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Introduction

Few biblical books are at the same time as familiar as Esther and have been read in such thoroughly different ways. The aim of this book is to recover how the book of Esther was read by its first readers, and perhaps even how it was intended by its author, by situating it within Jewish thought regarding the Persian Empire. Seeing the contours of the thought current prior to the writing of Esther allows us to see how the book reacts to those ideas. Tracing the contours of this thought in the centuries following the writing of Esther allows us to understand the ancient reactions to the book. The basic thesis of the present book is that Esther, first and foremost, is a work of politics. The author peopled his narrative with historical personages, and deployed sophisticated literary techniques and structures, but these are not utilized for their own sake. Instead, they are pressed into service to tell a story which explores diaspora life and personal identity.

Midway through the Persian Empire, Jews throughout the realm were engaged in introspection and debate regarding their own position in the world in which they found themselves. To what extent had the world changed? Were the Persians just another foreign overlord, like the Assyrians and Babylonians before them, or did the stability of the Persian Empire reflect a new world order? Could one still hope for Jewish autonomy in one's own land, or were such notions relics of a past era? How did one define what it meant to be a good Jew in such conditions, and had the very terms of that question been altered by life in unending exile? On these and other questions central to Jewish identity and existence, Esther staked out provocative and daring positions.

The conceptual heart of the present book is Part 3, Chapters 9 through 12, which chronicles early reactions to the book of Esther from Hellenistic and Roman times. These reactions are generally oblique. To find them, a wide range of Jewish texts in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic, all of which have something to say about the book of Esther, are surveyed. In some cases, such as the Additions to Esther, the relationship to the book is explicit; in other

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cases, such as the story of Judith, the Genesis Apocryphon from Qumran, and a tale about Alexander Janneus preserved in later sources, the relationship is implicit. I argue that all of the sources from this period reflect a negative attitude toward the book of Esther.

The most notable counter-example to this generalization is a later source: the synagogue paintings at Dura Europos, which include the story of Esther, front and center in the Jews' house of worship. This source, from third-century Syria, is both later than the other sources discussed and the only evidence of the attitude toward Esther current among Jews in the eastern Diaspora. Both of these distinctions make a difference.

It is argued that a negative attitude toward Esther was the prevalent one in Palestine throughout the time of the Second Temple, but that contemporary diaspora Jews may have thought about the book very differently. As time went on, however, attitudes within Jewish society changed, reflecting developments within Jewish political thought, itself reflecting to a large extent the dynamics of actual politics. Many of the reasons that Palestinian Jews had to condemn the book vanished by the end of the first century CE. As a result of long processes, and especially of the trauma of the destruction of the Temple, the formerly stark divisions between "homeland" and "diaspora" dissipated, and Esther became a book beloved by Jews everywhere.

The claim that Jews in Second Temple times overwhelmingly denounced, disparaged, or disregarded Esther leads naturally to two further avenues of inquiry. The first is to explore whether the ideologically opposition evoked by the book was expected by the author of Esther. I contend, in the first two parts of the book, that the provocation represented by Esther was entirely deliberate. Part 1, consisting of Chapters 1 through 4, sets the stage by attempting to reconstruct the contours of "conventional wisdom" regarding issues of Jewish political thought and identity in early Second Temple times. Drawing on the various biblical books from the sixth and fifth centuries – from the time of the Neo-Babylonian and Persian Empires – I trace the expectations, beliefs, and opinions which seem to have been widespread, especially on issues of politics, religion, and identity.

On a long list of issues, the author of Esther opposes the conventional wisdom. Part 2, Chapters 5 through 8, attempts to establish just what the book of Esther asserts, politically and ideologically. It seems clear, on close inspection, that the author denies the expectations of a second exodus which will bring an end to the exile; he denies the relevance of the Davidic dynasty; he denies the centrality of Jerusalem and of the province of Judea. The king of Persia, far from being God's emissary, is depicted in starkly negative terms, and the law of the land is absurd. All of this opposed,

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in dramatic fashion, much of what the other Jewish texts of the era propound. It can be concluded that this opposition was intentional, and was likely the original purpose of the book's composition.

Once it is argued that the book of Esther intentionally entered the political arena, the negative reactions to the book traced in Part 3 of this book turn out to be unsurprising, and in fact predictable. Whereas Esther champions a hero who intermarried and lives her life in the Persian palace, many of the Jews in Palestine would have reviled such a character. She would have been condemned for compromising her religion and culture, and the fact that she used her status to save her kinsmen would not persuade these readers otherwise. Surely if she had stood her ground and refused to enter into such a compromised position – perhaps even at the cost of her own life – God would have effected a miraculous salvation for his people.

