on Jerusalem and emphasizes the centrality of Zion for Judahites. God's presence is centered in a special, holy place. The prophet Ezekiel envisions new life in the land of Israel in his vision of the dry bones (Ezek 37:12-14). Daniel risks his life and prays facing Jerusalem (Dan 6; 9). Nehemiah endangers his position in the king's court by requesting to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls (Neh 2:3-5). Throughout the canon, the biblical narrators depict Jerusalem as a distinctive place.

Torahcentrism directs Judahites to observe Torah. Dietary laws, cultic practices, and purity laws function as identifying markers for the community and serve a central role in the practice of faith. The book of Daniel commences with the eponymous character and his friends willing to risk their lives in order to maintain a kosher diet (Dan 1). Following Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones, the prophet sees a rebuilt temple, altar, priests, and sacrifice and Yahweh's presence returning to the land (Ezek 43-44). In the book of Ezra, after the prophet reads the law and learns of the people's marriage to foreigners, he demands ritual cleansing and casting away of foreign wives and children (Ezra 9-10).

Natocentric Judaism concentrates hope in God's provision of an anointed Davidic ruler (Jer 22:30; Ezek 34:23, 37:24; Ezra 3:2; Neh 12:1; Zech 4:6; Hag 1:1) and a purified Levitical priesthood (Ezek 44:15-31; 1 Chr 5:27-41, 6:1-47, 6:54-81). These legitimate leaders will guide Israel toward renewed national existence and reflect concern

³Laniak, "Esther's Volkcentrism," 79-90.

for pedigree. The traditions of these canonical traditions await Yahweh's fulfillment of an everlasting Davidic dynasty (2 Sam 7).

Finally, Yahwehcentric Judaism calls on the exilic and postexilic communities to renewal of their covenant with Yahweh. In Ezek 48:35, the prophet renames Jerusalem "The LORD is there," יהוה שמה emphasizing God's return to the city abandoned at the beginning of Ezekiel (Ezek 10). This name symbolizes the ubiquitous nature of Israel's God—Yahweh is the one true God not only of the Jews but of all nations (Dan 2:47; 3:28; 4:2-3; 4:34-37; 5:17; 6:26-27; Isa 2:1-4; Mic 4:1-5). Yahwehcentrism confesses that the God of Israel is the God of all nations, and this God controls the great empires of the world all the while continuing a special relationship with the chosen people.

With these four characteristics in mind, Laniak avers the book of Esther reformulates the monologic vision of life in the Diaspora by shifting the focus of faith back to its people, or *Volkcentrism*.⁴ This emphasis on the "people" reflects older traditions of Yahwism. In the book of Esther, the narrator mentions Jerusalem only once in a proleptic comment (Esth 2:6). The narrative begins and ends in Susa with no mention of the Diaspora community longing for their homeland. The opulence and grandeur of the Persian court receives praise from the narrator while Jerusalem's majesty garners no attention. Except for one reference to fasting (Esth 4:16), the text records no references to the laws or practices of Torah. Esther engages in sexual activity with a gentile, lives in the court harem, prepares food (assumedly not kosher) for the monarch, and undergoes stringent cosmetic regiments. She purposefully conceals her Jewish ethnicity (Esth 2:20). The narrator betrays little interest in lineage and pedigree.

⁴Laniak, "Esther's Volkcentrism," 77-90.

Mordecai's lineage is recorded; he is a Benjaminite (Esth 2:5). But rather than saving his people, Mordecai endangers them by refusing to do obeisance to Haman. Instead Esther, an orphaned, exiled, female procures salvation for her people. Lastly, while the name of Ahasuerus appears 190 times in the book of Esther, the divine name is not once mentioned.⁵ The vision of the book of Esther thus offers a qualification to these other sources of identity (Jebucentrism, Torahcentrism, Natocentrism, Yahwehcentrism) and hope in post-exilic Judaism and returns to the older emphasis on the people of God.⁶ The narrator of the book of Esther emphasizes this disorientation with traditional features of Judaism through the chronotope of banquet scenes. Reading the banquet scenes in Bakhtinian terms reveals the narrator's emphasis on a new paradigm of Judahite faithfulness that stresses human initiative, survival as a virtue, the possibility of achievement among Gentiles, and the deconstruction of the status quo.⁷

Human Initiative

Interpreted through the lens of dialogism, chronotope, and carnival, the banquet scenes in the book of Esther stress human initiative. Mordecai reminds Esther if she does not act on behalf of her people, help will arise from another place, ממקום אחר. But this elusive "other place" is the most overt reference to divine intervention in the entire narrative. This story details the *Heilsgeschichte* of God's chosen people but depicts them

⁵Laniak, "Esther's Volkcentrism," 88.

⁶Laniak, "Esther's Volkcentrism," 81-2.

⁷This paradigm displays some consonance with wisdom literature but retains distinctives as well. As Fox notes, all of Wisdom Literature (but notably absent in the book of Esther) points to God's persistent and universal presence in human life. Michael V. Fox, "The Religion of the Book of Esther," *Judaism* 39 (1990): 137.

as procuring their own salvation. Esther intercedes before Ahasuerus. Mordecai commands her to do so but she supplies the method and plan. Esther and Mordecai assiduously respond to Haman's plot and the king's capricious edict. Esther's circumspect handling of the threat during two banquet scenes engenders Haman's demise, Mordecai's promotion, the safety of her people, and new converts to the faith.

Duguid suggests the book of Esther be interpreted as a cosmic, eschatological battle with Ahasuerus and Xerxes as dialogical enemies. He opines the opening scenes of the book depict successful exilic Judahites living enmeshed in the Persian Empire with Xerxes "winning the battle for the loyalty of God's people" who appear to live without concern for God's kingdom.⁸ While the question of eschatology in the book of Esther is intriguing, this reading fails to address the issue of why the narrator chooses to keep God hidden and the king explicitly visible. No one prays, asks Yahweh for help, consults a prophet or priest, has a dream, or consults the Mosaic laws. Esther requests the people fast, צום, and she and her maidens do the same. But this act constitutes the only quasi religious feature within the text. The narrator purposefully omits or hides God from the text and in doing so refracts the chronotopic motif of Diaspora story.⁹ While Yahweh may be active behind the scenes, the narrator chooses to keep the divine character hidden from the narrative. The Judahites achieve salvation through human means, not explicit divine intervention.

⁸Duguid, "Happily," 90.

⁹Beal, *Esther*, xx. See also Deut 31:18 where God declares "And I will surely hide my face from them." The Talmud explains divine absence by reading the name Esther as a first person imperfect form of the verb "to hide," הסתר אסתיר. Beal, *Esther*, xx.

Survival as a Virtue

A Bakhtinian reading of the banquet scenes in the book of Esther reveals another Diaspora motif: the notion of survival as a virtue. Unlike the book of Daniel where the eponymous character chooses death rather than disobedience to Mosaic laws, Esther prefers survival. The relationship between these two texts, both of which take place in foreign courts and concretize the experience of Diaspora, is complex. Comparing the social setting of both narratives illuminates the unique vision articulated by the narrator of the book of Esther.

The book of Daniel mandates a worldview in which Jews and Gentiles live at odds.¹⁰ The Jews in the text remain faithful to Yahweh and their religious customs even when facing death. The book opens with a description of Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of her people to Babylon. The narrator emphasizes Daniel and his compatriots' status as exiles under the Babylonian sovereign (Dan 1:1-3). By comparison, the narrator of the book of Esther introduces readers to life in the Persian Empire by describing the king's opulent 180 day banquet. The first chapter in the book of Daniel details Daniel's request for kosher food and his superior health because of it (Dan 1:15). In the book of Esther, Ahasuerus allows his banqueters to imbibe as much as they choose (Esth 1:8). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse to bow before Nebuchadnezzar's gold statue and face the fiery furnace rather than bow before the idol (Dan 3:13-23). Similarly, Daniel will not forgo his prayers to Yahweh (performed three times a day facing Jerusalem) and chooses a night in Darius' lion den over disobedience

¹⁰J.J. Collins, "The Court-Tales in Daniel and the Development of Apocalyptic," *JBL* 94 (1975): 234.

to his religious customs (Dan 6).¹¹ For the traditions of the Daniel narrative, obedience to God's laws and the traditions of Judaism overshadow the desire to live.¹² Although the relationship between Daniel and the various gentile monarchs is amicable (at least in the first six chapters of the book),¹³ he and his friends remain loyal to their faith and risk defying their human king rather than their divine one. While Pleins argues the book of Esther portrays resistance as a "life-long pursuit waged by both women and men against the persistent structures of pagan power, law, rule, and presence,"¹⁴ the characters do not directly challenge dietary regulations or worship of a false god. The characters in Esther resist in order to survive an arbitrary edict tied to Mordecai's refusal to bow.