While the first area of research took the reactions to Esther and looked backward in time, to investigate the motivations for the book to begin with, the second avenue opened is the later history of the book's interpretation. In particular, the rabbinic reactions to the book of Esther can now be seen in a richer and more complex context. There is more explicit treatment of Esther within the corpus of rabbinic literature than of any other biblical book except for Genesis. Many studies have illuminated individual details of the Rabbis' treatment of the book. Part 4 of this book, consisting of Chapters 13 through 15, attempts to sift and organize dozens of individual comments in order to see the patterns in the rabbinic approaches to Esther as a whole.

The Rabbis were faced with all of the same problems with the book that their counterparts faced in Hellenistic and Roman times. They had an additional handicap, however, in that the book was already by their time canonical, and therefore neither suppression nor heavy-handed editing was a viable option for them in dealing with the book. Instead, they turn to interpretation to bring Esther in line with conventional biblical and rabbinic thinking. Drawing on other biblical texts, such as Daniel, much of Esther is re-read in insightful and far-reaching ways.

The investigation carried out here surveys the rabbinic texts as a whole, but also searches for differing attitudes toward Esther within these sprawling corpora. Part 3 helps elucidate the findings here, as well, since on the whole, few consistent differences are found between earlier and later rabbinic sources, or between sources of Palestinian and Babylonian provenance. There are a number of specific motifs whose origins can be isolated, but the general themes appear to be common throughout rabbinic literature.

In the Rabbis' hands, Esther observes the laws of kashrut, Shabbat, and menstrual purity. The Jews were punished for their failure to scrupulously

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observe many of the laws, but the piety of Mordecai and Esther moved God and others in heaven to mobilize on the Jews' behalf. Esther enabled the reconstruction of the Second Temple. Xerxes took his place in the long list of foreign kings who believed themselves to be more powerful than God; like his royal predecessors, Xerxes was brought low by the biblical story as read by the Rabbis. He is depicted as a pale image of Solomon, much as his palace is depicted as a pale image of the Temple in Jerusalem, and Susa itself is depicted as a pale image of Jerusalem.

All of this is part of a large-scale and sustained effort on the part of the Rabbis to rid Esther of the parts of the story which are troubling or challenging, and to transform the story into a conventional biblical story. Elements strikingly absent from the biblical book itself, such as sin and punishment, Jewish law, prayer, providence, and, most importantly, God, are reintroduced into the story. Through these techniques, Esther has been converted into an eloquent statement of orthodox theology, rather than the trenchant and penetrating challenge to the conventional wisdom it once was.

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PART I

The provocation

Conventional wisdom in early Second Temple Judaism

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CHAPTER 1

Setting the stage
The theological challenge of political stability

1. Introduction

As the Persian Empire entered its second century of rule, the Jews of Persia struggled with difficult questions regarding their own identities and their positions within Persian and Jewish societies. Since Cyrus had brought the Babylonian Empire under Persian control in 539, and in one fell swoop gained control over nearly all the lands in which Jews were resident, Jews had the option of moving "back" to Jerusalem and its environs, to the Persian province of Yehud.[1] Some, indeed, had taken the opportunity, and since the late sixth century BCE there had been a community in Jerusalem, centered on the Second Temple. For many of the Jews, however, the idea of moving "back" seemed artificial. They, after all, had never seen Yehud, or any land other than where they lived now. Their ancestors had been exiled from that land in the early sixth century, through a series of events that left an indelible imprint on their national and political consciousness. This was family lore, though, not a central part of their identity.[2]

[1] The degree to which Cyrus supported the return of the Jews to Yehud, as opposed to simply allowing it, is debated: the book of Ezra claims that those returning received imperial financial support for the construction of a temple, but some modern scholars are skeptical. See, for example, Amélie Kuhrt, "The Cyrus Cylinder and Achaemenid Imperial Policy," *JSOT* 25 (1983), 83–97, and the discussion in Lester L. Grabbe, "Biblical Historiography in the Persian Period: Or, How the Jews Took Over the Empire," in Steven W. Holloway (ed.), *Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 10 (Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 400–14.

[2] The terminological conundrum regarding the "Jews" is now a well-studied question. Cynthia Baker, "A 'Jew' by Any Other Name?," *JAJ* 2 (2011), 153–80 provides a thorough and insightful discussion of the major contemporary scholarly views (Cohen, Blenkinsopp, Mason, and Brettler). I refer to these people as "Jews" throughout, in a manner that accords with Brettler's arguments. This would also be acceptable to Blenkinsopp, since the discussion here relates to the Persian period and not earlier. See Marc Zvi Brettler, "Judaism in the Hebrew Bible? The Transition from Ancient Israelite Religion to Judaism," *CBQ* 61 (1999), 429–47, and Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Judaism, the First Phase: The Place of Ezra and Nehemiah in the Origins of Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009). For a more fundamental defense of the translation of *yehudim* of Esther as "Jews," see Anne-Marie Wetter, "How Jewish is