As Levenson explains, the book of Esther emerges from within the post-exilic community that heralded the land of Israel and a Zion centered eschatology and redemption.¹⁵ In much of the canon, exile is interpreted negatively as God's punishment for Israel's sin and valuable only as propaedeutic to the return.¹⁶ Rather than viewing exile as a curse, the narrator of the book of Esther re-imagines life in the Diaspora within the pattern of redemption history; the book of Esther does not speak of a "New Israel" but

¹¹Collins, "Daniel," 135.

¹²See also 2 Maccabees 6-7, which details the stories of the priest Eliazar who refuses to eat pork and thus be a poor example to the people and the mother and her seven sons who all opt for torture and death over disobedience.

¹³Henze, "Narrative," 12-13.

¹⁴J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 194.

¹⁵Levenson, "Scroll of Esther," 446.

¹⁶Levenson, "Scroll of Esther," 446-7; See Second and Third Isaiah; Hag 1:2-11; Zech 1:7-17; Hag 2:23; Zech 4:6-10; Ob 1:15-21; Neh 1:3-4, 2:5.

of a newly redefined Israel¹⁷ Levenson summarizes the narrator's vision of the book of Esther:

. . . the author of Esther is keenly aware of the ambiguity of historical structures, of the potential for calamity in every event...What Esther lacks in poetic power it gains in a realistic assessment of the options open to Israel in the radically new situation of Diaspora, in which shrewd statespersons were at least as essential to survival as were prophets. The theology implicit here is thus a reflection of the new social situation in Jewish history, one in which the Diaspora is so optimistic and self-confident that it can even imagine one of its own as prime minister...the author has in the process shown us a momentous transformation in the understanding of life outside the Land of Israel and of the potential for healthy Jewish-Gentile relationships.¹⁸

In lieu of obedience to the laws and traditions of ancient Israelite religion, Esther elects the virtue of survival. She marries an unclean gentile king, dines on non-kosher food, keeps her ethnic identity a secret, employs guile, exploits her sexuality, demands the death of her enemies, and supports a non-Torah espoused holiday. The narrator of the book of Esther esteems survival as righteousness and disseminates this virtue to every province throughout the empire (Esth 9:20-22).

Achievement among Gentiles

The book of Esther values the possibility of Jews succeeding in the midst of Gentile environments. Hayyim Angel argues the megilla portrays Jews in a positive light and contrasts their consistently righteous behavior with that of Haman and the king. As Angel explains, "the Megilla stresses that the Jewish laws and practices are an admirable alternative to the decrepit values represented by Ahashverosh's [sic] personality and

¹⁷Levenson, "Scroll of Esther," 449, 451.

¹⁸Levenson, "Scroll of Esther," 449.

society.”¹⁹ He reads Ahasuerus as the counterpart to God and representative of a cosmic battle. The king is whimsical, arbitrary, self-serving, and immoral while God is just and prevails in the end.²⁰ Angel stresses the dichotomy between Jews and Gentiles, uniformly labeling the Jews as righteous and the Gentiles as wicked. While possible, Angel’s reading circumscribes details within the text. At Esther’s command, a second day of massacre occurs. His theological claims stretch the text to a religious fervor not present within it. If the king and Persian society are so thoroughly wicked, why do the Judahites not pine for Jerusalem and their homeland? Psalm 137 records the exiles longing for their homeland:

By the rivers of Babylon-- there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there we hung up our harps.

For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!

Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (Ps 137:1-6)

Agonizing memories of Jerusalem do not seem to haunt the characters of the book of Esther. If they do, the narrator does not allow them to be voiced. Verses eight and nine of Ps 137 predict the retribution imminent for the Babylonians who plucked the ancient Israelites from their homeland: “O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy

¹⁹Hayyim Angel, “Hadassa Hi Esther: Issues of Peshat and Derash in the Book of Esther, *Tradition* 34 (2000): 89.

²⁰Angel, “Hadassa,” 90.

shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock” (Ps 137:8-9). Neither the Persians nor king Ahasuerus receive similar stinging rebukes from the narrator of the book of Esther. In the world of the Esther narrative, the narrator envisions the possibility of success and prestige for the Jews living among the Gentiles not threats of retribution and destruction.

Although some facets of the plot depict rancor between Jews and Gentiles, Esther keeps her identity as a Jew secret as per Mordecai’s instructions (Esth 2:10), Haman writes an edict declaring the massacre of all Jews in the empire (Esth 3), and Haman’s identification as an Agagite provides a rationale for the struggle between the Jews and Gentiles (Esth 3:1), the narrator remains stubbornly optimistic about the possibilities for Jews living among Gentiles. While the aforementioned facets of the plot of the book of Esther fit in efficiently with the persecution of Jews in the book of Daniel, they appear in dialogic relation with other details of the narrative.²¹

When Esther reveals her identity as a Jew, the king does not respond (Esth 7:3-5). He does not express surprise, disgust, or disbelief; apparently the revelation does not warrant comment. Ahasuerus gets angry at the threat to Esther’s life, but he does not remark about her ethnicity. Indeed, he effortlessly awards Esther Haman’s property, which she promptly gives to Mordecai. Ahasuerus permits them to author counter-edicts protecting the Jews and allowing them to retaliate and later promotes Mordecai the Jew (Esth 8:15). The people of Susa (assumedly including Gentiles) respond in chaos to the

²¹For example, Daniel’s night in the lion’s den (see Dan 6) and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego’s trip to the fiery furnace (see Dan 3:19-30). The book of Daniel pointedly begins with a description of Nebuchadnezzar’s sacking of Jerusalem and removal of sacred objects from the temple setting a tone of disapproval and creating a dichotomy between Jews and Gentiles.

initial anti-Jewish edict (Esth 3:15) and then joy at its reverse (Esth 8:15). The only anti-Jew in the text seems to be Haman who arguably is not so much anti-Semitic as he is anti-Mordecai. The Jewish community is at times both marginalized and accepted. The narrator seems to suggest the Judahite community can overcome adversity and rise to prominent positions within the foreign court.

The ideology of achievement among gentiles found in the book of Esther has a counterpart in the book of Jeremiah. In Jer 29:4-7, the prophet sends a letter to the exiles in Babylon commanding them to establish themselves in their new environment.

Thus said the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel, to the whole community which I exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there, do no decrease. And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the LORD in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper (Jer 29:4-7).

Connecting the pericope in Jeremiah with the book of Esther, Humphreys argues that at least in some circles the possibility of successful, creative, and rich existences for Diaspora Jews living in foreign environments existed.²² Tales of court conflict in which he places the book of Esther, Judahites “overcome adversity and find a life both rewarding and creative within the pagan setting and as a part of this foreign world.”²³

While scholars debate the text’s ideological view of relationships between Jews and Gentiles, a dialogical reading of the text allows the narrator and characters to express dialectical views. The Jewish community in Susa both remains at odds with the Gentiles

²²W. Lee Humphreys, “A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel,” *JBL* 92 (1973): 211-13.

²³Humphreys, “Life-Style,” 223.

and consolidates with them in unity. The book of Esther preserves a unique alternative to Diaspora life—one that envisions Jewish life in exile as prosperous and joyous. While still tinged with fear and anxiety, existence in the Diaspora is no less dangerous than returning to Jerusalem and beginning anew there. The book of Esther does not draw clean lines between Jews and Gentiles but blurs the boundaries of insiders and outsiders, engendering a text that supports remaining in exile and remains hopeful of the community's continued success and survival there.