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It was now more than a century after Cyrus. Not a person alive remembered a time when the Persians were not in control. As this reality became less traumatic and more "normal," the theological challenge it presented became more difficult. In centuries past, prophets had foretold an exile, and so the idea of life outside of a national homeland did not present much in the way of theological problems. Of course, exile had been predicted as a punishment, and so the experience provoked much soul-searching and self-interrogation. "What had we done wrong?" asked the Jews. "Has God forsaken us? Are we no longer His chosen people?"[3] These questions swirled as the Jews became accustomed to living as a minority, alongside other minorities, in the midst of a great empire. The great prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel had provided intellectual and theological responses to these questions.[4] Other Israelites, their voices preserved in psalms and laments, provided other responses, less abstract and more experiential.

Jews made their peace with the changed reality. They worked hard to forge an identity in exile that would allow them both to thrive in their wider societies and to retain their loyalties as Jews.[5] Some lived in voluntarily segregated areas, such as the town of al-Yahūdu, "the town of the Judeans," near Nippur.[6] Most, however, tried to manage multiple loyalties, and as a

Esther? Or: How is Esther Jewish? Tracing Ethnic and Religious Identity in a Diaspora Narrative," *ZAW* 123 (2011), 596–603, and see also Moshe Bar-Asher, "Il y avait à Suse un homme juif – איש יהודי היה בשושן הבירה," *REJ* 161 (2002), 227–31.

[3] The responses to these questions were most thoroughly studied by Dalit Rom-Shiloni, אלהים בעידן של חורבן וגלויות: תיאולוגיה תנ"כית (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2009).

[4] See the studies of Dalit Rom-Shiloni for insightful analysis of the prophetic and other responses: "Ezekiel as the Voice of the Exiles and Constructor of Exilic Ideology," *HUCA* 76 (2005), 1–45; "Deuteronomic Concepts of Exile Interpreted in Jeremiah and Ezekiel," in Chaim Cohen, Victor Hurowitz, Avi Hurvitz, Yochanan Muffs, Baruch Schwartz, and Jeffrey Tigay (eds.), *Birkat Shalom: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom M. Paul on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 101–23. See also William M. Schniedewind, "'Are We His People or Not?' Biblical Interpretation during Crisis," *Biblica*, 76 (1995), 540–50, on the responses found in some of the psalms.

[5] For discussions of how the Judeans preserved their identity/identities in the eastern Diaspora, see Israel Ephʿal, "The Western Minorities in Babylonia in the 6th–5th Centuries BC: Maintenance and Cohesion," *Orientalia*, 47 (1978), 74–90, and Bustenay Oded, "The Judean Exiles in Babylonia: Survival Strategy of an Ethnic Minority," in Menahem Mor, Jack Pastor, Israel Ronen, and Yakov Ashenazi (eds.), *For Uriel: Studies in the History of Israel in Antiquity Presented to Professor Uriel Rappaport* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center for Jewish History, 2005), 53*–76*.

[6] F. Joannès and André Lemaire, "Trois tablettes cunéiformes à onomastique ouest-sémitique (collection Sh. Moussaïeff) (Pls. I–II)," *Transeuphratène*, 17 (1999), 17–34; Ran Zadok, *The Earliest Diaspora: Israelites and Judeans in Pre-Hellenistic Mesopotamia*, Publications of the Diaspora Research Institute 151 (Tel Aviv: Diaspora Research Institute of Tel Aviv University, 2002), 33–35; Laurie Pearce, "New Evidence for Judaeans in Babylonia," in Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (eds.), *Judah and the Judaeans in the Persian Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 399–411; W. G. Lambert, "A Document from a Community of Exiles in Babylonia," in Meir Lubetski (ed.), *New Seals and Inscriptions: Hebrew, Idumean, and Cuneiform* (Sheffield: Phoenix, 2007), 201–05.

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community, the Jews were successful at this. Jews occupied positions in the bureaucracy, usually lowly ones, but occasionally rising to impressive heights.[7] These very efforts, which made life in the Diaspora less challenging, caused the theological challenge to grow. It dawned on people slowly, until it became a roaring undercurrent of Jewish thought. The prophets of centuries past had always promised that exile would be a temporary state of affairs. The Jews would be punished, the conquering nation would exhaust its power, and then the new world order would crumble. Seventy years, Jeremiah had said. Others spoke in less specific terms. No one had spoken of exile as an irrevocably changed reality.