Deconstructing the Status Quo

The book of Esther maintains and demolishes the status quo. At times, the text appeases those in power and supports the imperial regime. For example, neither Esther nor Mordecai protest Esther's forced conveyance to the palace (Esth 2:8). She quietly accepts her place in the harem (Esth 2:8), obeys Mordecai's insistence she keep her ethnicity a secret (Esth 2:10), and follows Hegai's recommendations for beauty treatments and accouterments (Esth 2:15). When Vashti openly disobeys the king and resists a royal order, she loses her crown. Her opposition threatens the king's status. When Esther speaks to the king, she carefully addresses him with polite, demure language. In Esth 5:4 when she approaches him unsummoned, she exclaims, "If it pleases the king," *אם על המלך טוב* (Esth 5:4). When she makes her first speech at the initial banquet, Esther again employs decorous language, "if the king will do me the favor, if it pleases the king to grant my wish and accede to my request," *המלך ואם על המלך* (Esth 5:7). In chapter seven, Esther again uses verbatim the same phrase as she addresses the king, *אם מצאתי חן בעיניך המלך ואם* (Esth 7:3). She further intones the king her request for a counter-edict in

unsuspecting language, אִם עַל הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב אִם מִצְאָתִי חַן לִפְנֵי וְכִשֵּׁר הַדְּבָר לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְטוֹבָה (Esth 8:5). Continuing to protect his honor, the king orders Haman's death because he suspects Haman has offended his reputation by accosting Queen Esther (Esth 7:8). The king's honor must be promoted and protected. The king remains in power and his decrees cannot be countermanded.

Yet, as the text promotes the king's hegemony, it pokes fun at him and the Persian Empire. A carnivalesque reading of the text overturns the status quo. For example, Vashti refuses to appear before the king and her actions prompt an empire wide edict requiring all women to obey their husbands (Esth 1:22). This edict engenders the opposite effect and disseminates her disobedience across the entire empire and into every home. It reveals that the leader of the empire cannot control his wife. Mordecai refuses to bow before Haman. The refusal of one Jew, a member of a disenfranchised group, sets off a maelstrom of events culminating in Haman's death, Mordecai's promotion, and the safety of Jews within the empire. Esther appears before the king. The narrator explains the risks associated with appearing before the king unsummoned (Esth 4:11), but then describes Esther's successful appearance and salvation strategy. An orphaned, exiled, female Judahite overcomes the evil plot of the king's top courtier and secures the well being of her people. Her actions allow Mordecai the opportunity to ascend to Haman's position. The Jews defend themselves and defeat their enemies. They disproportionately triumph over their enemies killing over 75,000 of those who hated them (Esth 9:16). The fear of the Jews so overtakes the Gentiles that many of them convert (Esth 8:17). Esther and Mordecai then initiate a new festival into the Jewish calendar. These two Diaspora

Jews, without royal, prophetic, or priestly pedigree, and outside the Jerusalemite community institute a new holiday.

Burns points to the book's anti-imperial rhetoric as an explanation for its popularity during the Hellenistic era among Jews and its subsequent lack of appreciation among Christian audiences.²⁴ He interprets the book of Esther as an example of cultural recontextualization as evidenced by its various versions (MT, LXX, AT). The book, he opines, was designed to appeal to Hellenized Jews because it typifies "Jewish resistance to political imperialism and negotiation with cultural homogeneity," issues relevant to Jews in both the Hellenistic and Roman eras.²⁵ Burns astutely observes the text's malleability and relevance to changing political situations, for it undergoes multiple versions. Yet despite its anti-imperial rhetoric, both Esther and Mordecai operate within the Persian system of protocol. They do not resist authority vis a vis the Maccabean revolt. Neither do they suggest returning to Jerusalem or rebuilding Jewish life with the temple and Torah at the center. Rather, the book of Esther promotes an alternative assessment of the Diaspora from that of the normative Jerusalem focused community.

Writing on the modern experiences of Diaspora, Homi Bhabha writes, "The wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological 'limits' of those ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices..."²⁶ As Bhabha describes the importance for subordinated peoples to retrieve their repressed histories and reclaim their cultural

²⁴Burns, "Special Purim," 4.

²⁵Burns, "Special Purim," 8.

²⁶Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4-5.

traditions, he discusses displacement and explains, “the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.”²⁷ This crossing of boundaries between public and private spheres and between characters from diverse social backgrounds occurs within the Esther text.

As characters cross boundaries, the narrator projects an ideology that ridicules the powerful but concomitantly shows the community how to manipulate the system. This is not a story encouraging open rebellion against injustice. Rather, the book of Esther maps a path advocating careful responses to unjust authority that ensures survival and hopefully success. This text encourages readers to become part of the system all the while acknowledging the stupidity of those in charge of the system.²⁸

The Narrator’s World

A discussion of the date of composition for the book of Esther is a pertinent topic related to chronotope. Since chronotopes represent the variety of ways people relate to their world, chronotopic genres function to concretize those possibilities and communicate to readers the form-shaping ideologies within literature.²⁹ This living impulse arises within a specific context thus necessitating a consideration of the book of Esther’s date. The homology between text and context,³⁰ however, does not uniformly suggest an unmediated connection between the world of the text and its socio-historical

²⁷Bhabha, *Location*, 9.

²⁸Niditch, *Underdogs*, 144.

²⁹Morson and Emerson, *Creation of a Prosaics*, 366.

³⁰Greenstein, “Jewish Reading,” 226.

origin.³¹ The narrator constructs the narrative world in order to draw readers into the text, and the *Sitz im Leben* does not correlate vis a vis to the authorial world. Readers create a chronotopic image of the author, which may be truthful and profound, but is not chronotopically identical to the author or the world the author creates.³² Bakhtin explains that every literary work “faces outward away from itself” and awaits a reaction from readers who participates in the creation of meaning.³³ All images are created things.

Assigning dates to texts in the Hebrew Bible is a notoriously difficult task. Yet, reading a text within a specific historical context can be immensely helpful, and thus a careful examination of textual and linguistic features is a worthwhile task. The Esther scroll offers an array of fascinating linguistic and literary features. Because of the numerous borrowed Persian terms, Aramaic phrases, and historical issues, the text resists easy assignment. The Talmud identifies the authors of the book of Esther as the “men of the Great Synagogue (Baba Bathra 15a).”³⁴ Josephus and Clement of Alexandria name Mordecai as the author making the date of composition close to the events of the text.³⁵ Levenson places the scroll sometime in the fourth or third century B.C.E.³⁶ while Sandra Beth Berg suggests an earlier date because, “the number of Persian words in Esther and

³¹Matthias Henze, “The Narrative Frame of Daniel: A Literary Assessment,” *JSJ* 32 (2001): 5.

³²Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 256-7.

³³Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 257.

³⁴Eliezer Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary Volume 1* (BJS 291; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 31. This reference from the Talmud may refer to anonymous teachers who lived between the last of the prophets and later rabbinical scholars. See also Karen Jobes, *Esther: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 29.

³⁵Jobes, *Esther*, 29.

³⁶Levenson, *Esther*, 26.

its numerous Aramaisms suggest the story's composition during a period not far removed from the events it describes."³⁷ She later clarifies her opinion and advocates a Hellenistic date for the book of Esther because of its references to proskynesis, which she relates to Alexander the Great.³⁸ Robert Gordis proposes an early date of approximately 400 B.C.E. (only a few decades after the rule of King Xerxes) because of the, "considerable number of Persian and Aramaic words and idioms," and given the absence of Greek words he rejects a Hellenistic date.³⁹ For Berlin, the Esther scroll is a typical story about Persia from the Persian period because it borrows many of its motifs from the broader Greek writings of its time.⁴⁰ Robert Polzin distinguishes the language in the book of Esther from that in Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.⁴¹ Considering the Megillah's positive portrayal of the Diaspora, it is probably not a product of the Seleucid period or Hasmonean rebellion. Fox maintains the most scholars can say about the date of the text is that the Greek translation is brought to Egypt in 73 BCE, and the Hebrew version originates by the third century BCE.⁴²

³⁷Berg, *Book of Esther*, 2.

³⁸Berg, *Book of Esther*, 170-173.

³⁹Robert Gordis, *Megillat Esther* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1974), 8. See Yamauchi, "Archaeological," 101-2 for a summary of proposed dates for the text.

⁴⁰Adele Berlin, "The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling," *JBL* 120 (2001): 14.

⁴¹Robert Polzin, *Late Biblical Hebrew: Toward an Historical Typology of Biblical Hebrew Prose* (HSM; 12; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976), 74.

⁴²Fox, *Character*, 139-40. The Septuagint's colophon explains that the Greek text of Esther was brought to Egypt in the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra. There are two probable identifications of Ptolemy: Ptolemy XII Auletos making the date 73 BCE or Ptolemy VIII Soter II, dating to around 114 BCE.