2. Hopes for a second exodus

The prophets had even spoken of a second exodus from Babylonia; indeed, "the idea is a common one in the literature of the period."[8] Interestingly, this was a reversal of the use to which the Exodus had been put in previous decades. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel had utilized the imagery of the Exodus with a vicious twist. Jeremiah prophesied: "I shall fight with you, [says the Lord,] with an outstretched hand and a strong arm, and with fury and wrath, and with great anger, and I shall strike (*ve-hikkēti*) the inhabitants of this city [Jerusalem] – human and animal! They shall die in a great plague."[9] Equally ominously, Ezekiel foretold: "I will take you out (*ve-hotzētī*) of [Jerusalem] and put you into the hands of strangers, and I will execute judgments (*shefātīm*) on you."[10] Jeremiah was clearly playing on the Exodus narrative: in Egypt, too, God said, "I will strike (*ve-hikkētī*) all the firstborns in the land of Egypt, from human to animal," and of course, there, too, a plague (*dever*) had struck.[11] Ezekiel, as well, had Exodus on his mind: two of his terms, "I will take you out" and "judgments" are particularly

[7] Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, "Prayers and Dreams: Power and Diaspora Identities in the Social Setting of the Daniel Tales," in John J. Collins and Peter W. Flint (eds.), *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception, VT* Suppl. 83.1 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 278.

[8] Sara Japhet, "People and Land in the Restoration Period," in Georg Strecker (ed.), *Das Land Israel in biblischer Zeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 03–125, reprinted in her *From the Rivers of Babylon to the Highlands of Judah: Collected Studies on the Restoration Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 112. See also the discussion and references in Rom-Shiloni, "Deuteronomic Concepts of Exile Interpreted in Jeremiah and Ezekiel," 118.

[9] Jeremiah 21:5–6. [10] Ezekiel 11:9.

[11] For these elements, see Exodus 12:12 and 9:1–7. Dalit Rom-Shiloni, "Facing Destruction and Exile: Inner-Biblical Exegesis in Jeremiah and Ezekiel," *ZAW* 117 (2005), 189–205, esp. 192–94, sensitively analyzes the dynamics of this reuse of the Exodus vocabulary.

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reminiscent of the earlier narrative.[12] For example, in Egypt God had said, "I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; I will save you from their labor; I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments."[13]

The shocking detail in these prophecies, of course, was who was targeted in them. In the Exodus narratives, the object of the "judgments" is the Egyptians, and the Israelites are to be removed *from* Egypt to march *to* Israel and Jerusalem. In Ezekiel, the reverse is foretold: Israel themselves will be subjected to the judgments, and they were be removed *from* Jerusalem.

The prophets who worked after the exile, on the other hand, reversed this motif once again, and began to speak of a second exodus much more similar to the original one. This re-reversal occurs within Ezekiel himself. Once the Jews are in exile, he foretells another, more dramatic enactment of the Exodus:

> Therefore say to the House of Israel, "Thus said the Lord God: Will you defile yourselves in the path of your ancestors, and whore after their detestations? . . . As I live – declares the Lord God – I will reign over you with a strong hand, with an outstretched arm, with outpoured fury! I will take you out of the nations, and gather you from the lands in which you are scattered, with a strong hand, with an outstretched arm, with outpoured fury. I will bring you to the desert of the nations, and there I will enter into judgment with you, face to face. *Just as I entered into judgment with your ancestors in the desert of the land of Egypt*, so will I enter into judgment with you!" – thus speaks the Lord God. "I will pass you under the staff and I will bring you under the bond of the covenant; I will remove the rebels and sinners against me from among you: I will take them out from the land in which they are dwelling, but they will not arrive at the land of Israel, and you will know that I am the Lord . . . when I take you out from the nations and gather you from the lands in which you are scattered, and I will be sanctified there in the eyes of the nations. You will know that I am the Lord when I bring you to the land of Israel, to the land which I swore to give to your ancestors."[14]

[12] For "I will/did take out," see also Exodus 7:5; 12:17; 29:46; 32:11; and of course the Decalogue (Exodus 20), "I am the Lord God who *took you out* of the land of Egypt . . ." For "judgments," see also 12:12..

[13] Exodus 6:6; cf. also 7:4 See the discussion in Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 366–67, and Rom-Shiloni, "Facing Destruction and Exile," 202. Another reference to the Exodus early in Ezekiel may be the "mark" (*tāw*) on the foreheads of those to be saved in Ezekiel 9:4–6; see the suggestive remarks of R. David Qimḥi *ad loc.*, as well as the highly relevant Samaritan practice described in Bernard M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 58 n. 15, and the Greek evidence discussed in John W. Olley, "Ezekiel LXX and Exodus Comparisons," *VT* 59 (2009), 116–19.

[14] Ezekiel 20:30–42. Parts of this passage are closely paralleled in Psalm 106:26–27. For comments on this relationship and its implications, see Tzvi Novick, "Law and Loss: Response to Catastrophe in Numbers 15," *HTR* 101 (2008), 10.

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