Reconstructing the narrator's world offers readers a window into the ancient context and allows them to assess the text's ideology. Because we are reading this text within the chronotopic genre of Diaspora story, the perspective of the book of Daniel provides a helpful comparison in reconstructing potential narrative contexts for the book of Esther. Like the book of Daniel, the book of Esther occurs within the court and empire of a foreign king. While Daniel and his visions emphasize the God of Israel and this god's control of the universe, Esther and Mordecai's god remains silent. Daniel pronounces the end of the Babylonian kingdom;⁴³ Esther and Mordecai do not envision an autonomous Jewish state with Yahweh deposing the earthly empires. What both the books of Esther and Daniel do is "outline a life-style for the Diaspora,"⁴⁴ but each articulates a different outline. Collins supposes the tradents of the Daniel narratives envisaged the following life-style for the Diaspora community:

. . . few Jews could hope to be as successful as Daniel, and not all who entered the royal service were necessarily so scrupulous about dietary observance. Yet we know from the case of Nehemiah that a devout Jew could rise at court. The tales presuppose a Diaspora setting not only in terms of the places mentioned but especially in the kinds of problems addressed—rivalry with pagan courtiers, the dangers of refusing to participate in the local cults. These were problems which confronted Jews of the Diaspora rather than residents of Jerusalem...they [the tradents of the Daniel narratives] developed an interest in dreams and omens which remained utterly alien to the Jerusalem centered wisdom of Ben Sira. At the same time, they maintained unwavering piety.⁴⁵

Like the book of Esther, the compilers of the Daniel tales depict successful Jews thriving outside of Jerusalem. The narrator of the Esther tale pushes further, however, and

⁴³Collins, "Daniel," 135.

⁴⁴Humphreys, "Life-Style," 211-23.

⁴⁵Collins, "Daniel," 136-7.

portrays Diaspora Judahites remaining outside the land and outside of tradition focusing instead on human initiative, survival as a virtue, the promise of achievement among gentiles, and forging a new status quo.

Some (Not) Final Thoughts

The poet of the book of Ecclesiastes exclaims, “There is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, ‘See, this is new’? It has already been, in the ages before us. The people of long ago are not remembered, nor will there be any remembrance of people yet to come by those who come after them” (Eccl 1:9-11). Bakhtin disagrees with this sentiment. His vision of human potential includes surprise, openness, and a sense of unfinalizability. The narrator of the book of Esther shares this hope for human possibility. Judahites in the Diaspora reframed their worldview to include positive, joyful opportunities in exile in the midst of the reality of not returning to Jerusalem.

This dissertation examines the banquet scenes in the book of Esther from several Bakhtinian perspectives. The dissertation’s concern with Bakhtin’s theories makes a singular method difficult to identify since many disciplines have adopted Bakhtin’s work.⁴⁶ It considers the chronotopes of Diaspora story and banquet—remembering and refracting the traditions. The dialogic relationship between banquet scenes reveals heteroglossia—the banquets and characters speak a variety of languages. Esther possesses a surplus of seeing. She and Ahasuerus exhibit double voiced discourse although the king wears the mask of a fool and does not know. One of Bakhtin’s

⁴⁶See Craig, *Reading Esther*, 18; David Carroll, “The Alterity of Discourse: Form, History, and the Question of the Political in M.M Bakhtin,” *Diacritics* 13 (1983): 67.

significant contributions lies in his emphasis on dialogism—reader, text, and narrator contribute equally to create meaning. Bakhtin's theories offer a bridge between literary, historical, and reader emphases. The connection between the narrator's ideology concerning the Persian king and empire and a positive vision for Judahite life in the Diaspora reframes traditional historical critical methods concerned with the author or the *Sitz im Leben*. The homology between text and context tells modern readers significant details about the narrator's attitude regarding Diaspora, foreign kings and empires, and the abounding possibilities available to Judahites outside the land.

The relationship between texts and readers is fluid. Bakhtin reminds readers they cannot read in isolation. They cannot read texts apart from other material in the canon or in isolation from other communities of readers. The narrator of the book of Esther takes a community on the margin of society and transforms them into members of the center. The narrator of the book of Esther presents the audience the possibility of becoming part of the center as exiles become prominent in the royal court and a detainee becomes queen. Using the banquet scenes, the narrator reframes a portrait of Judahite life in the Diaspora to include the possibility of survival and joy within the gentile court of a foreign king.

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